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FEBRUARY 7, 2006

## CAPITAL LIVING

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### Campbell: A used car salesman with a penchant for faith and fast cars

By Charles Case

NEWPORT BEACH, Calif. — At first glance, Rep. John Campbell (Calif.) appears to be a tried-and-true Republican: He's a car dealer who is also a certified public accountant with a yen for spreadsheets and financial statements.

That is, until the ring tone on his cell phone blasts into the room. It's "California" by Phantom Planet, and the theme song to "The OC," Fox TV's salute to babes and 'boards:

*Pedal to the floor,  
Thinkin' of the roar,  
Gotta get us to the show.  
California here we come.*

The lyrics really should read "California here I go." Elected to the state Assembly in 2000, Campbell made the jump to the state Senate in 2004. When Rep. Chris Cox (R-Calif.) ascended to the chairmanship of the Securities and Exchange Commission last year, Campbell ran to fill the open congressional seat, a virtual shoo-in in this heavily Republican enclave of Orange County.

Unlike most under-the-radar special elections, the contest in the 48th broke into national consciousness when Jim Gilchrist, the Minutemen-movement vigilante, threw his hat into the ring as the candidate of the hard-right American Independent ticket.

The election soon devolved into a dogfight, with Gilchrist firing off blistering attack ads assailing Campbell for what Gilchrist perceived to be his soft stance on immigration issues. Gilchrist also ran radio spots mocking Campbell as untrustworthy, a used-car salesman trying to sell rattletrap policies as though they were Ferraris.

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Campbell's district office overlooks the main runway of Orange County's regional airport. This being the far side of the mythical Orange Curtain that separates the area from the land of liberalism to the north and San Diego to the south, it's not surprising that this airport is named for the famous no-nonsense gunslinger John Wayne, an unapologetic Republican.

With rising and descending planes as his backdrop, Campbell mulls over his own career trajectories. He confesses that people still look a little askance at his decision to leave behind a lucrative business for the rough and tumble of first state and now national politics. While Campbell ultimately trounced Gilchrist last fall, it's clear the race left him a little bruised, and he doesn't relish the prospect of a tough rematch in November if Gilchrist decides to run again.

"This is a tough job," Campbell admits. "It has a lot of difficulties, and the job I had before [in the car business] was arguably a whole lot better. I didn't have to commute, I didn't have to deal with people sending out thousands of pieces of mail saying I'm a scumbag. ... And in my line of work, I made a lot more money."

Campbell has the look of a classic Republican pol — albeit one from Southern California: he's tanned and affable, but his hair is trimmed short and he's sporting a boring gray suit and patterned tie.

A devout Christian who sings tenor in the choir of his Presbyterian church, Campbell also has come to interpret his hard-fought political successes through a religious lens.

"Why would I want to do this?" he says. "Faith comes in there, in the sense that if God gave me talents in this field ... and I don't use them, I feel I'm letting him down."

But Campbell hesitates when asked if there is any one issue in which faith alone guides him.

"My decisionmaking process is one based on rational thought, on previous experience," he says.

Many of those life lessons were learned in the more than two decades Campbell spent in the car business. While he hasn't tried to hawk a coupe in a long time, it's apparent Campbell hasn't lost that "Lord of the Lot" ease, demonstrated most starkly by his choice of cars when he's in the district: a 2005 Corvette convertible.

"My dream car is an Astin-Martin DB 9 convertible — a two-hundred-something-thousand-dollar car," he says.

But Campbell recognizes that in the perkless post-Abramoff bread-



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and-water days, he would draw too much attention burning down to the Capitol in a red 'Vette soft-top.

"I bought an Audi A3, which is small enough to park in Georgetown and Alexandria, where I bought a place, but it has all-wheel drive, a neat transmission and is very fast," he says.

Campbell says several aspects of the car business helped hone his political skills, especially customer care, financial bottom lines and the ability to finesse a problem into an opportunity.

"There needs to be some of us that can look at a financial statement and know what it says and look at a chain of revenues and expenses and say, 'This is going to work,' or, 'No, this is not going to work.'"

As an industry executive, Campbell also made a concerted effort to recast the public's negative perception of car dealers as a slick bunch: "Obviously, car dealers, like politicians, don't have the greatest reputation for integrity."

To repair the image, Campbell instituted reforms in his own business, such as pricing strategies he felt made the customer-salesman relationship fairer and more transparent.

"A reformer is what I am naturally," Campbell elaborates. "If you were to look at my career in the car business I was a start-up and turn around guy. Every dealership I ever went into or ever bought was losing money or didn't exist, it was a start up. That's what I like."

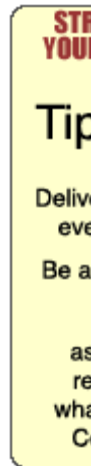
Few dispute that the Republicans could use some new blood to rebuild the party's fortunes, even if it is coming from a used-car salesman.

An office phone rings. The GOP leadership contest is at full throttle, and it's House Majority Leader Roy Blunt's (R-Mo.) turn to pitch Campbell. In the past couple of days, Campbell has also taken calls from Blunt's opponents in the race, Reps. John Boehner (R-Ohio) and John Shadegg (R-Ariz.), and he's struggling with the decision.

"I just wish I had a few more months," Campbell exclaims, "so I'd have a little more confidence in where I'm going to go."

Ultimately Campbell would declare for Blunt, the veteran insider and loser in the race, but he still identifies himself as a reformer at heart. Campbell is exasperated with what he sees as the GOP's recent record on fiscal restraint.

"We frankly haven't delivered what we stand for as effectively as we



should,” he says.

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