

Opinion: Jerry Brown now owns California's big drought

By Dan Walters dwalters@sacbee.com

Responses to crises often define political executives – presidents, governors and big-city mayors – for posterity.

Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War. Franklin Roosevelt and the Great Depression and World War II. John Kennedy and the Cuban missile crisis. George W. Bush and 9/11. History books are full of such crises.

Among recent California governors, Pete Wilson was easily the most crisis-challenged, dealing with floods, wildfires, a race riot and a severe recession, to mention just a few. Wilson faced each stoically, and his gritty crisis management helped him win a landslide re-election in 1994.

Conversely, Wilson's successor, Gray Davis, stumbled badly in handling an electric utility meltdown (caused by legislation that Wilson had signed, ironically) and a budget crisis. Just a year after winning a very narrow re-election in 2002, Davis was recalled.

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Jerry Brown knows very well how crisis can impact a politician's indelible image.

His father, Pat Brown, was on vacation in Greece when a horrific race riot erupted in the Watts neighborhood of Los Angeles in 1965.

Neither communications nor intercontinental transportation was instantaneous then, so the burden of command fell on the elder Brown's lieutenant governor, Glenn Anderson, who called out the National Guard.

A Brown-appointed commission later criticized Anderson for a slow response, but Brown did not emerge unscathed and he lost his bid for a third term in 1966.

Jerry Brown had a more personal experience with crisis in 1981 when he bungled an infestation of Mediterranean fruit flies. He initially rejected pesticide spraying, citing "environmental risks," and then reversed himself under pressure from farmers and legislators.

"I'm getting bugged by this bug," Brown complained. "It's got a lot of politicians panicked or foaming at the mouth."

Brown's Medfly debacle poisoned his 1982 U.S. Senate bid, short-circuiting a career he had hoped would lead to the White House.

And that brings us to Brown 2.0's big crisis, a prolonged drought.

He had been reluctant to take political ownership by ordering draconian water reductions, hoping that voluntary cuts would suffice. However, after a few December storms, drought reappeared, and last week, with the Sierra snowpack nonexistent, Brown imposed rationing on urban users.

The water savings he wants are only about 5 percent of average human use, largely because he exempted

agriculture, saying that farmers were already suffering. But a day after his announcement, the state Water Resources Control Board posted a warning, “curtailment of water right diversions expected soon.”

Brown is now engaged, but may have left himself open to criticism that it’s too late and too little. And if it turns into a full-blown disaster, it may undermine his hopes for better standing in political history.

Call The Bee’s Dan Walters, (916) 321-1195. Back columns, sacbee.com/dan-walters. Follow him on Twitter @WaltersBee.