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Kevin Johnson’s Power Play

In Sacramento, the mayor and former NBA all-star is discovering that politics is a tough game

When Kevin Johnson, Sacramento’s first African-American mayor, made an appearance on “The Colbert Report” a year ago, he was more media-savvy former NBA star than mayor of a mid-size, oft-overlooked city. While most Colbert guests play the awkward, unfunny sideshow to Colbert’s alter ego, Johnson played the adept ham. When the host bounded over to the interview set and blew kisses to the audience, Johnson popped out of his chair, motioned to the crowd to applaud and gave a little bow, drawing more whistles and “woo-hoo’s” even as Colbert moved to his seat.

The episode aired November 11, 2008, one week after the historic election that put the first black man in the White House and made Johnson the city’s first black mayor. Despite the frenetic coverage of the presidential election, the national media took note of this first in Sacramento city politics, and Johnson’s victory landed him in Colbert’s hot seat.

“Are you this much pissed at Barack Obama?” Colbert asked. “He totally stole your thunder, man.”

“When I played in the NBA they called me ‘Pocket Magic’ because of Magic Johnson,” Johnson said. “So now they call me ‘Little Barack.’ I’m okay with that.”

As the audience laughed, Colbert sat back and raised his eyebrows. “Wow,” he said. “Wow.”

This is not a typical scene from the life of a mayor of Sacramento.

A former Suns point guard and three-time NBA all-star, Johnson is an unusually high-profile politician in a metropolis that has traditionally been overshadowed by California’s more glamorous cities. He has been showered with humanitarian awards, and in 1992, McCall’s Magazine even named Johnson “one of the 15 greatest men on Earth.” Since taking office, Johnson has been to the White House four times, and in December, made headlines when he became engaged to Michelle Rhee, the high-profile chancellor of DC schools.

But despite his own national profile, in Sacramento the sentiment towards Johnson is complex. He confuses some traditional Democrats, because he is pro-business with a lot

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But detractors fear that Johnson is a showboat with no substance: a dangerous naïf with no political experience. They see him as a celebrity playing politician. The question of whether Johnson will rescue Sacramento or ruin it has galvanized and polarized the sleepy city. “It’s not just the tenor of City Hall that’s changed,” says Anna Molander, chair of the Sacramento Democratic Party and a former colleague of Council Member Rob Fong. “The way people physically sit in their offices has changed. I think people feel afraid. It feels out of control.”

II.

The city of Sacramento sits in the middle of California’s Central Valley, a midpoint on the route from the Bay Area to Lake Tahoe. Fly into Sacramento International Airport—flights to Mexico were added in the 90s—and the view out the window is a patchwork of green and gold fields. According to Sacramento lore, NBA player Chris Webber cried the first time he flew into the city, and not because he was moving to a team with one of the worst records in the NBA. He had no idea how rural it was. The greater Sacramento area boasts a population of two million, but about 500,000 live within city limits, and the downtown skyline is drawn by only a dozen skyscrapers, give or take.

In some ways, Sacramento feels like San Francisco’s younger sister—a less lively, cleaner, and more conservative version of the Bay Area’s big city. It’s smaller than San Francisco, far less glitzy than L.A, and doesn’t have the rough reputation of Oakland. It’s the capital of a state with the 9th largest economy in the world, and bigger than Cleveland or Denver, but it still has a reputation for being a boring, bureaucratic cowtown. It’s not the Scranton of California, but it weathers the same kind of jokes.

This reputation is particularly bothersome to Johnson, who grew up in the Oak Park section of Sacramento, one of the city’s most disadvantaged neighborhoods. “Playing in the NBA you travel to 29 cities,” he says. “And you come to some cities, and you’re like, ‘Oh, this is an awesome city.’ And then you come to some and you’re like, ‘I can’t wait to leave town.’ And I know there’s people in the NBA who come to Sacramento and they’re like, ‘I can’t wait to get out of town.’”

