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## Schwarzenegger's Star Dipping as Californians Feel Its Sting

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**S**AN FRANCISCO, April 30 - Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger made a prediction in January in a speech proposing changes to the way public pensions are managed in California, the state budget is balanced, legislative districts are drawn and teachers are paid.

"The special interests will run TV ads calling me cruel and heartless," Mr. Schwarzenegger, a Republican, told lawmakers. "They will organize protests out in front of the Capitol. They will try to say I don't understand the consequences of these decisions."

Mr. Schwarzenegger's prediction about his detractors has come true in every respect, but so has something that he did not foresee four months ago: the larger-than-life governor has been brought down to size. His popularity has plummeted, and he has retreated on some proposals, like the ones on public employees' pensions and redistricting.

Now his Democratic opponents "see blood in the water," as one Democrat characterized the situation, and they are taking on Mr. Schwarzenegger with new determination.

On Friday, they seized upon statements he made praising the so-called Minutemen volunteers in Arizona who patrol the Mexican border for illegal immigrants. President Bush has described the volunteers as vigilantes, but Mr. Schwarzenegger said he would welcome them in California because "our government cannot secure the borders and keep our country protected."

Art Torres, the chairman of the state Democratic Party, accused Mr. Schwarzenegger of exploiting fears about illegal immigration, a historically divisive subject in California, to divert attention from his problems as governor and to appeal to his conservative supporters.

"We don't need an Austrian Minuteman," Mr. Torres said in a reference to Mr. Schwarzenegger's native country.

Two opinion polls released this week showed that the governor's approval rating had dropped below 50 percent for the first time since he took office in November 2003. The surveys reflected months of protests against Mr. Schwarzenegger by nurses, teachers, police officers and other public employees.

"The mainstream has turned on him," said Rose Ann DeMoro, executive director of the California Nurses Association, whose members have hounded Mr. Schwarzenegger because of his opposition to a state law that requires more nurses in hospitals.

The governor has publicly brushed aside the slide in the polls, saying Thursday on Sean Hannity's radio show that his critics "have not been successful at all with their mission because taking the poll numbers down didn't make me more vulnerable." Mr. Schwarzenegger said he would continue to collect signatures to qualify several of his proposals for a vote in November, no matter the political toll, and he did so on Saturday at a diner in Lancaster.

"They're lying to the people," Mr. Schwarzenegger said in the radio interview. "And they're trying to convince the people that my reforms are no good because they feel that that will be destructive to them because they want to keep the power, and they want to keep spending money."

Mr. Schwarzenegger's famed charisma continues to play well with many Californians. But even with the benefits of his Hollywood celebrity, which also gives him a friendly platform on talk radio and other news media, the new polls reveal that Mr. Schwarzenegger is not immune to the fallout of a sustained public beating.

Some of his Republican allies acknowledge as much, though they insist there is no sense of panic.

"Sometimes you go through turbulent air, and sometimes smooth air," said State Senator Abel Maldonado, a Republican, who is pushing some of the governor's education proposals in the Legislature. "Right now, it's no secret there's some turbulent air."

Several weeks ago, Mr. Schwarzenegger suspended his plan to place before the voters a measure that would have converted the state pension system to private accounts. His decision came after law enforcement groups mobilized against the proposal because it would have deprived public employees of death and disability benefits, something Mr. Schwarzenegger said he never intended.

This week, the governor backed off an important demand in his redistricting proposal, telling a town hall meeting that its timing "can be worked out." Previously he had insisted that the new districts, which he wants drawn by retired judges, be in place for next year's elections.

While each of the protesting groups has a different gripe with Mr. Schwarzenegger, they have united in depicting him as an uncaring, partisan Republican doing the bidding of big business. According to the polls, the message seems to have resonated with Democrats and independents, who together accounted for the sharp decline in Mr. Schwarzenegger's standing.

"Voters are concerned and frustrated that the governor may becoming another one of the Sacramento politicians, rather than the reformer that they were hoping that he would be," said Douglas Johnson, consulting fellow at the Rose Institute of State and Local Government at Claremont McKenna College, which conducted one of the polls.

In a poll by the Public Policy Institute of California, a nonpartisan group in San Francisco, there was a 20 percentage point drop in Mr. Schwarzenegger's approval rating among registered voters, to 40 percent in April from 60 percent in January. By comparison, Gov. Gray Davis, who was removed from office in a recall election, had a 62 percent approval rating in a poll taken two years into his first term.

One practical effect of Mr. Schwarzenegger's slump has been to renew the intense partisanship in Sacramento that he had managed to subdue in his first year in office, in large part on the strength of his stardom and efforts by both parties to put the recall of Governor Davis behind them.

After working last year with the Democratic-led Legislature to pass several proposals, relations went into a deep freeze upon the unveiling of his "Year of Reform" in the January speech.

Many Democrats saw the proposals, which included merit-based pay for teachers, as an assault on organized labor. His decision not to restore \$2 billion in education financing from last year further infuriated the California Teachers Association, which with other groups has been broadcasting television and radio advertisements featuring PTA members accusing Mr. Schwarzenegger of retreating on promises to schools.

In one advertisement, several parents are featured talking about their disappointment.

"That's money our schools need to reduce class sizes and keep quality teachers," one parent says.

"The governor's always running around talking about reform," another parent says.

The first parent replies, "But to me, it sounds a lot more like breaking his word on education."

Roger Salazar, a spokesman for the California Education Coalition, which includes the teachers' union and other school groups opposed to Mr. Schwarzenegger's spending on education, said the coalition has spent about \$4 million or \$5 million on the commercials. Mr. Schwarzenegger's aides estimate the total is closer to \$15 million, far more, they say, than the advertisements some of Mr. Schwarzenegger's supporters have begun broadcasting in response.

The depth of organized labor's rage has startled some Democratic lawmakers. The Assembly speaker, Fabian Núñez, a Democrat from Los Angeles, said some union leaders, whom he would not identify, have insisted that he refuse to meet with the governor because they want to "take him on and go all the way to elect a Democratic governor" in 2006.

"The state is in political disarray," Mr. Núñez said. "There is a great divide between Democrats and Republicans. I don't think it is good for California that we continue on this war path."

Mr. Núñez said the governor could go a long way toward building bridges by dropping his threat to call a special election in November that would place his remaining proposals on redistricting, a state spending cap and teachers' pay before the voters. Mr. Schwarzenegger is expected to submit the signatures on at least two of the measures to the secretary of state next week.

Mr. Schwarzenegger's chief of staff, Pat Clarey, said the threat of a special election had been instrumental in getting the Democrats to the negotiating table. "The deadline is coming up quickly, and I think everybody is trying to see if we can have some honest discussions," Ms. Clarey said.

Leon E. Panetta, a former congressman from California and White House chief of staff under President Bill Clinton, said Democrats would be unwise to underestimate Mr. Schwarzenegger's ability to rebound from his current troubles.

Mr. Panetta, a Democrat, described the governor as "part of the gridlock" but suggested that state lawmakers were likely to lose any public blame game with him.

"While there is blood in the water, he's still the predominant political figure in California," said Mr. Panetta, who is co-chairman of a committee created by Mr. Schwarzenegger to retain military bases in the state. "I don't think the Democrats can forget one thing: If the Legislature had been on the recall ballot with Gray Davis, they would have all been thrown out."