

The Real Gavin Newsom

By Bruce Bawer

Be afraid. Be very afraid.



I've been appalled by Gavin Newsom for years, but to read Ellie Gardey Holmes's powerful and unflinching new book *Newsom Unleashed: The Progressive Lust for Unbridled Power* is to find one's contempt for this hideous creature skyrocketing. If he has any redeeming qualities, any special gifts, any attributes that might illuminate an admirable

and recognizably human side, there's no sign of them here. This is a man who, despite having no discernible talent for governance or anything else, was lucky enough to be born into one well-off family – his great-grandfather co-founded the Bank of Italy, which later became the Bank of America – and to be, from earliest childhood, a sort of honorary member of an even richer family, the Gettys, his father being best friends with oil magnate Gordon Getty, who was like a second father to young Gavin.

Both men, his biological father and his second father, used their considerable influence from the beginning to help Gavin rise to power. Indeed, as surely as any Kennedy or Bush, Gavin Newsom was born into a political machine and bred to be a politician. After he and Getty played a big role in helping Willie Brown to get elected mayor of San Francisco, Brown

named Newsom to the city's Parking and Traffic Commission. Soon he was promoted to the Board of Supervisors, a post he held from 1997 to 2004. "Because of his lack of qualifications," writes Gardey Holmes, "Newsom entered office entirely indebted to Willie Brown." Observers referred to him, in fact, as "an appendage of Willie Brown." Quick sidebar in the midst of this tale of political advancement: when his mother was dying, Gavin was pretty much AWOL, although he was present when she underwent assisted suicide – which, at the time, was illegal in California. Others had been prosecuted for their participation in such actions; Gavin was not, a foreshadowing of many other occasions on which he would be treated as exempt from the rules governing the behavior of ordinary mortals.

In 2003 he was elected mayor. One of his first acts was to authorize the issuing of marriage licenses for same-sex couples, even though he had no power to do any such thing. He even performed some of the marriages himself. This cynical move (which even California's two Democratic Senators, Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer, opposed) was a cheap stunt, carried out at the expense of gullible gays, whose marriages were soon enough ruled invalid by the state Supreme Court – but it had the desired effect. It made him a national figure and it won him the esteem of the mainstream media. Bob Simon told him on *60 Minutes* that he might well have "set a record for instant fame in this country."

From the beginning of his life in "public service" – that laughable term – Newsom's vanity and ambition were flagrantly palpable. Although the *New York Times* described him during his mayoralty as the subject of "local adoration," some San Francisco insiders resented his brazen focus "on self-aggrandizement and personal publicity" and his relative indifference to the city's growing problems on a variety of fronts. Routinely, he stole credit for other people's initiatives and acted as if he were exempt from the rules. A

police officer drove him to his wedding in Montana in his official SUV – a definite no-no.

After two terms as mayor he had his eye, naturally, on the Governor's Mansion – but polls convinced him to run for Lieutenant Governor instead. He spent two terms in that job, too, but hated it: he had no real power, no real staff, no real budget, and he felt disrespected by his boss, Jerry Brown. The initiatives he did support were destructive “progressive” bilge of the first water: for example, he was the only statewide elected official to support Proposition 47, which converted many felonies to misdemeanors, helping to set off the still ongoing rash of shoplifting that has made San Francisco, particularly, an international joke. For the most part, however, instead of addressing the state's problems he put his energies into enhancing his national profile. He became a fixture on shows like *Real Time with Bill Maher*. He also wrote – or at least signed his name to – a book calling for the transformation of government by means of “digital technology”; the book's argument didn't make much sense, and even Stephen Colbert, usually a reliable left-wing shill, dismissed it as “bullshit.”

