

BIG DADDY

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—Lou Cannon, author of *Governor Reagan: His Rise to Power*

JESSE UNRUH

AND THE ART OF POWER POLITICS

BILL BOYARSKY



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The Death of a Boss

THE LAST DAYS OF Jesse Marvin Unruh were a fitting end to the life of a great American political boss: drinks, stories, and friends and family mourning, not only for the boss but for themselves. He was dying of prostate cancer, having refused to permit his prostate to be surgically removed. Unruh spoke to several people about this decision, including family and friends.¹

A radical prostatectomy might have saved him but he dreaded that it would leave him impotent, taking him out of a game that was very important to him, the game of sex, played over and over again, with many, many women. Impotence in sex, politics, or anything else was unacceptable to this domineering man, who had raised himself from Texas sharecropper poverty to becoming, at the height of his power, the single most influential politician in California, first as an assemblyman, then as state assembly speaker, and finally as state treasurer. Unruh was one of those rare elected officials whose power reached far beyond the offices he held. Other state assemblymen, assembly speakers, and state treasurers have served and been quickly forgotten. Unruh took these jobs in new directions, and during his lifetime and long afterward, he exemplified the word *politician* in its finest sense.

Unruh was much more than a California politician. He was part of a line of postwar Democratic political leaders, beginning with Harry Truman, who espoused the center of American liberalism. It was a position that would be made untenable in the 1960s by conflict over race and the Vietnam War. Unruh's effort to keep California Democrats on this centrist path anticipated and encapsulated the struggles that were to tear the Democratic Party apart.

Unruh embodied much of what was accomplished in postwar California. In his prime, California was already the most important state in the union, exceeding the wealth and influence of most nations. Its impact on national policy and politics was huge, and Jesse Unruh was part of it every step of

the way as a lawmaker, policy maker, and political prophet. Unruh foresaw the challenges and problems of the postwar era, and proposed and enacted solutions that were accepted both in his own state and in the other places where he had influence, on Wall Street and in Washington, D.C. In doing so, he made his way between the extremes of a volatile California. If his path had been followed by his party in later years, it might have saved the Democrats from their estrangement from working-class America.

In his years in power, from the late 1950s to his death in 1987, Unruh was a pragmatic visionary, focused on individuals like himself, who had struggled from poverty to the middle class. He retained a sense of what he had in common with middle-class and working-class Americans. He looked at such people weathering economic, social, and cultural hardships and wondered what government could do to protect their financial and civil rights. He also worried about their right to a decent education that would help propel them upward, just as his own path up had been cleared by public schools and the GI Bill.

He did this in an era of California's great projects, while the state was busy constructing a system to deliver water from the wet north to the semi-arid south, building university campuses and freeways, replacing wartime portable classrooms in the public schools with well-designed buildings on large campuses. Unruh supported them all. But, having been raised in extreme poverty, his vision was focused more on the human condition than on concrete and bricks. Let others preside at groundbreaking and dedications. He cared most about what went on inside the classroom.

Concern for the little guy—and his own indignation over high interest on an appliance he'd purchased for his own young family—inspired him to secure passage of a state law protecting consumers who bought on the installment plan.² His outrage when an African American girl was denied admittance to a Los Angeles private school—along with his experiences in the Jim Crow South, the segregated Navy, and his racially troubled legislative district—impelled him to write and secure passage of a civil rights bill that, strengthened over the years, remains the state's strongest such law.³

Knowing that a legislature intellectually and financially subservient to lobbyists and state bureaucrats could not prescribe for the new postwar California, Unruh persuaded the voters to approve a full-time legislature with a large staff of its own experts, a pattern adopted around the nation. Eventually, it became clear the new system was flawed, although not as badly as the old one. Full-time status and higher pay did not make the lazy more productive or the greedy more honest. But in their early years, Unruh's in-

novations turned the assembly into a creative body that originated policies preparing California for the changes in economic and social conditions of the 1960s and 1970s.