When Kevin Johnson was born in March of 1966, his mother, Georgia West, was a sixteen-year old student at Sacramento High. His father, Lawrence Johnson, died in a boating accident on the American River when Kevin was only three. The job of raising little Kevin fell to West’s parents, George and Georgia Peat, a sheet metal worker and a bar maid who lived in Oak Park. The Peats were white, but Georgia West, who was not her father’s biological child, was black, and the mixed family lived in a predominantly black neighborhood that was notorious for its high crime rates.

As a child, Johnson realized that there were differences between his neighborhood and others—particularly Land Park, where he was bussed to school every day. Where Land Park had sidewalks, Oak Park had ditches.
"I remember being on the bus, going over an overpass and coming down, and thinking, ‘Why do they have sidewalks and no ditches and we both live in Sacramento?’” he says. “I didn’t understand that disparity even then.”

Johnson was a dedicated student. As a fourth grader, he was in a classroom mixed with fifth graders, and by the end of the year, he’d finished all of the fifth grade work and skipped to sixth. As a Sac High Dragon, he lettered in baseball and basketball. By 17, he was headed to UC Berkeley on a full basketball scholarship, having led the state in scoring with 32.5 points per game.

Nonetheless, Johnson struggled in college. On his first day of Freshman English at Cal, Johnson recalled, his professor asked a class of thirty, “Who knows what a euphemism is?” Twenty-nine hands went up. Johnson’s didn’t.

“I didn’t even know if that was an English word,” he says. “I didn’t know what class I was in. Not only did I not understand what the word was, I didn’t understand what was going back and forth. I remember leaving there and feeling very small.”

In the summers, Johnson went to baseball training camp with the Oakland A’s. He gave up baseball to enter the NBA after four years of college, but before receiving his diploma; he finished his political science degree while playing for the Suns. As a young NBA player, Johnson capitalized on his fame by calling famous, successful men in the cities he traveled to and requested meetings with them—everyone from Clarence Thomas and Donald Trump to Stedman Graham.

“He’s the guy in the classroom with his hand raised all the time,” says Steven Maviglio, Johnson’s campaign manager. “He studies all the time. You don’t see that in politicians a lot.”

While in the NBA, Johnson played a season for the Cleveland Cavaliers, then spent the remainder of his career in Phoenix, where he became a three-time NBA all-star. By 1991, Converse had given him his own shoe. And during the 1994 Western Conference Semi Finals, he recorded an iconic dunk over seven-footer Hakeem “The Dream” Olajuwon. In that play, Johnson, 6'1, drove straight down the baseline and jumped, knocking Olajuwon’s arm away from the ball with his left arm while he curved his right over his head, slamming the ball through the hoop so hard it bounced off the side of his face. The Suns made it to the Finals, but Michael Jordan’s Chicago Bulls kept Johnson from getting his ring.

Johnson, meanwhile, had other obligations. Not long after leaving Sacramento, he started St. HOPE (Helping Our People Excel) Academy, an after school program for boys at Sac High. He was worried that the boys growing up in his neighborhood—many of them without their fathers—didn’t have the support they needed. “I grew up in that community and was one of my few friends to make it out,” he says. “Athletics and education allowed me to do it.” While in Phoenix, Johnson took in his 12-year-old half-brother, Ronnie West, whose father was not involved in his life. Over the next three years, four other boys
from the Oak Park neighborhood moved in with Johnson, who also paid their tuition at Brophy, an elite college preparatory school in Phoenix.

In 2000, after Johnson retired from the NBA, he applied to Harvard Divinity School, and was accepted. He did not want to become a preacher; instead, he says, he was “fascinated by the role of the black church in communities.” But not long after he was accepted to HDS, the Suns’ point guard Jason Kidd broke a bone in his foot, and Johnson was pulled out of retirement to take his place. At end of that season, he signed up to work as an NBA sports commentator in New York, and gave up on getting his second degree. “The window at Harvard, for me, had closed,” he says.

Around the same time, politicians at both the Republican and Democratic National Conventions urged Johnson to run for Congress—or even the governor’s seat—in Arizona. They thought he could make it on his status as an icon.

