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Democrats hit road in Social Security war

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By **GLEN JOHNSON**
The Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Just five months after the presidential election, Democratic lawmakers are traveling throughout the country to campaign anew against President Bush and his agenda. This time, though, the stakes are the future of Social Security rather than control of the White House.

The battle over "strengthening Social Security," as the White House and Treasury Department call it, has renewed the conflict between many of the same people and organizations that clashed in November.

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The liberal online group MoveOn.org, labor unions, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and several umbrella organizations are back at it, arguing for and against Bush's proposed personal investment accounts for Social Security.

They are using many of the same campaign tactics: apocalyptic television ads — in one case recalling the Titanic hitting an iceberg; boisterous town hall meetings; mass e-mails to reporters.

Among those involved are activists associated with the Swift Boat group, which attacked the Vietnam War record of Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry, and top officials who worked last year with the Democrats competing for the right to unseat Bush.

"The president is running a presidential-style campaign on this," said Erik Smith, who advised former Rep. Dick Gephardt when the Missouri Democrat

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sought his party's presidential nomination.

Today, Smith is preparing anti-privatization ads along with Jim Jordan, Kerry's former campaign manager. "I think once a public debate starts, you need to engage," Smith said.

Brian McCabe, president of Progress for America, a leading supporter of Bush's effort, said, "I think that a lot of people thought after the election we wouldn't see so much advertising on the air again, but Social Security came out of the box quickly, and a lot of the groups that engaged last year began to engage again."

Progress for America, a GOP-connected group that helped Bush win re-election, spent over \$3 million in ads in March. One likened Social Security's impending financial problems to the Titanic's approaching the iceberg that would send the ship to the ocean floor.

During the presidential campaign, Bush did talk about his hopes for overhauling Social Security. But voters focused more closely on the candidates' fitness to conduct the fight against terrorism.

Once re-elected, Bush made Social Security his No. 1 priority. He devoted a good portion of his State of the Union speech to showcasing his idea of letting younger workers invest a portion of the payroll taxes designated for the pension program's benefit trust funds.

Democratic opponents of the idea revived a technique from the fall campaign when they highlighted their position on Social Security during Congress' two-week Easter vacation. Democrats have made their case in the districts of Republican colleagues who are wary about embracing Bush's idea of private accounts.

Rep. Sandy Levin, D-Mich., had a town meeting in the Battle Creek, Mich., district of GOP Rep. Joe Schwarz. On Monday, Rep. Betty McCollum, D-Minn., plans to attend a town hall meeting in the district of her Republican colleague from Minnesota, Rep. Mark Kennedy.

Rep. Earl Pomeroy, D-N.D., went to the district of Minnesota Republican Rep. Gil Gutknecht. Paying for the trip was Americans United to Protect Social Security, an umbrella group headed by the AFL-CIO and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees.

Like many similar groups, Americans United is registered with the Internal Revenue Service as a 501(c)(4) organization, a designation that allows it to raise and spend unlimited amounts of money without having to disclose its donors. The exemption limits such groups to issue advocacy, not partisan politicking, but whom they support in the fight is rarely hard to discern.

"If the president takes privatization off the table, our organization could cease to exist," said Brad Woodhouse, spokesman for Americans United.

Woodhouse denies a spillover from the 2004 election, when he was communications director of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee. "But there is definitely an element of this that is the very early start" of the 2006 congressional elections, he said.

Among the groups backing Bush on Social Security are the National Association of Manufacturers and the Business Roundtable, which have unified under the banner of the Coalition for the Modernization and Protection of America's Social Security (COMPASS). But some corporate members recently dropped out under pressure from labor unions.

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USA Next, a more conservative group whose members include former television host Art Linkletter.

"AARP is actually to blame for the predicament we find ourselves in with Social Security," said Charlie Jarvis, chairman and chief executive of USA Next. "They have been the behemoth that has been pushing the liberal agenda, including 18 payroll taxes (since Social Security's inception). We intend to make them pay very dearly for their opposition to personal retirement accounts."

Steve Hahn, an AARP spokesman, said Jarvis' remarks were erroneous and a distraction. "Our members still view AARP as the most credible source when it comes to Social Security," he said.

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