Unruh's state assembly team of legislators and consultants initiated a vast change in the treatment of the retarded and mentally ill, improving their care, as well as giving them civil rights. The warehousing of children was ended, as was the practice of shipping the mentally ill to state hospitals after only perfunctory hearings. Sharing Unruh's belief that civil rights laws alone were not enough to overcome generations of discrimination and segregation, assembly consultants developed a policy of tutoring and aid that, if enacted, would have made college much more available for the needy of all races, accomplishing the purposes of affirmative action without falling into the bottomless pit of racial politics.

Against the opposition of school administrators and teachers, Unruh and his team pushed through testing and other accountability measures that forced the schools to prove they were doing the job required of them. Before anyone else in power saw the danger, his assembly committees warned that California's deteriorating public education system and dependence on the aerospace industry would leave the state ill-equipped to compete in the increasingly complex technological society that was then only dimly viewed by futurists. In part because of Unruh's farsightedness, these warnings were heeded, helping set the stage for developments such as the technological explosion of Silicon Valley.⁴

Unruh reached into the streets of South Central Los Angeles and, for the first time, brought substantial numbers of African Americans into power in the California legislature and Democratic Party. "Jesse genuinely believed that South Central Los Angeles ought to elect black officials," said Leon Ralph, an African American who represented one of the assembly districts Unruh created in a reapportionment that increased chances of minority representation. "He genuinely believed that and put his money and power where he spoke."⁵

But it was not all high idealism. Unruh skillfully used money to assure he would become and remain boss. Where once businesses and their lobbyists gave directly to legislative candidates, Unruh figured out a system in which the money would come to him, and he would pass it on to candidates who supported him. It was a brilliant invention, a breakthrough, and the forerunner of the corrupt or corruptible methods of campaign contributions that came to dominate politics in the following decades.

Now he was on a hospital bed on the second floor of the three-story

home he and his wife Chris had built near Santa Monica Bay. They had been lovers for ten years and had recently married. She was a bright, attractive presence at social events, a former nightclub singer whose upbeat personality contrasted sharply with Unruh's dark moods and inveterate and often brutal sarcasm. "To me, Jesse Unruh was bigger than life. And I loved him with a passion," she told me. "When I met him, I thought this guy is something! He can't just belong to me, he belongs to everybody. But I thought Jesse really needed a main person in his life, and I think I was that."⁶

Chris was Unruh's second wife. Virginia Lemon, a college physical education teacher whom Unruh met while serving at a Navy base during World War II, was his first. After the war, Virginia steered him to college, helped launch his political career, and bore him five children. Their marriage began to crumble when Unruh, on his way to becoming a big shot, took up with other women in Sacramento; but it survived, painfully, for almost twenty more years.

Other women were a constant with Unruh. He was always on the prowl, and as his power grew, the chase became easy. He mixed long and short-term relationships. In the short term, his criterion was availability. "He'd fuck a filing cabinet," said one friend. "As long as it was a girl filing cabinet," another friend said.⁷ But other relationships were long term and deep, and his partners in them spoke of him with admiration and affection long afterward.

From the front, Chris and Jesse Unruh's house near Santa Monica Bay resembled a stucco fortress, with small, high windows. It sat on a street with one three-story residence after another, almost as tightly packed as row houses. As with all the houses, the rear, facing the bay two blocks away, was where the designers and builders had put their best effort. It was finished in brown shingles, evoking an image of the New England shore. The second floor was the heart of the house, a place for parties, with a large living room and dining room separated by a bar. Two sliding doors opened onto a terrace, recessed into the house to give guests more space and to shield them from neighbors just a few feet away.

