"John has taught me how to get along with other people," Brown says, noting that his service as speaker, the longest in state history, depends on the support of his fellow legislators. "I am fairly abrasive and less tolerant than anyone you know," Brown adds, "John has been the anchor who reminds me that we are dealing with human beings."

AT THE BEGINNING of his political career in the late 1960s, Vasconcellos' politics were defined more by what he opposed than what he supported. Arriving in Sacramento after his 1966 election, he was determined to protect the expansive legislative legacy of his mentor, Gov. Pat Brown.

Gov. Brown, Vasconcellos says, was, more than any other single individual, responsible for the expansion of California's roads, water system, business infrastructure and the creation of the most accessible system of higher education in the history of humanity. A popular former movie actor named Ronald Reagan, who was prone to wearing cowboy hats and other cinematic regalia, had defeated Brown in the 1966 gubernatorial election.

Vasconcellos, a newly elected assemblyman, approached his term uneasily; the wildly popular new governor, it appeared, planned to undermine California's recent social progress. "He had this simplistic, constricted philosophy," Vasconcellos recalls, which held, among other things, that what California really needed were more prisons and fewer trees.

Vasconcellos stormed into and out of committee hearings, glared at opponents and fought for his causes on the Assembly floor like a cornered tiger. "I was not a very pleasant person at the time," he concedes.

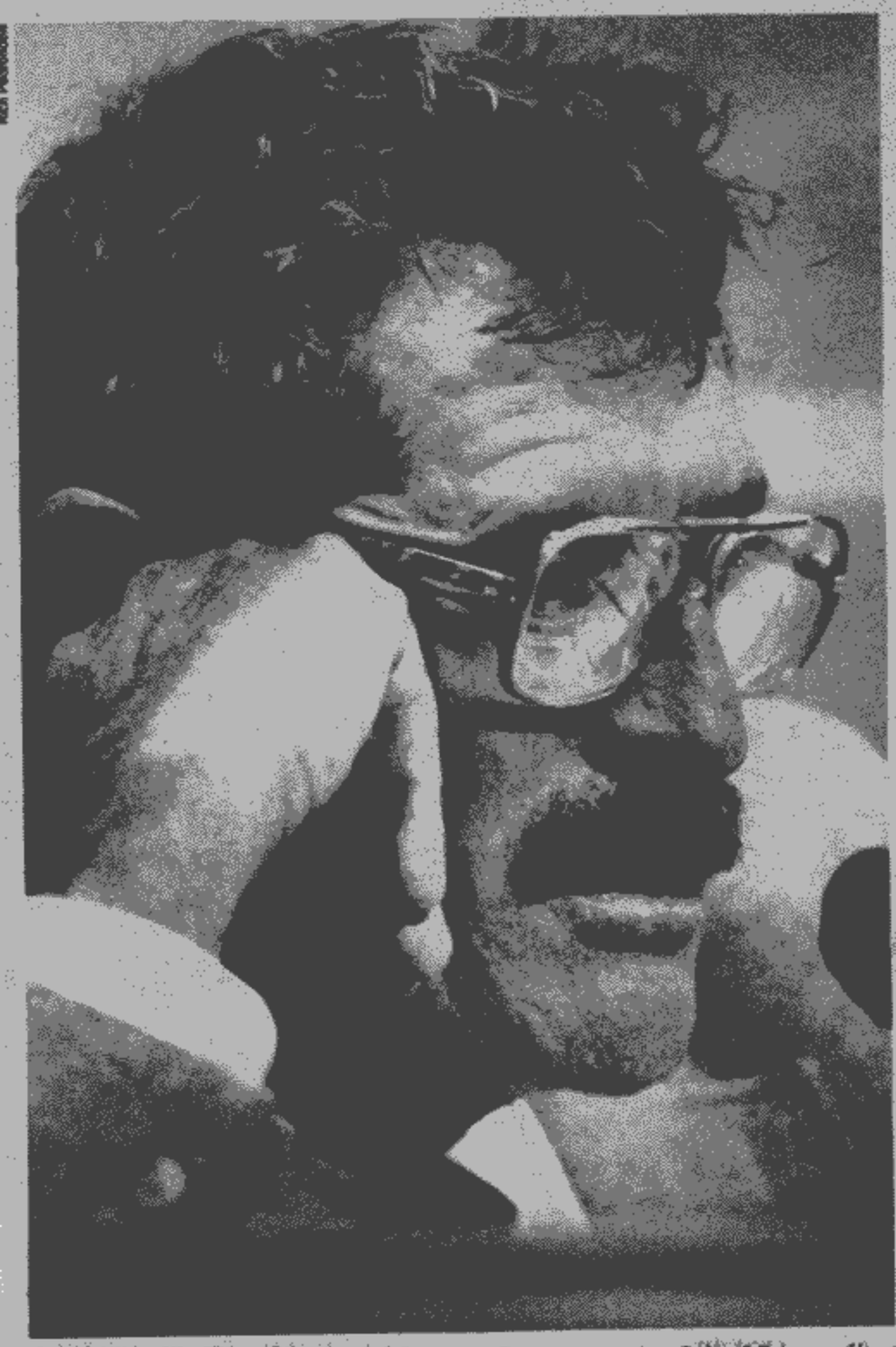
"I was a locked-down, buttoned-down, good Catholic boy trying to toe the line." When his personal puritanical dam finally burst, he let his hair grow and wore an angry expression. *California* magazine's Richard Trainor even went so far as to suggest Vasconcellos looked more like a cross between a rock star and a drug smuggler than a politician. Trainor dubbed him "Don Vasco de Santa Clara."