“They would have paid him to do it,” says Johnson’s mother, Georgia. “They love him in Phoenix.”

“I loved Phoenix,” he says. “But I wanted to make a difference in my hometown.”

Instead, Johnson went home to Sacramento, where he expanded St. HOPE into a redevelopment charity—constructing, among other things, a 25,000-square-foot development called the 40 Acres Art Gallery and Cultural Center. He also pushed the city to convert Sac High—by then in danger of being shut down because of low test scores—into a charter school run by St. HOPE. (As a charter school, Sac High has since gone on to post test scores in the top ten percent among schools with similar demographics.)

Five years later, Johnson decided he was ready for politics. He announced his bid for mayor in Oak Park’s Guild Theater—a St. HOPE project—and members of the community began to rally around the hometown hero.

But not everyone was so enthused. During the campaign, rivals began to distribute molestation claims made against Johnson years before he decided to run for office.

In the summer of 1995, when Johnson was still living in Phoenix and playing for the Suns, a sixteen-year-old girl accused Johnson of molesting her. The Phoenix police never brought charges against Johnson, citing a lack of evidence. But Johnson did settle with the girl in a $230,000 confidentiality agreement.

It didn’t end there. In 2007, a teacher at Sac High contacted police after a student came to him and said Johnson had hugged her and fondled her breasts on a field trip. The student later recanted her story, and the police investigation found no indications of any wrongdoing. He was not charged in either case, but the allegations made the headlines throughout his campaign.
In November of 2008, despite the scandal—and what he described as “mudslinging”—Johnson swept the mayoral race on a platform of action and accountability. “Let’s talk about real issues to move the city forward,” he said in his acceptance speech. “The people of Sacramento want change, and they want it now.”

III.

By the time I met with Johnson last December, a more complicated political reality had set in.

Since taking office, Johnson had been dealing with the repercussions of another scandal that first broke when he was on the campaign trail. In 2008, Gerald Walpin, the Inspector General for Corporation for National and Community Service, issued a report claiming Johnson’s charity, St. HOPE, had misused $850,000 worth of federal funds—in part by using AmeriCorps volunteers to run personal errands. Walpin suspended Johnson and St. HOPE from receiving any federal money, and recommended that Lawrence G. Brown, the U.S. Attorney in Sacramento, bring criminal charges against Johnson and Dana Gonzales, former executive director of St. HOPE.

Brown refused to pursue the charges, and accused Walpin of conducting a biased investigation. In an April 29 letter to a federal panel, Brown wrote of Walpin, “He sought to act as the investigator, advocate, judge, jury and town crier.” Obama went on to fire Walpin in June, inciting criticism that he was trying to protect Johnson, who had endorsed him in the presidential election. The story got more complicated still when the Los Angeles Times reported that Michelle Rhee had been involved with the investigation, and had assured Walpin that her soon-to-be-fiancé was a “good guy.”

In Sacramento, the city attorney said that Johnson’s inability to receive any federal funds could make Sacramento ineligible for any federal money—including stimulus money. The prospect of losing out on stimulus money would be a big deal in any city, but for a city in the financially disastrous state of California, it could have been devastating. In April, the U.S. Attorney offered Johnson a settlement that required St. Hope to return $426,836.50—about half of the funds received. More than $73,000 of that was to come from Johnson’s own pocket. He paid the sum, Gonzales paid $1000, and Sacramento got its stimulus money.

But the settlement didn’t sit well with U.S. Senator Charles Grassley. “It seems that the facts of this investigation were substantially disregarded and the blatant waste of federal taxpayer dollars were handled with little more than a slap on the wrist,” he wrote in his letter to the chairman of the Corporation for National and Community Service. Five months later, an internal investigation cleared Walpin of the allegations against him.

