



Who is Scott Walker, really?

His new book highlights the paradoxes of the man and his politics

BY CHARLES J. SYKES

Three years into his tumultuous first term, as he prepares to run for re-election and perhaps position himself for a presidential run in 2016, Scott Walker remains a puzzle to even some of his closest observers. He is, after all, a hard-edged conservative who talks about being a “champion to the vulnerable”; a fiscal conservative who disdains the politics of austerity; as well as a master communicator who sometimes fails to make his case.

His new book is unlikely to satisfy his critics or dispel all of the mystery behind the man we should know so much better. But it is a start.

Unintimidated: A Governor's Story and a Nation's Challenge (Sentinel Books), is an attempt not merely to tell the story of his battle over Act 10, but to define “Walkerism” and to sharply differentiate its style and philosophy from those of other leading Republicans, especially failed presidential candidate Mitt Romney.

Along the way, the book highlights the paradoxes

of the man at the center of the storm. Let's take a look at those paradoxes one by one and how they might play on the national stage.

Walker is a fiscal conservative but disdains the politics of austerity.

After nine years as Milwaukee county executive and three years as governor, Walker's image (at least among progressives) is that of a relentless budget cutter. In a scathing attack in 2011, historian John Gurda accused him of “dismantling government one line item at a time, regardless of the consequences.”

But in his book, Walker is sharply critical of what he calls the “sour politics of austerity.”

“Too often, conservatives present themselves as the bearers of sour medicine, when we should be offering a positive, optimistic agenda instead.”

His budget could have laid off tens of thousands of middle class workers, slashed Medicaid, and cut

Instead, Walker champions what he calls a “hopeful, optimistic alternative to austerity.”

The key, he writes, is rejecting the “false choice” of spending cuts versus tax hikes and opting instead for changing the fundamental rules of the game. “We found a way to make government not just smaller, but also more responsive, more efficient and more effective. And because we did, we were able to cut government spending while still *improving* education and public services.”

Early in the fight over Act 10, a liberal critic referred to Walker's "icy ideology." But his argument for championing the less fortunate is central to Walkerism (and to his scathing critique of the failure of Mitt Romney to connect with voters.)

“Republicans need to reclaim their position as the party of upward mobility and opportunity for all,” he argues. Walker places heavy emphasis on the need to reform entitlement programs not by emphasizing green eyeshade critiques but by stressing the importance of moving people from dependence to independence.

When the left accuses him of “hating” the poor, Walker responds: “I love the people of my state so much that I don’t want them to be permanently dependent on the government. I don’t want to make it harder for them to get government assistance; I want to make it easier for them to get a *job*.”

“We need to champion immigrants who come here seeking a better life. We need to champion those born here in poverty who want nothing more than to escape it.... That requires more than saying the right things. It requires showing up in inner city schools and talking about expanding school choice, reading initiatives and our plans to reform education, so that everyone among us will have the mental tools to build a better life.”

In the book, Walker is scathing in his critique of Romney's 47 percent comment, saying that he "cringed" when he heard Romney say, "I'm not

concerned about the very poor.” And he labels Romney’s use of the phrase “self-deportation” as “disastrous.”

“You can’t win the presidency when nearly two-thirds of the country thinks you don’t care about their struggles,” he writes.

Walker is a policy wonk but emphasizes the need to tell stories about “fairness.”

He comes from the Paul Ryan/Ron Johnson “I-have-a-chart-for-that” School of Fiscal Conservatism. So, it’s striking to see Walker quote the American Enterprise Institute’s Arthur Brooks, who argues that human beings by their nature respond to moral, rather than empirical, arguments.

“Conservatives spend far too much time trying to move minds, without moving hearts as well. We gather tons of empirical data to back up our arguments, only to see the liberals respond with heartbreaking stories about how our policies will

Walker is sharply critical of what he calls the 'sour politics of austerity.'

supposedly hurt children, the elderly and the destitute. The heartbreaking stories win.

“If we counter the left’s arguments simply with logic, reason and data alone, we will lose the debate over the future of our country. But if we counter them with logic, reason, data *and* an appeal to the American people’s innate sense of fairness, we can prevail.”

He is a radical reformer but talks about appealing to the center.

To his critics, of course, Walker is a figure of extraordinary divisiveness. But polls suggest that something like 11 percent of the state's electorate supports both Walker and his ideological nemesis, Barack Obama.

Walker repeatedly emphasizes the importance of “boldness” and tackling major issues with



sweeping reforms. “I governed as a conservative reformer and didn’t flinch,” he writes. But Walker argues that the key to understanding the Walker-Obama voter phenomenon is recognizing the bloc of “independent, reform-minded voters” who are attracted to “a reform agenda that is hopeful and optimistic.”

