

# The Gripes of Wrath

*Willie Brown's management style irks  
Assembly staff members*

**S**ACRAMENTO—As if legislative lawyers didn't have enough to worry about, Assembly Speaker Willie Brown recently gave them one more occupational headache.

During the annual summer budget crunch, the mercurial, sometimes unpredictable speaker—himself a lawyer, with encyclopedic knowledge of legislative rules—called the approximately 100 Assembly committee consultants in for a lecture and general verbal thrashing, which included a warning that one-fourth of them could lose their jobs.

Staff members, many of whom are lawyers, resented what they considered Brown's patronizing tone when he reminded them to be objective and avoid detailed, long-winded dissertations when analyzing legislation. Particularly irksome to some was Brown's threat during the meeting that "25 percent of you may be out of here" if Assembly Republican Minority Leader Ross Johnson succeeds with his proposed ballot initiative to cut legislative spending by 15 percent.

Susan Jetton, Brown's press secretary, says the speaker called the meeting to emphasize the importance of objective, nonpartisan committee analyses and insists the angry reaction was exaggerated.

The impromptu nature of the meeting is typical, according to Jetton. "You have to understand Willie Brown," she says. "He gets something in his mind and he does it. Probably somebody complained,

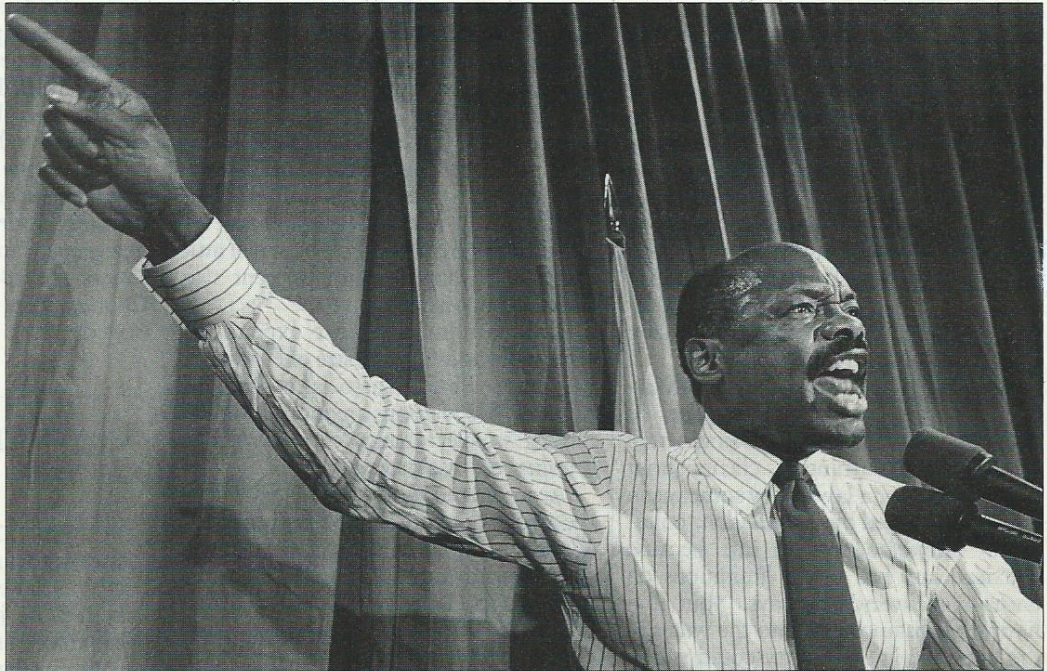
and he said, 'I've got time,' so he called a meeting."

The heated session may have been prompted unwittingly by a routine letter prepared for the speaker's signature by William George, a lawyer who has been one of the Assembly's most respected consultants for more than a decade. A longtime consultant to the Assembly Finance and Insurance Committee, George is now the assistant chief clerk of the Assembly—a top legislative staff posi-

bating final measures on the floor. "When we get near deadlines, we have to remind the consultants that if the [Assembly] floor is in session they should be there, and they should remain there a sufficient time to see if there are any amendments to be done," George says. If amendments are necessary, the deadline pressure rises to fever pitch. The amendments must be written, copies made and distributed. At such times, says George mildly, "We get a little upset when we can't find the consultants."

Brown's talk essentially reiterated the points George had made in his letter, such as reminding consultants to be succinct. "A lot of times a consultant will want to wax eloquent on the floor," says George. "One night we were there till 3 in the morning. We had 200 items on the file. When you're working with that volume and someone delivers a long, wordy analysis, your inclination is to trash it."

Despite strong reminders by Brown about brevity and objectivity, it appears that what many staffers took away from the meeting was simply resentment.



*Assembly committee consultants did not appreciate the way Assembly Speaker Willie Brown (shown here at a San Francisco political rally) pointed out their shortcomings recently.*

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Among George's responsibilities is the so-called "third reading unit," which at crunch time in the Legislature provides the critical final floor analyses to legislators.

Members of the unit must be able to reach the committee consultants, who must also be available to legislators de-

"People were angry," says one lawyer-consultant, "[especially] those of us who worked every weekend, here until midnight and 2 in the morning until the budget was done. What he implied was so insulting, and he made comments that were unnecessary."

—SIGRID BATHEN