

# The Orange County Register

## Opinion

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### CALIFORNIA FOCUS

# Governor burns his ships behind him

After a passive beginning, he has engaged the unions in all-out war



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Before marching on the capital of the Aztec empire in 1519, Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortes burned his ships – cutting off the possibility of retreat and ensuring that his tiny army would either prevail or perish.

It's no great exaggeration to say Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger faces a similar situation. For most of his brief governor-

ship, he has been locked in mortal combat with the powerful public-employee unions over the direction of state government – a conflict of increasing intensity as the Nov. 8 special election approaches.

Finally, last month, Schwarzenegger figuratively burned his ships by endorsing Proposition 75, the paycheck-protection initiative that would force those unions to obtain prior permission from members before spending dues for political purposes. A few days prior, he announced his intention to seek re-election next year – something he could easily have delayed until after the special election. Around the same time, three of his top advisers took leaves to take the reins of the governor's disjointed campaign apparatus.

During the past several months, as the unions hammered the Governor with tens of millions of dollars in attack ads, a sinking feeling

took hold among Schwarzenegger supporters that the unions were the only ones who understood that the governor was in a fight to the finish.

Schwarzenegger has erased that doubt. The governor clearly understands he has crossed the Rubicon and has no option but to decisively settle the question of who governs California: the taxpaying middle and entrepreneurial classes, or their nominal servants in state and local government employee unions.

In hindsight, that has been the issue at the heart of the political upheaval that began with the Gray Davis recall and Schwarzenegger's election, and continues with the special election and next year's general election.

The stakes Nov. 8 are enormous for both sides. If voters reject his reform package, Schwarzenegger is weakened going into 2006, when he grapples again with the unions and the Democrat-controlled Legislature over the chronic budget deficit while running for re-election.

On the other hand, victory for his reform package entails dire consequences for the Democrat-union axis, because Props. 75 and 77 pose a very real threat to their power.

Democratic politicians freely admit that requiring public-employee unions to obtain prior permission before spending members' dues for political purposes is a "dagger aimed at the heart" of their party. Furthermore, by replacing the current gerrymandered legislative districts with fair and balanced lines drawn by a panel of retired judges – as happened after the 1990 Census – Prop. 77 will likely result in a

much more moderate Legislature than our current one – whose leadership is far-left.

Thus, Schwarzenegger would enter the 2006 elections and budget negotiations with a voter mandate for change and the prospect of a Legislature more amenable to his structural reforms.

It's refreshing to hear Democrat politicians admit they utterly depend on involuntary political contributions from government employees, and fears are well-founded. Passage of either one of these initiatives is bad news for them – passage of both is a disaster.

Only a handful of California's 80 Assembly districts and 40 Senate districts are competitive, allowing the unions to concentrate their 2006 campaign spending in just a few districts. Prop. 77 would vastly increase the number of districts in play for 2006 elections and force the unions to cover far more campaigns with the same prodigious, but finite, war chests.

At the same time, Prop. 75 is bound to reduce their war chest. As a result, the unions will have less money to spend on more campaigns. This simultaneously dilutes the unions' influence while constricting a primary source of Democratic campaign finances.

The unions realized for months that this election is for all the marbles. By announcing for re-election and endorsing paycheck protection, Schwarzenegger signaled that he, too, realizes the special election is not just another campaign, but a case of "come back with your shield, or on it."