When he was healthy, Unruh could sit on the terrace and look down at a murky stream called the Grand Canal. The canal actually was neither grand nor a canal. Rather, it was a relic of a failed dream, part of a plan conceived by an early twentieth-century real estate promoter, Abbott Kinney, who tried to build his own Venice on the Pacific shore. Canals extended from a large plaza—his version of St. Mark's—with bungalows lining either

side of them. Unfortunately, the tides of Santa Monica Bay weren't strong enough to circulate water through the canals, and they stagnated. Kinney's bungalows went unsold, and, after a few years, oil was discovered. Venice became a polluted tangle of tall oil-drilling towers in a time when oil was king in Los Angeles.⁸

But with the ocean so near, the dream would not die. After the oil was exhausted, enterprising Californians saw how to profit from the seaside desolation the Southern California way, as Kinney had hoped to, through real estate. With local government financing the work, and real estate developers profiting, construction crews dredged and dug the world's largest man-made marina. Restaurants, apartment buildings, and houses, some built by developers and others by individuals such as the Unruhs, rose over the years from the old oil fields, an evocation of the postwar California conviction that nature can always be overcome with enough government funds, private investment, creative engineering, and the drive to make a profit. It was a belief so common, so deeply ingrained, that it became the engine that drove post-World War II expansion and shaped the philosophy of Unruh and his generation of political leaders.

Unruh's bed when he lay dying was in the living room, adjacent to the bar and dining room. Friends had drinks from the bar. The large dining area and kitchen adjoining the living room left plenty of space for the continuous farewell. "We had something that must have been like an Oriental potentate dying," said a friend. "People all over the house. The death of an emperor." When the pain wasn't overwhelming, Unruh got up from bed and joined Chris and guests in the dining room. But more frequently, he lay in bed, injecting morphine with a pumping device. He had lost weight, and his face muscles had grown slack. At the foot of the bed was a television set with a VCR, and Unruh watched old movies. "He was in terrible shape," said his friend Frank Burns. "It got to the point where the morphine pump was going pretty constantly."⁹

Weakened, drugged, often unable to speak, Unruh still had a powerful quality that made him larger than life. Even dying, he retained the ability to dominate the lives of those around him. His sharp eyes had once seemed capable of boring into a person's inner depths, finding the most carefully concealed weaknesses. His voice was deep, with a hint of impoverished rural Texas, often warm and friendly, just as often fierce. Even though he had set one follower against another, they all loved him. He could make you feel like his closest friend, his most trusted adviser—or the dumbest person in the world. He had huge strengths, which propelled him to power, and huge

weaknesses, which prevented him from making it to the top. Our political figures are now plastic, fashioned for television. The life we see in public may have little relationship to what happens in private. But Unruh was not a hypocrite. He lived his life fully, without apologies. His story is more like a novel than a humdrum political biography.

In the last years before his death, Unruh often reflected on his life. He had learned he had prostate cancer in 1984. His friend Larry Margolis was present when Unruh received the diagnosis. Unruh was state treasurer and Margolis was one of his top assistants, and they were in Manhattan at the Fraunces Tavern Restaurant awaiting the arrival of their luncheon companion. “Unruh called back [to California] to get the results of the prostate test he had had a couple of weeks before and learned that it was malignant. He got the news while we were standing there waiting for our guests to arrive for lunch. It was pretty much a downhill spin from that point on. At that point he was told it was a very slow growing malignancy and the most responsive to treatment. But it wasn’t.”¹⁰

“We all knew, those of us who were real close to him, that the only decision you had to make in those days . . . was you either had an operation or you didn’t,” said his friend Carmen Warschaw, who, with her husband, Lou, had been with him from the beginning of his political career. “Of course, the main thing was that supposedly you could never have an erection again.” Unruh chose X-ray treatment. “To him, sex was his ultimate goal, because he was not attractive physically,” she said. “And although he had power in the legislature, I think he felt this was his big attraction. And because he was raised in . . . poverty, [he felt] that you never really achieved anything unless you had sexual prowess. That’s part of my interpretation of the way he lived, and that was part of the reason I think he had those women, because he did not feel he was accomplishing this at home . . . and this was to show his power.”