The investigation also caused problems at St. HOPE. In May of 2009, Rick Maya, the man who had taken over for Johnson at St. HOPE when Johnson became mayor, resigned in a letter to the charity’s board that detailed legal and ethical concerns, including a claim that board members had deleted Johnson’s emails during the federal investigation. He was the third board member to quit in three months, and he declined to speak to the
media. Months later, Kim Curry-Evans, the curator of St. HOPE’s 40 Acres Gallery also resigned her position in a letter to the board, citing “personal behavior and actions [by Johnson] that make it impossible for me to continue working for St. Hope.” She also refused to comment. But the resignations had Sacramentans wondering what exactly was going on at St. HOPE.

By the time the political fallout from the AmeriCorps scandal had been sewn up, Johnson had been pushing his strong mayor initiative—which he pitched in a mailer to 80,000 Sacramentans months before the election—for nearly a year. Many older Sacramentans—the ones most likely to vote—had come out against it, as had all of the city’s former mayors.

In January a judge struck the proposal from the June ballot. Now, Johnson is scrambling to weaken the amendment and get it onto the November 2010 ballot.

“I’m not surprised because people are resistant to change,” Johnson told me, as we chatted at a Sacramento coffee shop, “but I have been surprised at how polarizing it has been.”

To many, Johnson biggest hurdle his ambition coupled with the political naiveté of a first-time politician. Before his first day in office, he had no real political experience. “He walked into this job untrained,” says Maviglio, Johnson’s campaign manager. “This is a new world for Kevin.” While he was still campaigning, Johnson showed up to City Hall on a Sunday and took a tour of the mayor’s office after a security guard let him in the building. Rob Fong, a city councilman and one of Johnson’s biggest critics, happened to be in his office with his kids at the time, and called the press—which, according to Johnson’s campaign manager, “blew the whole thing up like it was Watergate.” (According to Maviglio, the guard had invited Johnson in when he saw Johnson looking for places to hold an event outside City Hall.) Maviglio also notes that Johnson also had trouble with interviews, sometimes walking out when he wasn’t prepared or when questions got too tough. “It looked like he was running away,” he says.

Still though, some say Johnson’s posture of innocence can sometimes feel contrived. In December, Johnson went on a local radio show and talked about attending a White House Christmas party for the first time. “I felt like a big kid…I didn’t eat or anything, I was so excited,” Johnson said. And yet Johnson had already been to the White House at least three times, had met several presidents (including George H.W. Bush, who named him the nation’s 411th point of light) and often met with Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano when he was in Washington. (Napolitano is the former governor of Arizona).

On election night, Johnson promised voters that no one “will be more prepared on day one than Kevin Johnson.” He had already gathered a 50-person “transition team”—a first for the city—and spent the next two months getting advice from mayors around the country, including New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg. He even remodeled an entire floor of City Hall to resemble Bloomberg’s bullpen style office, and avoided the formal mayor’s office that sat up on the sixth floor with the other Council Members. Johnson
saw the move as a way to borrow another mayor’s “best practices,” but council members found the physical separation alienating, and saw it as symbol of the celebrity mayor’s big ego.

According to Ginger Rutland, a lifelong Sacramentan and member of the local paper’s editorial board, the City Council “resents his behaving as though he’s the king and they’re the courtiers.” The fact his biggest push during his first year was office is to increase the power of the mayor didn’t help relations down at City Hall—and neither did the fact that Johnson didn’t follow a traditional path to the mayor’s office. According to Johan Otto, certain council members had expected to move into the mayor’s chair after they served their time in their districts. “When Johnson got elected, he upset the apple cart,” Otto says.

In January, Johnson seemed disappointed by the lack of progress on his agenda, but unsurprised. “It’s people resisting change,” he says. “It’s hard. It takes unique people to take on the status quo and do things that aren’t popular for a greater good—and I think this is for a greater good.”

IV./Coda

Since then, things have only gotten worse. Last March, the city manager quit because of the strained relations and contentious atmosphere down at City Hall. An interim manager has been appointed, but Otto and others are concerned that it will be difficult to attract a good permanent candidate given that Johnson is trying to minimize the manager’s role. They fear that mediocre city manager and a gridlocked council could have seriously adverse affects on business in the city, and slow down development in a city with a struggling downtown.