Vasconcellos's personal angst, reflected in his counterculture lifestyle, was fed by anger. The tragic events of June 6, 1968, when New York Sen. Robert F. Kennedy was murdered on the eve of his victory in the California presidential primary, nagged at Vasconcellos like an unkept promise. Just days earlier, the two had shared a platform, the experience filling Vasconcellos with hope unfelt by him since the assassination of RFK's brother and the defeat of his own patron, Pat Brown.

"Bobby, even more than his brother [Jack], spoke often of the potential power in each individual and of the value of every single person," Vasconcellos recalls. "Losing him, here in California, was one of the toughest things we've ever been through."

During most of the 1970s, Vasconcellos' mood fluctuated from combative to depressed. He realizes now, he says, that in addition to the turmoil of the times, he was also struggling with an unresolved inner conflict related to the same strict Catholic upbringing that had helped motivate his work on human and civil rights issues. Following an epiphany that has had ramifications for California and the nation, Vasconcellos went public, sharing his personal experiences with psychotherapy. His original orientation, what he calls "the traditional guilt-sin way of living," was, Vasconcellos concluded, an emotional crippler.

Slowly at first, and later with a feverish speed, he began to connect the dots. California's problems, which he was elected to resolve, were simply the sum total of the problems of people and organizations saddled with the same personal demons that haunted his own psyche, he theorized. By exploring and explaining his discovery of the connection between public policy and personal psychology, Vasconcellos became a national figure, respected by legislative colleagues and revered by members of the mental health profession, who have showered him with more awards than he has wall space on which to hang them.



Assembling His Thoughts: *22nd District Representative John Vasconcellos*

FACED WITH the worst financial crisis in California since the Great Depression, Vasconcellos, now 60, is burdened with the job of finding the ways and means by which California can fund itself. The onerous task is made even more difficult, Vasconcellos says, by the recent passage of Proposition 140, which not only limited the number of terms legislators can serve, but also reduced legislative staff positions by 40 percent.

To Vasconcellos, who routinely gets reelected with more than 60 percent of the vote, the passage of Prop. 140 was a disheartening setback. "It means the lobbyists and bureaucrats will be running the show," he says. "Legislators will now come and go, but there are no term limits on the bureaucrats and the lobbyists," he observes. The influence of the most narrow special interests, Vasconcellos predicts, will become even more pronounced once the process of legislative musical chairs begins.

Even more galling, though, was the partial destruction of a legislative staff once considered among Sacramento's most effective problem-solving teams.

Although best known for his work on social issues and the promotion of self-esteem, Vasconcellos has also been a frequent advocate for area business interests. In addition to recruiting employers to Silicon Valley, Vasconcellos successfully sponsored reform of the state's unitary tax rules, an effort that put domestic multinational businesses on an equal tax footing with foreign multinational corporations. The move initially reduced tax receipts for the state but did win Vasconcellos plaudits from the likes of David Packard and the late Intel co-founder, Robert Noyce, who credited the legislation with helping to preserve thousands of local jobs.