Walker flatly rejects the idea that Republicans need to “moderate” their views to appeal to an increasingly left-leaning electorate. “Our principles are not the problem,” he argues. “If our principles

‘We found a way
to make government
not just smaller, but also
more responsive and
more efficient.’

were the problem, then why are so many Republican governors winning elections by campaigning on those very principles.” He points to the fact that in the era of Obama, the GOP has gone from controlling both the legislatures and governorships in eight states to controlling them in 23 states in 2013. No GOP governor, he notes, has lost a general election since 2007.

“We did not win all those races by running from our principles. We won by *applying* our principles in ways that are *relevant* to the lives of our citizens.”

Walker is an intransigent politician but is willing to compromise.

During the battle of Act 10, the public perception of Walker as a my-way-or-the-highway politician, unwilling to compromise with his opponents, proved a heavy drag on his image. But, in the book, he points out that he was not only willing to compromise with Democrats, he also significantly modified his own proposal in the face of GOP opposition.

“My original plan for Act 10 was to eliminate collective bargaining altogether for all government

“Similarly, when Republican senators wanted to reform collective bargaining rather than eliminate it, we compromised again — finding a way to accommodate their concerns while preserving the goals of our legislation.” His attempts to strike a deal with the absent Democratic senators ultimately were rejected.

He may be the most media-ready governor west of Chris Christie, but in the excerpt from “Unintimidated” that

“If my own wife didn’t see why we needed to change collective bargaining, how could I expect the voters of Wisconsin to see it? I was obviously doing a lousy job of explaining our reforms.” As a result, Walker has become much more disciplined in explaining his thinking.

Walker recounts at length and in graphic detail

But even in the newly toxified atmosphere. “It was important to me that they saw that I never responded in kind to the often vicious attacks directed against me. I was firm and did not budge — but no matter how personal the invective became, I

But the book shows a far more reflective figure who is willing to admit his worst mistakes. Writing about the embarrassing prank phone call from an activist claiming to be billionaire David Koch, Walker admits, “I was not as mad at him as I was at myself. Listening to my voice on the recording of the call, my heart sank. I came across as pompous and full of myself.”

He describes his press conference in the

|||||

In the era of Obama,
the GOP has gone from
controlling both the
legislatures and governorships
in eight states to controlling
them in 23 states in 2013.

aftermath: “I felt like an idiot. Sure, I was upset that my staff had let the call get through to my office, making me look so silly. But ultimately, I was responsible for what I said and how I came across.”

Those paradoxes will be central to the way that Walker is trying to define himself on the national stage. And this brings us to a final paradox: **A strong supporter of Mitt Romney’s 2012 presidential bid, Walker is now biting in his criticism of his campaign and its message.**

Walker says flatly that Mitt Romney “did not get the message of Wisconsin.”

He writes: “Two days after I won my recall election, Mitt Romney seized upon our victory to make his case against Barack Obama. The president ‘says we need more firemen, more policemen, more teachers,’ Romney declared. ‘Did he not get the message of Wisconsin?’



“Unfortunately, it was Gov. Romney who did not get the message of Wisconsin.... Our reforms had *protected* the jobs of firemen, policemen and teachers. We had avoided the mass layoffs of public

workers that local communities were facing in other states across America. We had strengthened local government and improved public services.”

But Walker saves his sharpest criticism for what

|||||

‘Gov. Romney did not get the message of Wisconsin,’ Walker writes. ‘Our reforms had *protected* the jobs of firemen, policemen and teachers.’

|||||

he says was Romney’s failure to provide a positive alternative to President Obama. Instead, he “let the Obama campaign cast him in the role of an out-of-touch rich guy.”

Walker recounts how his advice to Romney’s team “fell mostly on deaf ears,” noting that when he made public suggestions, “we learned there were a lot of screamers in Boston.”

Perhaps his most biting critique is his comparison of Romney’s failed campaign to the failed recall candidacy of Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett.

Like Romney, Barrett failed to offer a positive alternative vision. “His entire message was ‘Dump Scott Walker’ — just as Mitt Romney’s entire message in the fall campaign was ‘Dump Barack Obama.’

“In other words, President Obama won by using the same successful message we employed in the recall election, while Mitt Romney lost by emulating the failed message of Mayor Barrett.”

In conservative circles, that’s going to leave a mark.

Charles J. Sykes, the editor of this magazine, is the founder of the Right Wisconsin website and a talk show host on AM-620 WTMJ in Milwaukee.