Later in 1984, after his decision was made, the Warschaws invited the Unruhs for a cruise through the Greek islands and up the Italian coast. Their yacht was named *The Dragon Lady*, the nickname given Carmen by her opponents in the many Democratic Party fights she waged as an Unruh ally—against the party’s liberal wing, against the Democratic governor, Edmund G. “Pat” Brown Sr., as well as against foes by then gone from the memories of all but a few like Carmen and Unruh, neither of whom ever forgot or forgave a double cross. She wore the name “Dragon Lady” with such pride that she affixed it to the family yacht.

Although his death was more than two years away, Unruh knew he had

made a fatal decision. He played cards, ate the meals prepared by the Warschaws' excellent chef, read, and spent much of his time on deck in a swimsuit watching the scenery. They all went ashore to visit Delphi. Unruh, then state treasurer, amused himself and the others by posing in front of the ruins of the Athenian Treasury, orating while his picture was taken. Mostly, "he was very quiet during the trip, and he would cry at intervals, he even would cry when Chris was around," Carmen said. "He would sit there and there were just tears. And you'd say, 'What's the matter, Jess?' and he'd say, 'I'm just thinking about, I don't have long to live, have I been able to do everything I should?' . . . He would start to think about his future and he just felt there was none," she said. At times, he "was so melancholy. I remember we would sit up with him, especially Lou. They would sit on the back deck and talk about it. And he would cry very easily, really weep that he made that choice. [But] he still felt it was the right one to make." Chris "was so sweet to him and kind to him and would ask him if there was anything she could do for him. She would kiss him. She would sit on his lap. She would tell him how much she loved him. She'd tell him how wonderful he was."¹¹

In 1986, Unruh was elected to a fourth term as state treasurer, but his illness worsened. By early 1987, he was on heavy pain medication, and soon he was bedridden. Toward the end, a hospice nurse, a specialist in ministering to the dying, was with him. She talked to him and helped him confront the final stage of his illness.

But neither she nor his friends could give him a peaceful death. The turmoil of his personal life followed him to the grave. Although Unruh had been on the public payroll for more than thirty years, he had accumulated an estate estimated at more than \$1 million in property, stocks, and cash, and a separate fund containing at least \$1.3 million in unused campaign contributions. In his will, he had provided for a young woman with whom he'd lived for a time in a house he owned in Sacramento. From all accounts, it was a warm relationship, not as tempestuous or unsettled as some of those in his past. A friend remembered going on picnics with her, Unruh, and her young child. "She was very nice to Jess," Burns recalled. "This was a very rough time for Jess. It was when he was coming to grips with the fact that he was going to die, that there was nothing that could be done. And he and Chris weren't getting along."¹² But as the cancer spread to his bones Unruh left Sacramento, reluctant to burden the single mother with the task of caring for a dying man. He returned to Los Angeles to marry Chris. Chris Unruh was in the will, along with the young woman in Sacramento and

Unruh's grown children: Bruce, Bradley, Randall, Robert, and Linda. He had divorced their mother, Virginia, in 1975.

As death neared, Unruh, often groggy from painkillers, tried to sort out his obligations. He changed his bequests seven times in nine days. The last and final version of the will is in a weak, barely legible handwriting. Chris's share was increased, his children's reduced. And, just before he died, the young woman was dropped from his will.¹³ "I told him it was chaos," a friend said. "I told him it would result in the chaos that happened. He didn't care. He felt that who wins, wins. It was vintage Jesse Unruh."¹⁴

His public persona was captured by his nickname, "Big Daddy," after the domineering father in the Tennessee Williams play *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. It added to the widespread impression that he was a ruthless political boss. He loathed the reputation, the nickname, and being fat. Chris said: "Someone would come up and pat him and say, 'Oh, you're gaining some weight there.' That would drive him up the wall. 'I know I'm heavy [he'd say]. I don't need some asshole to come up and pat me on the belly.' And he also had a very difficult time when people called him Big Daddy. He hated that."¹⁵

