

Fathers and Sons:

THE BROWN FAMILY AND THE ARC OF LIBERALISM IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

BY REUEL SCHILLER*

MIRIAM PAWEL

THE BROWNS OF CALIFORNIA:

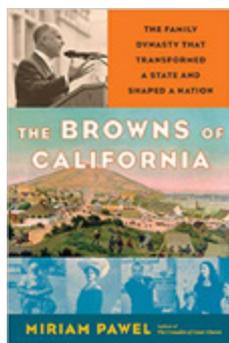
THE FAMILY DYNASTY THAT TRANSFORMED A STATE AND SHAPED A NATION

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HALFWAY THROUGH HER marvelous book, *The Browns of California: The Family Dynasty That Transformed a State and Shaped a Nation*, Miriam Pawel recounts a small, but telling, incident. It was 1976 and Edmund G. “Jerry” Brown, Jr. had just started his first term as governor of California. A Cub Scout from Boise, Idaho wrote to the governor, requesting an autographed picture in order to complete his collection of signed gubernatorial photographs. Unfortunately for the young man, the Brown administration had recently implemented a new policy with respect to such pictures: it refused to provide them. Accordingly, the boy, like hundreds of others, received a form letter: “[The Governor] feels that distributing such memorabilia contributes to a misplaced cult of personality which too often grows up around our political leaders.”

Undaunted, the scout wrote to Brown’s father, Edmund G. “Pat” Brown, Sr., who, our intrepid scout must have known, had been California’s governor eight years earlier. The scout asked Pat to intervene on his behalf, and the 71-year-old retired politician did: “I know you’re very, very busy Governor,” he wrote his son, “but I assure you that complying with a few requests would not be burdensome.” Pat, however, was not optimistic. “I have written my son,” he informed the scout, “and told him that I thought he ought to send you an autographed picture. Sons don’t always pay attention to their fathers, however.”

Indeed, they don’t.

In fact, the contrast between Pat and Jerry is the fulcrum on which Pawel’s energetic narrative sits.

The father was a tireless campaigner who eagerly used government resources to transform California into the largest, richest, most dynamic state in the country. The son, on the other hand, disdained the theater of politics, often doubted the ability of government to solve social problems, and embraced an outsider, anti-establishment image despite being a scion of California’s premier political family. This contrast might tempt a reader to the facile conclusion that the shifting nature of California politics was the result of some sort of Oedipal struggle. Indeed, Pawel’s narrative leaves no doubt that Jerry’s relationship with his father helped to define both his personality and his politics. Yet, the differences between father and son illustrate much more than the anxiety of influence that often drives the relationships between parents and children. The story of Pat and Jerry is emblematic of a dramatic change in the dimensions of American liberalism in the twentieth century. It was not simply one son who ignored his father’s advice. It was an entire generation of Democratic politicians who rejected the lessons of New Deal and Great Society liberalism, and replaced them with a more constrained idea of the role of government in the lives of the American people.

Pawel tells this story by focusing on the biographies of Pat and Jerry. After a brief introduction to the Brown family’s immigrant ancestors, the first third of *The Browns of California* focuses on Pat’s career. Preternaturally interested in politics, Pat began running for office in high school, and did not stop for 50 years. He lost his first campaign for public office when he ran for the state assembly in 1928, a year after he graduated from law school. What followed were a string of campaigns, some successful, some less so, in which Pat rose through the ranks of Democratic politics in the state: San Francisco district attorney, two terms as the state’s attorney general, and the two terms as governor. An optimistic, warm, gregarious fellow (“natural as an old shoe,” one voter remarked), Pat thrived in both retail politics and in cultivating the state’s elites. His policy preferences were typical of New Deal liberals in the postwar period: low-key but significant regulation of business (he enacted the first pollution control standards in the country), support for civil rights (his administration saw the passage of state legislation prohibiting both employment and housing discrimination), and substantial government

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spending on public goods, particularly higher education and water infrastructure.

Like many liberals of his generation, Pat had difficulty weathering the seismic changes in political culture that occurred in the 1960s. He was unable to see the threat to California Democrats posed by a Republican Party that, under the leadership of Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, abandoned the reasoned moderation of Earl Warren and stoked the fires of cultural and racial resentment. At the same time, he supported the war in Vietnam and was “hurt, outraged, and bewildered” by student protests on the campuses of his beloved University of California. Yet despite these failings, Pawel’s portrayal of Pat is extremely and deservedly sympathetic. Her Pat Brown is a charming, compassionate, earnest man — perhaps a little naive — who entered politics with a faith in government to act for the benefit of all Californians.