Recently, however, the task of attracting businesses to Silicon Valley has become tougher. While leaders of other states, including Texas Gov. Ann Richards, make regular visits to Silicon Valley to court businesses, California Gov. Pete Wilson appears to have abandoned the traditional state executive's booster role. Instead, he has publicly bad-mouthed the Golden State, calling it "a bad product" in several recent speeches.

Vasconcellos sees the governor's derision of California as part of a deliberate effort to generate a sense of alarm in order to pass pro-business legislation without assessing the merits. He contends that a similar nefarious goal motivated the recent budget stalemate, when the governor put off making an agreement even after his stated terms and conditions were met. "He figures that if he can create enough chaos and desperation, he might be able to seize control of the Legislature," through the defeat of Democratic incumbents and the passage of Proposition 165 this November.

The proposition, sponsored by Wilson, coincidentally, would grant near-absolute powers to the governor whenever the Legislature and the governor are unable to agree on a budget by the annual deadline. "It's the most cynical ploy I've ever witnessed," Vasconcellos fumes. "First you create the chaos, then you present yourself as the solution."

Vasconcellos took some heat himself recently when he plainly admitted to a daily newspaper that solutions to California's fiscal problems are getting harder and harder to come by. "I don't know," he snapped at the reporter who pressed him for a solution to the recent budget stalemate during a break in the negotiating sessions. The resulting article portrayed Vasconcellos as being overwhelmed by the problems.

He says he was simply being honest. "The days when we could solve most of our financial problems easily are long gone," he says, noting that he warned colleagues and reporters of California's impending financial catastrophe for several years. "Anyone who tells you there is an easy solution either doesn't understand the problem—or isn't telling the truth."

The key, Vasconcellos says, is to first forge an understanding about the proper role of government. "The basic problem with politics today," Vasconcellos wrote in an open letter to some friends recently, "is that it is still mostly trying to operate, both in its substance and in its style, upon cynical, negative assumptions about who we are and our natural inclinations as human beings. The old politics continues to operate on the assumption that we human beings are inherently monstrous, or at least usually don't know what is good for us.

"The conservatives, usually Republicans, operate as though they believe that we humans are naturally irresponsible, even dangerous, and therefore can't be trusted with, and shouldn't be allowed to enjoy, personal freedom. Their programs, although well-intentioned, are too often punitive, repressive, defensive and armed—and lead us, inevitably, to a 'warfare state.' "

"The liberals," Vasconcellos continues, "mostly Democrats, operate as though they believe we humans can't be trusted to take good care of ourselves. Their programs, although again well-intentioned, too often lead to dependency-perpetuating and care-taking and lead us, again inevitably, toward a 'welfare state.' Neither of these states, warfare or welfare, can either suit or satisfy who we human beings are becoming today," Vasconcellos concludes.

A more socially productive third—and higher—ground can be found, Vasconcellos argues, in the scholarship of humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers. "Rogers taught that we human beings are innately inclined toward becoming constructive, life-affirming, responsible and trustworthy," Vasconcellos says repeatedly in his standard stump speech. "But if your view of people is that they are evil, dirty little monsters who need to be controlled, it is impossible to construct anything other than a negative social structure, which is clearly what we have at the moment, and which is bound to fail."

Vasconcellos says this insight—that differing perceptions of human nature are frequently at the root of what appear on the surface to be political disagreements—was not immediately apparent. "I got to Sacramento," he says, "and in the middle of all these arguments I suddenly realized these people were not really arguing about programs or policies but rather about different conceptions of human nature. Until we achieve consensus about who we are as human beings, we'll never solve these other problems."

His preoccupation with the link between public policy and personal psychology has made Vasconcellos the butt of jokes, including an occasional starring role in the Doonesbury comic strip. It has also won him admiration in other quarters. Since Vasconcellos initiated his state task force on self-esteem and personal responsibility, several states, including Maryland, Louisiana and Virginia, have set up similar programs aimed at nurturing self-confidence.

Among those who recognized early on the value of Vasconcellos' effort to foster self-esteem as a centerpiece of public policy is the governor of Arkansas, Bill Clinton, who invited Vasconcellos to visit him in Little Rock well before the start of the current presidential election.