And then, inevitably, in 2019, Newsom became governor, thanks in no small part to massive donations from the Gettys and Pritzkers and his role as “the darling of the upper class.” California was already on the skids, but Newsom accelerated the process. He pulled National Guard troops from the southern border, saying that “[t]he border ‘emergency’ is a manufactured crisis and California will not be part of this political theater.” He even had the state sue President Trump over his border emergency declaration, which according to Newsom was nothing but an expression of “division, xenophobia, [and] racism.” Instead of canceling one of the state's notorious boondoggles – the program to build a staggeringly expensive high-speed rail line from San Francisco to San Diego – he shortened the planned route, so that the trains would run

only between Merced and Bakersfield. This made the rail line an even more ridiculous proposition, but Newsom's priority was not to provide a useful means of public transportation but to keep the state from having to return the federal money appropriated for the project to a government run by Donald Trump, who from the beginning of his governorship Newsom singled out as his personal enemy – an action that profoundly enhanced his popularity among California Democrats. Indeed, instead of seriously dealing with California's jobs and education crises, Newsom focused relentlessly on attacking Trump. A hundred days into his governorship, he bragged childishly that California was "the most un-Trump state."

The actions he did take, all of them plucked right out of the progressive playbook, tended to be disastrous in their impact. He ended the death penalty, in contradiction to voters' wishes. He signed into law Assembly Bill 5, which forced companies to reclassify contractors – "gig workers" – as employees, a move that would threaten individuals in a wide range of professions, from truckers to freelance writers and musicians. As one Republican legislator put it, the effect of the law would be nothing less than to "destroy...people's lives." Newsom only agreed to water down the law when his mentor, Willie Brown, told him that the law threatened his own gig as a columnist for the *San Francisco Chronicle*.

Then came COVID. Newsom, determined to respond to the pandemic in a more authoritarian way than any governor in the country, took "the most drastic actions" possible, including a "total stay-at-home order" and a panoply of inane and arbitrary rules that resulted, for example, in a \$1000 fine for a man caught surfing alone. Even some of Newsom's leftist allies compared his actions to the tyrannical conduct of the Chinese Communist Party. Nonetheless, several other states followed Newsom's lead, and the mainstream press celebrated him. Unsurprisingly, he was among the politicians caught violating their own rules: spotted at a birthday party at one of California's most

expensive restaurants, the French Laundry, he endured a wave of backlash. Yet this was, it appeared, a man incapable of feeling shame. Following the French Laundry scandal, he doubled down on his lockdown, mandating masks even outside and instituting a curfew. Even outdoor dining was forbidden, although it was known to be safe. The whole policy was nothing but virtue signaling. Even as it became clear that school closings and online learning were causing immense psychological and educational damage to young people, it was reported that Newsom's own four children were undergoing "in-person learning at their private school in Sacramento."

Newsom seemed to have a special animus for religious institutions. For a brief period during the pandemic, he reopened restaurants – but not churches. In February 2021, writes Gardey Holmes, Newsom "reopened film productions, hair salons, libraries, malls, massage parlors, nail salons, professional sporting events, retail stores, and tattoo parlors in counties where COVID-19 spread was designated as 'widespread.' And yet, in accordance with his continuously demonstrated bias against places of worship, churches remained shuttered." It took an order by the Supreme Court, ruling that Newsom's action violated the First Amendment, to get the churches opened again. In 2020 came a new scandal: tens of billions in unemployment benefits had been claimed by undeserving persons – including convicted felons – under the auspices of the state's Employment Development Department. How could this have happened? Because under Newsom, ordinary precautions to prevent such fraud had been swept away. Then came *another* scandal: it turned out that Newsom had solicited donations to the state and to certain charities, including one run by his wife, from various corporations – an outrageous violation of state law. And this, it emerged, was only one of several shady moves on his part to pad his and his friends' pockets.

It was all quite appalling. Yet none of it kept true-blue

California Democrats from adoring Newsom as the very embodiment of anti-Trump progressivism. Still, his missteps led, in August 2021, to a serious effort to recall him. Newsom's supporters were quick to demonize their opponents, with the head of the state's Democratic Party describing the recall effort as a "coup" that was "led by right-wing conspiracy theorists, white nationalists, anti-vaxxers, and groups who encourage violence on our democratic institutions." Newsom's leading opponent, black conservative radio host Larry Elder – a highly intelligent and worthy contender, as devoted to the improvement of California as Newsom was to his own political fortunes – was smeared in a notorious *Los Angeles Times* column as "the black face of white supremacy." In the end, Newsom handily defeated the recall effort with 62% of the vote, and the next year was elected to a second term in Sacramento by a huge margin. California was apparently such a deep blue state that absolutely nothing could bring Newsom down.

