Huckabee gambles on an inside straight

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In November 2008, Mike Huckabee — the former broadcaster, ad man, pastor and governor of Arkansas — visited two cities in Iowa: Cedar Rapids and Windsor. He wasn't attracted by the weather, quipped Steffen Schmidt, a political science professor at Iowa State University.

The first politician since the election of Barack Obama to "robocall" Iowa voters, Huckabee asked for donations to the National Right to Life Council — and re-introduced himself to Republicans throughout the state.

Huckabee all but announces his candidacy for president in 2012 in "Do the Right Thing: Inside the Movement That's Bringing Common Sense Back to America" (Sentinel, $25.95).

Part campaign memoir and part articulation of a "common-sense vertical politics," neither right nor left, that takes the country up rather than down, on health care, taxation, and globalization, the book reveals why, with little money and no name recognition outside of Arkansas, Huckabee won eight states and four million votes in the GOP presidential primaries. In fighting the last war, however, with potshots at fellow Republicans and an outdated issues agenda, the former dark horse seems to be beating a dead horse.

Like Sarah Palin, Huckabee capitalizes on a "restlessness among the masses for authenticity and direction." Unlike the Alaska governor, he is smart, quick-witted, articulate and accessible. Positioning himself as a straight-talking evangelical populist who sticks to his principles, Huckabee proclaims that "being politically homeless is far better than being politically clueless." And he finds a felicitous phrase to pin on big-government liberals: "'More' is the most popular four-letter word in Washington."

Huckabee stocks "Do the Right Thing" with members of the middle class, more real than Joe the Plumber, who sweat on the job and not in health clubs and were the wind beneath his wings in the campaign. They include Pat and Irma Canan, an elderly couple who traveled from Portland, Ore., to Concord, N.H., to work in the primary they hoped would be decisive — and re-located to Florida when it wasn't.

Mike Huckabee may or may not be the man most likely to do the right thing for America. But in 2012, if he's on the radar screen at all, it's likely to be as a pundit on Fox News.

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