Still, though, some think he’s exactly what the city needs—someone take charge and to push Sacramento beyond its lackluster reputation. They believe Johnson is the key to making Sacramento a destination city, not just a city that lawmakers leave on the weekends. And, they say, Johnson has made progress on his agenda in other areas, cleaning up Sacramento’s “tent city,” pushing back against gang violence, and making strides in education by raising outside money and grants for schools. He has also attracted some big names during his time in office. Arne Duncan, the U.S. secretary of education, headlined Johnson’s September education summit in Sacramento. Magic Johnson has expressed interest in investing in projects in the city—including the new arena.

“Quite honestly, Kevin’s been good for the city because of his profile,” Otto says. “He’s taken on some tough issues. I’m not sure he’s resolved him, but he’s taken them on.”

Some also think Johnson is laying the foundation for a bigger political career, perhaps even waiting for Congresswoman Doris Matsui to vacate her seat.

But for his part, Johnson says he is focused on the mayor’s office, and at the end of four years, he’ll decide what comes next—but if Sacramentans are happy, he says he’ll run for another term.
Republican supporters and few friends in labor. The mayor’s race is a non-partisan election, but in the Democratic state capital, the politics still matter. He is a Baptist, which in any other election year could have been inconsequential, but became relevant when he landed on the same ballot as Proposition 8. (He came out against it.) He has been accused of molestation twice, and though he has never been charged with a crime, the allegations are brought up frequently by politicians, reporters and opponents. National media outlets like to lead with the fact that he is the city’s first black mayor, but in Sacramento, the city the Civil Rights Project at Harvard named the country’s most diverse, his election does not have the same kind of resonance as the election of Barack Obama. Sacramento has had non-white and non-male mayors before, and on the current City Council, five of nine members are not white. He has been lauded for his commitment to education, his push for a new arena and for his charity work, but has been criticized for his inability to build consensus. “He has absolutely no political ability to know you’ve got to be nice,” says Johan Otto, a developer who considers himself supportive of the mayor. “No one elected him God. He thinks he’s nice because he smiles—and he does, he’s always got a shit-eating grin on his face. But it takes a lot more than that.” The business community in the city generally likes Johnson, but is troubled by how contentious the Council has become since he has taken office. Three council members in particular—Sandy Sheedy, Rob Fong and Kevin McCarty—have been especially critical of the mayor, but declined to speak about what’s going on at City Hall. “He has a totally different style from what folks in Sacramento are used to,” says Councilman Steve Cohn, who considers himself one of Johnson’s biggest supporters. “We on the council are pretty much divided politically. It’s pretty stark.” As one businessman put it “if Kevin Johnson found a cure for cancer they would split on a 4-5 vote.”

For his part, Johnson has never seemed particularly interested in making friends. Shortly after taking office, he threw himself into the contentious battle to keep the city’s one professional sports team, the much-loved but beleaguered Kings, in Sacramento; and he pushed hard to get a committee outside of the Council to develop a plan for a new basketball arena. Even more divisively, a mere ten days into his term, Johnson pushed an amendment to the city charter designed to give the mayor sweeping powers over the city, including the power to fire all 900 city employees without approval of the Council. The “strong mayor” initiative led critics, including allies on the Council, to claim that Johnson was “opening the door to Chicago-style politics.” (When Johnson introduced the amendment, the city’s main newspaper, The Sacramento Bee, ran a story that began: “Less than two weeks into his job, Kevin Johnson wants a better one.”)

Supporters argue that Johnson is a hero working to transform a low-profile city that has long been mired in small-time politics, and has failed to capitalize on its potential.

“We’ve been treading water while the Portlands and Denvers of the world have had real advancements,” says Michael Heller, a developer whose family has been in business in Sacramento since the 1940s. “Do we have the will to take it up a notch, or are we content to be the little city of trees?”
Either way, Kevin Johnson is doing exactly what he said he would do—shaking up the city he came home to change.

“He’s a polarizing guy,” Heller says. “There are people that love him to death, and people who think he wants too much power. I’m just appreciative that we finally have a big player in this little town of ours.”