

REVIEWED BY ETHAN RARICK, DIRECTOR OF THE ROBERT T. MATSUI CENTER FOR POLITICS AND PUBLIC SERVICE, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY, AND AUTHOR OF CALIFORNIA RISING: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF PAT BROWN AND DESPERATE PASSAGE: THE DONNER PARTY’S PERILOUS JOURNEY WEST

Given Democrats’ dominance of California politics these days, it is easy to forget that for much of the state’s history, Republicans were usually the electoral winners, especially statewide. This was particularly true in the early 1950s, when four GOP giants stood astride the state’s political world. Gov. Earl Warren, Lt. Gov. Goodwin Knight, U.S. Sen. Bill Knowland, and U.S. Sen. Richard Nixon were the Big Four—colossal figures who competed more with each other than their outmanned partisan opponents. The intertwining careers of these four men—the aloof Warren, the scheming Nixon, the plodding Knowland, and the charming Knight—are examined by James Worthen in The Young Nixon and His Rivals.

The back story is recounted early in the book. Knowland’s publishing-magnate father boosted Warren’s early career. Warren returned the favor by launching the younger Knowland onto the national stage. Knight pined for Warren’s job. Nixon threw the sharpest elbows of the bunch as he muscled his way to the front.

The central moment in the four-way relationship—and in Worthen’s book—was the Republican National Convention in Chicago in 1952, when Warren hoped that a deadlock between Dwight Eisenhower and Robert Taft would make him the compromise nominee. Nixon played a shifty game, serving as a Warren delegate while secretly undercutting the governor, while trying to avoid a public break with the Taft conservatives, while helping to engineer Eisenhower’s nomination. Remarkably, he pulled it off and was rewarded with the vice presidential nomination. Knowland, who served as the chair of Warren’s delegation, emerged convinced of Nixon’s untrustworthiness, a feeling in which he was not alone. This is all described ably and in admirable detail, though it is more workman-like than insightful. Perhaps the biggest problem is one not of Worthen’s making: It is an oft-told tale, and it is a mighty chore to conjure up a new angle of historical attack.

Ultimately, the maneuvering of the Big Four—or at least the three of them who remained in politics after Warren’s appointment to the Supreme Court—played a role in California’s coming Republican woes. Both Nixon and Knowland longed to be elected president in 1960. Nixon could merely move one rung up on the national ladder, of course, but Knowland decided that California’s governorship was preferable to a U.S. Senate seat as a presidential launching pad. Knight was by then the governor, but Knowland announced he would challenge his fellow Republican in 1958, and poor Knight—always the fourth of the Big Four—had little choice but to abandon his own re-election hopes. He sought Knowland’s Senate seat instead. The idea of Knowland and Knight blatantly swapping public offices seemed distasteful to voters, who handed a landslide victory to Pat Brown and the Democrats.

Other factors played a more important role in the long-term Republican decline. The weakening and eventual repeal of the state’s unusual “cross-filing” system meant that voters could see candidates’ party affiliation on the ballot, which helped translate the Democratic majority among voters into a Democratic majority among officeholders. In more recent decades, the disappearance of Republican moderates, the increasingly Southern tilt of the national Republican voice, and the pronounced Democratic tendencies of California’s growing Latino community have combined to push the GOP brand ever more toward obscurity in the nation’s biggest state. The Republican supremacy that held sway back in the day of the Big Four seems a long way off.