His friend Ann Walsh recalled that, after a fund-raising dinner, she and Unruh "went into the bar and they had a band, and (I asked) 'Do you want to dance?'" He refused. A couple of years before, she recalled, "he had been photographed dancing with a woman, looking like a dancing bear, and it so hurt his pride that he never was going to allow himself to be put into that position again."¹⁶

People continued to call Unruh "Big Daddy" even after he lost almost 100 pounds. For the name had perfectly fitted his pre-diet five-foot-ten, 280-pound-plus body, which he draped in expensive suits tailored to disguise his huge physique. He had thick lips and a bulldog face, with jowls that hung around his shirt collar until a surgeon trimmed them.

Whatever his weight, he had an insatiable hunger for alcohol, food, and women. When drunk, he was angry and belligerent. He left one woman for another or, more typically, saw more than one at the same time. But he was honest about this and, several of them recall, treated women with consideration and affection. Ann Walsh was a political consultant and organizer in San Diego when she met Unruh. "I'm not embarrassed to say this because I'm an old broad now, but I was one of the multitude of women he slept with," she said.¹⁷ "I was so intrigued with him because under this big hulking man was a very gentle spirit. He talked about his parents. And one of the things that motivated him to push legislation . . . that would help

elderly people was the poverty Jess's parents lived in. You know there is . . . Jess who was the kingmaker, and then there was the other side of Jess who wanted to fight injustice, and that so impressed me. He was just very, very sensitive about his parents."

Jaci DeFord, Unruh's lover and friend for twenty years, said:

There was something about him. I think it was a charisma. He had an enormous charisma, and again, I think it was this ability he had to zero in, and [it] probably happened with all of his friends. I don't think it just happened with women; this incredible ability that when he was talking to you . . . you were the most important person in his world at the moment. The saddest thing when he did run for governor was that talking to a crowd of people you never got that incredible feeling that you got when it was one on one . . . when he was talking to a crowd, it was never the same thing.¹⁸

He had the gift of knowing instinctively what someone wanted, or needed. When John Quimby was a beginning assemblyman, he saw this side of Unruh, who was then speaker. He was in a hotel bar with Unruh. "I was just depressed," Quimby said. "My wife and I were having a lot of money troubles. We were paid . . . \$600 a month and my wife was a legal secretary making about that amount. We were strapped. We had five kids and all the expenses thereto . . . I wasn't complaining, but I was really concerned about my wife and my financial ability to continue. Jess picked up on this somehow. He just intuitively picked up on it. The guy knew things about you on a personal basis. He said to me, 'John, what's happening?' I said 'Jess, same old stuff, the wife and the kids and money.' He said, 'I want to give you some help.'"

Unruh's legislative salary was no more than Quimby's, and he also had five children. But this was an era when cash was king in politics; little was in writing, and paper bags were as common as checkbooks for delivering contributions. Unruh, by then a master collector of campaign money, pulled out fifteen one hundred dollar bills on the spot and gave them to Quimby, "Cash money," said Quimby. "I just can't tell you what that meant. He said just: 'Take this and use it for the best advantage.' Never mentioned it again. . . . I am not saying he [just] gave people money. He gave people what they needed that he could come up with even if it was a hug or a kind word or a phone call. . . . I think that was his secret."¹⁹

His loyal lieutenant during his years of legislative power, Larry Margolis, explained that Unruh

was so close to [his fellow assembly members] and so involved on all levels. I just don't mean on legislation. I mean on their personal lives, on their districts, on their philosophies and politics and their love affairs and everything. He just knew every detail there was to know. . . . A lot of people misunderstood what he was about because they believed he must have this mysterious hold on [people] . . . to get what he wanted them to do. And that it must be nefarious because it didn't meet the eye. Yet what they were failing to understand was that he knew this fellow's problems better than this fellow knew them, and the guy trusted him because of that.²⁰

These were political skills, some natural, some learned. But there was more to this gifted and complex political leader, and it was revealed in a personal history he shared with many of his fellow Californians.

