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Campaign-Like Attacks Turn Up Volume on Social Security Debate

By Warren Vieth, Times Staff Writer

WASHINGTON — After several months of relatively civil debate over President Bush's proposal to restructure Social Security, the gloves are coming off.

This weekend, newspaper readers in Shreveport, La., will find a full-page ad placed by a liberal advocacy group questioning the political integrity and financial ties of Rep. Jim McCrery, the hometown Republican who heads the House Social Security subcommittee. "Who does this man work for?" the ad asks. "Not you."



Last week, a conservative group launched what it promised would be a sustained attack on the

credibility of the 35-million-member AARP, which opposes Bush's plan. It posted an Internet ad suggesting, incorrectly, that the seniors' organization had embraced same-sex marriage, calling that "the real AARP agenda."

Mainstream political groups are getting in on the act too.

The Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee unveiled a website featuring GOP lawmakers "caught on tape" expressing inconsistent positions on Social Security. And the Republican National Committee denounced McCrery's critics as a "liberal front group" representing "the Michael Moore wing of the Democratic Party."

Faster than you can say "Swift boat," the Social Security debate is veering into new and potentially toxic political territory.

Not content to limit the discussion to facts, figures and philosophy, some advocacy groups are beginning to employ assault tactics honed in the 2004 presidential race and other electoral battles. Drawing on the strategic expertise and fundraising acumen of veteran campaign operatives, they are turning Social Security into a staging ground for an increasingly shrill political exchange.

"I support their right to do this. But I think some of the efforts of groups on both sides of the issue are wrongheaded and, in some cases, counterproductive," said McCrery, who attributed the phenomenon to campaign-finance laws that had restricted the ability of political parties to finance issue advocacy, thus allowing nonprofit groups to become big players.

"They've learned how to do it, how to raise the money and get the media," McCrery said. "Our supporters have to do the same thing to counter the liberal



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groups. So you've got the political discourse in this country being controlled to a large extent by these independent entities rather than by the political parties."

Independent analysts said the attack ads on Social Security were the tip of a broader incursion by well-financed, highly skilled and sometimes interconnected political organizations into the policy-making process. On the left, they include such groups as Campaign for America's Future and MoveOn; on the right, the roster includes Progress for America, Club for Growth and FreedomWorks.

According to several experts, spending on advertising and other forms of outreach on Social Security is expected to exceed \$100 million, a record for political advocacy not tied to an election.

"It's the professionalization of campaigning moving into governance," said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Public Policy Center. "It's taking structures that were set up to elect and defeat candidates and saying: 'Whenever you have a policy debate, we're going to come in and we're going to create the same dividing lines.' "

Evan Tracey, whose Campaign Media Analysis Group in Arlington, Va., tracked ad purchases by more than 100 advocacy groups during the 2004 presidential campaign, said Social Security was providing a new source of employment for some of them.

"Many of these groups are looking around for ways to stay relevant until '06," Tracey said, referring to the midterm elections. "The way to do that is to engage in issues that are within the public policy dialogue. A lot of these groups are starting to engage on Social Security."

Never mind that the initial expense and scope of the attacks often is small. If an ad campaign is sufficiently provocative, its effect is multiplied many times over by commentary and news coverage.

The newspaper ads targeting McCrery were purchased by Campaign for America's Future, a liberal advocacy group that was active in the 2004 elections. The group said it had spent \$50,000 on the initial ad buy and was seeking contributions to finance an expanded media campaign against McCrery and other lawmakers.

The ads say McCrery, who will play a central role in drafting any Social Security legislation considered by Congress, received campaign contributions of about \$200,000 from Wall Street firms and commercial banks that stood to gain from Bush's plan to let younger workers divert a portion of their payroll taxes into private investment accounts.

"This is the most corrupt Congress in recent memory, and Rep. McCrery is a perfect example of that corruption," said Ellen Miller, deputy director of Campaign for America's Future. She said McCrery's "biggest campaign contributors have him in their pockets."

The group offered no evidence that McCrery had taken any specific action in exchange for financial support. McCrery denied he would ever do so, saying he considered the organization's attack to be unsubstantiated and unfair.

"I get contributions from all kinds of interests, and so does almost every other member of Congress," McCrery said. "To impugn the motives of a member of Congress based on his campaign contributions is not appropriate and has no standing in the arena of political debate."

The money spent to attack AARP was less than what the initial campaign against McCrery cost, yet it attracted more attention because of its pointed content and controversial sponsorship.

An Internet ad posted briefly last week on the website of the American Spectator, a conservative publication, contained a check-marked image of two tuxedo-clad men kissing, a crossed-out image of an American soldier, and a slogan that said "the real AARP agenda."

Viewers who clicked the ad were transported to the website of USA Next, a conservative lobbying organization in Fairfax, Va., that lists a membership of 1.5 million. Formerly known as United Seniors Assn.,

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USA Next has advocated Bush administration initiatives on healthcare, tax cuts and energy policy.

The group's chairman and chief executive, Charlie Jarvis, said he hoped to raise as much as \$10 million to finance a campaign to discredit AARP because of its opposition to Bush's Social Security restructuring plan.

He has hired consultants who worked for Swift Vets and POWs for Truth, which waged a highly visible advertising campaign challenging Democratic presidential nominee Sen. John F. Kerry's Vietnam War record.

"Picture the Swift boat ads," Jarvis said. "We plan to have ads that tell the truth about AARP's position on a variety of different issues, including Social Security. Because AARP has chosen to make killing the president's proposal its main objective for 2005, we want to make sure we counter them effectively and energetically at every turn."

Jarvis said he spent only "a few hundred dollars" to buy the American Spectator ad that provoked a national uproar. He said the message was based on opposition by AARP's Ohio chapter to a proposed state constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriages.

AARP officials said the state chapter's position was based on its concerns about the amendment's effect on heterosexual couples, and the national organization had taken no stance on same-sex marriage. It declined to discuss USA Next's role in the Social Security debate.

Some analysts are concerned about the consequences of reducing complex issues such as Social Security to 30-second sound bites, and of focusing attacks on each side's messengers instead of the messages.

"It is a regrettable sign of the times that there are almost no limits to the pit-bull instincts in American political lobbying these days," said Ted Marmor, a professor of politics and public policy at Yale University.

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