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CAMPBELL: Song of the Shopkeeper

Clean sidewalks and economic growth don't happen by themselves

By Rep. John Campbell

Sitting outside with my wife on a recent trip to California, I quietly watched several shopkeepers sweeping the sidewalk in front of their stores. As I looked on, I began to think that shopkeepers have been doing this for centuries, if not millenniums. A few weeks later, back on the East Coast, I noticed another shopkeeper carefully rearranging a display in the window. It struck me that those acts represented pride in their work and their place of work. No work rules made them do it. It has always been thus.

When President Obama talks about the economy and jobs, he invariably mentions teachers and firefighters. Fine. Teaching and firefighting are noble professions. But I can't help but think that he does so because teachers and firefighters almost always are employees of some government entity and almost always are compelled by law to join a union as a condition of having the job. They pay forced union dues, some of which will be sent without their consent to the campaign coffers of politicians they do not support. It seems the president favors those who work for the government or are in a union or, preferably, both.

Well, Mr. President, most Americans do not work for the government, nor are they members of a union. They are salesmen, clerks, mechanics and, yes, shopkeepers. Their contribution to society is no more or less than that of people in those other professions.

But no one ever talks about the guy on the corner selling yogurt or the independent bookstore

run by the woman who is still making a go of it in spite of Kindles and such. Shopkeepers have a heck of a job. They take a lot of risks: signing a lease on the bet that they can sell enough stuff to pay the rent. Choosing what they think you will buy for more money than they paid for it. Figuring out how to spend limited advertising dollars and how to track whether the ads actually bring people to the store. Investing money they saved for years to buy the inventory. Selling at a loss things that didn't sell the way they thought they might. And, of course, they have to hire employees and do all the paperwork the government requires for taxes and workers' compensation insurance and God knows what else. They often work six or seven days a week because their shops usually are open all those days. They create a pension by saving enough of what they make. They buy their own health insurance.

Nothing guarantees their jobs except their own personal effort and industry. They still have a boss: It's the customer who can put them out of business in a moment.

When others in my current profession talk about their defense of those powerful interests that represent professions, I think that's fine for them. But for me, the unsung shopkeeper represents those Americans who take risks, work hard, take care of themselves and maybe someone else, too, and want the opportunity to succeed. They are small-business people. It is they who make the economy run. I hold them up with the greatest of respect. It is they who are ever in my thoughts as I make decisions in Washington. It is that entrepreneur for whom I fight the daily fight against socialism, blind ideology and those who would steal their independence and freedom.

So I sing the song of the shopkeepers. Their job is not a new one. It is as old as civilization. They are our neighbors, friends and family members. They don't make noise. They make growth. They are part of the fabric of society. And their toil is every bit as honorable in God's eyes as anyone else's.

Next time you walk past a clean sidewalk in front of a store, remember that it didn't get that way by itself. Behind those windows, someone is putting his all into what is not only his livelihood but a critical part of our economy and our way of life. May we give such shopkeepers shelves full of opportunity in the years ahead.

Rep. John Campbell is a California Republican.