Unruh was part of the huge migration from the Southwest to California in the 1930s and early 1940s, which infused the state with the same energy the immigrants had expended from dawn to dusk on their failing Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, and Missouri farms. Unruh was as poor as any of them while growing up on his parents' sharecropper farm 200 miles south of the Dust Bowl. And he was part of the generation of World War II veterans that emerged from wartime service with a spirit and determination that energized the state.

California after World War II was a place of frenetic motion. Magazines like *Look* sent writers there to discover the secret of its energy, to ponder what it meant for the rest of the country. Elementary and high schools were built in the new suburbs extending far outward from San Francisco and Los Angeles. Fields and redwood forests gave way to new public university campuses. Their graduates provided the intelligence and imagination that turned the wartime aircraft industry into something much bigger, aerospace, and eventually something bigger even than that arose, the computer industry. Dams created huge reservoirs, storing water to be carried to farms and cities in aqueducts defying the limits nature had placed on development on Southern California's semiarid coastal plain and in the great interior valley and desert, where agriculture had once been either limited or impossible. Distant rural areas were linked with cities by new freeways, which often destroyed old neighborhoods, encouraging sprawling growth but permitting fast transportation of crops and manufactured goods throughout the country and state, including the harbors that were the gateway to Asia.

As the vets crowded into universities and colleges, moved into mass-produced subdivisions, and went to work, they demanded more schools for

their children, better highways, new dams and water aqueducts, more parks, and, with a sophistication born of education and maturity, a decent state system of care for the mentally ill and retarded. Tax collections from wartime plants and shipyards and their workers had filled a state treasury badly depleted by the Depression. California had the money to build and a population with the will to do it. Unruh took his place as a leader of the generation determined to see that government would assure an education for the young from kindergarten through college and provide security for the old.

It is striking how much of what is good about California—the parks, the universities, the highway system, much of the water importation and distribution system—dates from those days. California at the start of the twenty-first century is the California Unruh and the others of his generation had built half a century earlier. They were a generation of hope and optimism, men and women who had survived the Depression and the war and emerged into the bright dawn of seemingly endless possibilities.

In Unruh's day, the state—and national—consensus embraced common goals. It was a broad consensus, reaching across party lines and led by two postwar governors, Republican Earl Warren and Democrat Edmund G. Brown Sr., and by Unruh. Blacks and Latinos had to fight for a piece of the power, but even as they battled, there was agreement on where they were headed. When the relative unity collapsed in the political and social revolution of the mid 1960s, the broad center vanished amid attacks from the Right and the Left. The center of the Democratic Party was particularly hard hit, its heart and soul cut apart by the competing claims of different interest groups. Unruh saw the deleterious impact these attacks could have on a state and nation that had in the past basically been wedded to middle-of-the-road politics. He believed that the Democratic Party as an institution should continue along this moderate path.

There have been enormous changes since Unruh's death. Leaders without a common goal struggle to appease rival interests. For example, the new symbol of California is not a university but a prison, a monument to interest groups that have exploited the public's fear of crime. Drive through rural California, and you are likely to see one, constructed by a new generation of governors and legislators afraid their constituents will vote them out of office whenever a murder or robbery is reported on the television news. Legislators, their terms now limited by the state's constitution, merely pass through the Capitol on their way to other public offices or other careers.

How did we get from there to here? Where did California go wrong? By

looking at those bright days through the life and career of Jesse M. Unruh, we can chart the peaks and valleys. The past can't be recaptured. The experiences that shaped Unruh are history. Yet the promise of California, with its natural and human resources, remains, just as it did when Unruh was beginning his career.