Gardey Holmes rightly devotes a good deal of attention to the issue of homelessness, a problem which got worse and worse in California, especially in San Francisco, during Newsom's years in local and state politics. As mayor, he embraced the "Housing First" approach – giving homeless people their own residences without first addressing their psychiatric issues or problems with addiction. This policy only exacerbated the homelessness situation in San Francisco, even as other solutions were scaling down the problem in New York and elsewhere. But Newsom wouldn't budge. Plainly, ideological correctness meant more to him than practical results. So it was that as governor he doubled down on Housing First, throwing billions of dollars at it even as the problem magnified, for reasons that Michael Shellenberger has explained eloquently in his book *San Fransicko*: briefly put, Housing First encourages homelessness while discouraging the homeless from trying to straighten out their lives.

Then the gender madness came along, and Newsom went all out, seeking to make California a beacon for the rest of the country when it came to the noble goal of pushing transgender ideology on toddlers. He signed a bill, the Menstrual Equity Act, providing free tampons in both girls' and boys' bathrooms. He radically increased funding for Planned Parenthood's attempts to push abortion on young people. Similarly, after George Floyd's death, he supported the introduction of so-called "anti-racism" ideology into school curricula, supported changing the names of schools named after Washington and Jefferson, supported defunding the police, and supported slavery reparations for black Californians – even though slavery had never been legal in California. "We've got to fundamentally change who we are," he pronounced. He signed a bill that made punishments for child rape more lenient. Dishonestly, he accused Florida Governor Ron DeSantis of banning books and pushed the "Don't Say Gay" lie. He even ran an ad in Florida telling residents of the Sunshine State that DeSantis was robbing them of their freedoms. Traveling around the country, he promoted California as *the* go-to place for abortions. He even signed a bill making California a "sanctuary state" for children seeking transgender "treatment" – regardless of their parents' wishes – and promoted Proposition 1, which would permit abortion right up to the point of delivery.

By the end of Newsom's first term as governor, the streets of several California cities, especially San Francisco, were full of mentally ill homeless people and heroin and fentanyl users. Thanks to the "shoplifting epidemic," even cheap items in drug stores were – and still are – kept behind lock and key. If you steal under \$950 worth of stuff from a single merchant, you won't be prosecuted – a law that has resulted in the mass closing of stores as well as of a major San Francisco shopping mall. The state is plagued by high unemployment and high rents. Student performance declined drastically during Newsom's governorship. As of early this year, California had a

\$73 billion deficit. Yet none of these problems were mentioned in Newsom's second inaugural address, in which his focus was rather on hailing California as – thanks to him, naturally – a world leader in progressive policy.

As Gardey Holmes puts it: “In Newsom's vision, his efforts to make history-like designating California as a sanctuary for children who identify as transgender–outweighed all the state's crises.” Not until President Biden and Chinese President Xi visited San Francisco for a conference in November 2023 did Newsom help local officials deploy “intensive measures to clean up the city. Sidewalks were resurfaced, areas were cleaned of human feces, piles of garbage were hauled away, and a giant homeless encampment vanished. The cleanup left residents questioning why such measures had not been taken earlier for their benefit.” In short, “Newsom only prioritized a clean San Francisco when the city's cleanliness directly contributed to burnishing his public image.” Whatever you may think of Ron DeSantis, America owes him one gigantic debt of thanks: in a November 30, 2023, debate, he wiped the floor with Newsom, effectively ending the latter's apparent plans to enter the 2024 presidential race.

That doesn't mean, of course, that Newsom's dream of the White House has died. No, he's just put it on hold. And as Gardey Holmes's cogent and comprehensive book makes eminently clear – and as she herself puts it in her concluding pages – “We should be very wary of a Newsom presidency. This is not a man whose intentions are the betterment of the country. This is a man whose intentions are the exaltation of himself and the furtherance of his own power. And, worst of all, his well-established pattern for seeking such exaltation and power is the advancement of extreme left-wing policies.” In short, as this book vividly and quite unsettlingly demonstrates, Gavin Newsom makes even the unsavory likes of Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama look like rank amateurs when it comes to sheer egotism, megalomania, and vaingloriousness. Every American who

cares about the fate of his country should pray that this oily narcissist's dreams of national power never come to fruition.

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