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HEADLINE: One of Capitol's savviest players is stepping down

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BODY:

White shirt. Tie as pink as his ruddy cheeks. The trademark black fedora. Elegant gold watch. Turquoise cuff links. Black leather moccasins.

Don Novey doesn't look like the most feared man at the California Capitol, but he very well may be.

At least until Thursday, when he **retires** after 20 years as president of the powerful California Correctional Peace Officers Association and one of the Capitol's bona fide power players. At 55 and as combative as ever, no one's expecting him to fade quietly away, but Novey said in an interview this week that he wants to relax, fish, work on his golf game and spend time with his five grandchildren.

His longtime second-in-command, Mike Jimenez, will take over the presidency when Novey leaves.

"There's a time in your life when you have to move on and face new, wonderful challenges," he said. Without being specific, he said he's weighing "three offers that are out there" and that he plans to stay active in politics.

"I don't think anybody would spend this much time learning all the innuendo and inner workings of the Capitol and the legislative system and then give it up," said Debbie Rawlins, office manager at the union's West Sacramento headquarters - complete with gun turret windows overlooking the lobby - that Novey built.

She's worked for **CCPOA** since 1978, two years before Novey left his job as a line guard at the state prison in Folsom because he hated the way management treated the guards and moved into union politics full time.

"He can move in those circles like no one else," Rawlins said in an opinion shared by many Capitol insiders.

If the former U.S. Army intelligence officer does nothing else in his life, Novey might go down in California history for one act he and some of his 20 lawyers pulled off

earlier this year: snagging a five-year, 34 percent, \$1 billion pay increase for his 28,000-member union at a time when California faces a staggering \$23.6 billion budget deficit.

But Novey's done lots more. His union's timely cash infusions, TV ads and endorsements of former Gov. Pete Wilson in 1990 and Gov. Gray Davis in 1998 helped both get elected, and the organization has helped pass dozens of bills friendly to prison officers.

Under Novey's leadership, **CCPOA** has so far put more than \$650,000 into Davis' current campaign; it spent more than \$2 million for Davis in 1998. In January of this year, it was rewarded with a contract that has made other public employee union leaders envious.

"We're all playing in the same ballpark," Novey is fond of saying. "We're all playing by the same rules. We could have done it wrong."

Novey hasn't done it wrong very often. Besides being tough and charismatic, a guy who talks profanely and bluntly with governors, bureaucrats and anyone else he deals with, he's simply as smart and as politically savvy as they come, those who have watched his career say.

Though he counts many politicians as close friends, Novey said he learned a lot about how to deal with them from his years walking the line at the penitentiary in Folsom.

"I picked up so much sophistication from career criminals dealing with their environment and their subculture," he said. "I understand that emotion. I was able to use that to optimum impact in the Capitol.

"That might sound strange, but the conniving, the manipulation - it's two subcultures of our society, and some of the same type of gamesmanship goes on in both elements."

On top of the intellect, Novey, who used to love to mix it up in the ring as an amateur boxer, has the muscle to put his ideas into action.

With 28,000 members paying \$59 a month in dues, Novey and his board have ample cash to throw into all types of political races. It's known throughout California that if **CCPOA** has strong enough feelings about a race, it's going to spend money trying to get its ally elected and its foe defeated.

Ask anyone who supported Assemblyman Phil Wyman, the outgoing Republican incumbent from Tehachapi. Wyman, a big supporter of the private prisons Novey's union opposes in large part because his members can't work in them, lost to Sharon Runner in the primary after **CCPOA** spent \$260,000 on her behalf.

"If he was in my business, he'd rule the roost," said Wayne Johnson, Wyman's campaign consultant. "He's that good."

State Sen. Richard Polanco, D-Los Angeles, another big supporter of private prisons, is probably Novey's biggest foe. Polanco has likened him to a demagogue who opposes anyone who disagrees with union positions. When Polanco's office was

asked whether the senator could be interviewed about Novey's retirement, an aide said Polanco laughed and said, "I think I'll pass this time."

It wasn't always that way for Novey or his union.

"I remember back in my earlier days in the Legislature, they referred to it as the prison guards union in a not-too-good light," said Robert Presley, a former state senator who now runs the state's Youth and Adult Corrections Agency.

"They didn't amount to anything. Nobody paid attention to them. Then Novey came along and started organizing and putting the war chest together and picking his shots at which campaigns to get involved in."

Novey's been helped by the fact he presided over a 20-year, \$5 billion buildup in state prisons. The construction boom, which began under former Gov. George Deukmejian, was fueled in large part by such tough-on-crime measures as the "three strikes, you're out" sentencing law Novey and his union helped get approved by voters.

Over that 20-year period, the union exploded from less than 2,000 members to its current 28,000 working in adult and youth prisons.

Novey has also helped finance victims rights groups, starting an annual victims march at the Capitol that has moved some speakers and guests to tears, and has proved to be a powerful public relations tool in his tough-on-crime efforts.

At the same time he built up membership, Novey has elevated the status of correctional officers. It's considered politically incorrect to call them guards, and Novey's had as much to do with that as anyone.

Their training has been increased. They soon will be required to have two-year community college degrees, and former Gov. Wilson said Novey has helped make their jobs safer.

"He's had a distinct impact on their safety," Wilson said in an interview Friday. "And it's a job that is subject both to some very real peril and some stress."

There are critics who say Novey's pushed for tougher criminal penalties so he can beef up his union, but he doesn't buy it. Neither does Wilson.

"He is quite sincere in his belief, which I share, that for a long time a lot of the laws in California were not only absurdly lenient but dangerously so. I think a lot of that criticism (of Novey) is both philosophical and ideological, and some of it is from people competing for state funds who think corrections simply gets too much."

Under Novey's tough negotiating, pay has shot up exponentially. A captain with about 10 years' experience can earn \$78,000 a year. Nonsupervisors with six years on the job get slightly less than \$55,000 a year.

"He's done an excellent job for his people," said D.O. "Spike" Helmick, commissioner of the California Highway Patrol. "I admire him for it."

"Some people say he gets too much, but that's exactly the job he's paid to do. He

brings numbers. He brings strength. He has a lot of people who get out and campaign hard for a candidate. The (campaign) contributions are all part of it. He's taken a group and moved them into the real world."

Even those he's battled with over the years say Novey has accomplished so much because he's never lost sight of his main purpose: taking care of his workers and building the nearly impotent union he took over in 1980 into a powerhouse with an annual budget of \$22 million.

In 1981, with only \$25,000 to spend on an election, Novey beat back two labor giants, the Teamsters and the California State Employees Association, to see who would represent the prison officers. Each group outspent his by more than 20-to-1.

"To beat those other two unions and hold that bunch together and get good contracts, he deserves a lot of credit for doing that," said Marty Morgenstern, the state's director of personnel administration who has negotiated contracts with Novey. "That takes no small amount of skill and no small amount of work."

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Don Novey

Age: 55

Residence: Rocklin

Education / Military: Associate's degree, American River College. U.S. Army, intelligence officer, 1968-71

Career: Correctional officer, 1971-85; California Correctional Peace Officers Association president, 1980-2002

Political Affiliation: Republican

Highlights: Former amateur boxer; started victims' "March on the Capital," 1989; former state athletic commissioner; former member International Narcotics Association

GRAPHIC: Sacramento Bee photographs / Randy Pench As the state deficit soared, **Don Novey** snagged a \$1 billion raise for his 28,000 correctional officers. **Don Novey**, in trademark fedora, says his 14 years as a guard at Folsom Prison helped him deal with political gamesmanship in the state Capitol.

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