His son was cut from different cloth. Pat knew what he wanted to do from an early age. Jerry, on the other hand, was more of a searcher. Though he may have been destined for politics, he started off training to be a priest. He left seminary after a year to enroll at UC Berkeley, where he studied history and political science, and contemplated a career as a psychologist. Yale Law School, however, beckoned, and, in the end, Jerry could not deny the one attribute he most certainly shared with his father: political ambition. Between 1969, when he ran to be a trustee of the Los Angeles Community College District, and 2019, when he concluded his fourth term as governor, Jerry ran in more than a dozen campaigns: for secretary of state, for governor, for senator, for mayor of Oakland, for attorney general and, of course, three times for president of the United States.

Yet despite their common ambitions, Jerry and Pat were very different politicians. Jerry, Pawel reports, would be the first to tell you that he took after his brilliant, acerbic mother, Bernice, rather than his father. Accordingly, he despised his father’s political style — “low comedy,” Bernice called it — and he replaced it with a blunt-talking rejection of the norms of both campaigning and governance. Jerry was not going to kiss babies. Nor would he give long, poll-tested speeches, or glad-hand Sacramento old-timers. More typical was his inclination to lecture the Boise Cub Scout on the danger of cults of personality. In a post-Watergate world, Jerry’s anti-establishment, straight-talking campaign style was exceptionally appealing.

His approach to public policy was also different from his father’s. Although both men were deeply committed to civil rights and racial egalitarianism, Jerry possessed a hostility toward government that had little in common with Pat’s New Deal conception of the role of the state. Jerry evidenced no particular faith in the state’s ability to solve people’s problems. To Pat’s chagrin, he attacked the University of California as a bloated bureaucracy

staffed by overpaid professors. Though he was opposed to Proposition 13 and the limits it placed on property taxes in California, after the proposition passed, Jerry embraced it with such fervor that 1978 poll revealed that a majority of Californians thought he was the force behind the initiative. Indeed, both Jerry’s rhetoric and his budgets during his first two terms as governor often had more in common with those of his predecessor, Ronald Reagan, than with those of his father: government could not be trusted, government taxed too much, government spent too much. In 1975, Jerry gave the commencement address at Santa Clara University, where he had attended seminary. His advice was simple: “He exhorted students not to look for government help in solving their problems,” Pawel wrote, “but ‘to depend on your own energy and your own creative potential.’”

That said, Pawel makes clear that viewing Jerry Brown as a Democratic clone of Ronald Reagan would be a grave mistake. Jerry was and remains an intellectual and ascetic man with deeply egalitarian impulses that have guided his public policy: his advocacy for the well-being of agricultural labor in California; his commitment to diversifying the state’s judiciary and its bureaucracy; his dogged pursuit of campaign finance reform; his passionate desire to make California the most environmentally friendly state in the union. A genuine free thinker, Jerry’s hostility toward hierarchy and established institutions led him in directions that infuriated both the right and the left, labor unions and corporate interests. By the time of his second go round in the governor’s office in the 2010s, he may have come to view government with a little more sympathy than he had in the 1970s, but he was still most at home when he could tweak the established order.

Pawel does as good a job of describing these contradictions within Jerry as she does introducing the reader to the simpler, and more charming, attributes of his father. *The Browns of California*, however, does more than this. It illuminates a world beyond these two men and the state that they governed for almost a quarter century. The Browns’ story is the story of the transformation of liberalism in postwar America. It is the story of how the Democratic Party changed from the party of Roosevelt and Kennedy — advocates of robust government pursuing the public interest though state power — into the party of Carter and Clinton — a party that lost faith in government and contented itself with technocratic fixes to small problems. Pat Brown viewed government as an engine for growth and prosperity. Jerry Brown, on the other hand, saw government’s limits. In the meantime, Democratic politics had become a rearguard action against the advancing power of the conservatism that had come to dominate America at the end of the century. As such, the careers of both men, so ably described by Pawel, trace the declining fortunes and ambitions of twentieth-century American liberalism. ★