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Rove Uses Campaign Playbook to Mastermind Social Security Fight

As President George W. Bush crisscrosses the U.S. promoting his plan to set up private Social Security accounts, a familiar face from past campaigns is usually close by: political strategist Karl Rove.

Bush has been taking his drive to overhaul the 70-year-old retirement program straight to the voters, and he's relying on Rove, the architect of his 3.5-million-vote victory over Massachusetts Democratic Senator John Kerry in November, to lead the way.

The Social Security fight has all the trappings of a Rove campaign: the targeting of key constituencies; the marshalling of the Republican Party apparatus; the enlistment of allies among Democrats; and the encouragement of well-heeled outside supporters, often to mount attacks on the opposition.

"I don't think there is any question that Karl Rove is masterminding the whole Social Security strategy," says Stephen Moore, president of the Washington-based Free Enterprise Fund, which backs private savings accounts. "The White House feels it can't afford to lose on this."

Rove's task may be even tougher than his orchestration of Bush's election victories in 2000 and 2004. A month after the president unveiled his Social Security overhaul in his Feb. 2 State of the Union address, congressional Democrats remain almost universally opposed. Some Republicans have voiced concern about the issue, once called the "third rail of American politics," and polls show public skepticism.

High Stakes

Bush's top adviser has overcome the odds before, helping engineer victories in dozens of state, local and federal races. The stakes this time couldn't be higher. A victory for Bush would be the domestic capstone of his second term. Defeat might dash the hopes of Republicans and Rove -- the man credited with turning Texas from a Democrat-controlled state to a Republican one -- for long-term political dominance.

residential confidants have led successful domestic battles in the past, often from Cabinet

agencies. Treasury Secretary James Baker was point man for Ronald Reagan's 1986 tax overhaul; Wilbur Cohen, undersecretary of Health, Education and Welfare, was instrumental in helping President Lyndon Johnson pass Medicare in 1965. At other times, initiatives have been led out of the White House: Baker promoted Reagan's tax cuts in 1981 as chief of staff, and Rove himself helped direct the winning effort to reduce taxes in Bush's first term.

Few have had a tougher task than the 54-year-old Rove does now in pushing a proposal that would allow workers for the first time to invest part of their Social Security payroll taxes in stocks and bonds.

'Singing From Same Hymnal'

The urgency was underscored last week, when Rove and National Economic Council Director Al Hubbard held a meeting at the White House to press industry associations to support the president's plan, says Jennifer Handt, a spokeswoman for the Business Roundtable, an executives' group.

"Karl Rove talked about its importance to the president's agenda, and Al Hubbard talked about its importance to the economy," Handt says.

The Roundtable is a member of the Coalition for the Modernization and Protection of America's Social Security, or Compass, which plans to spend as much as \$20 million to back Bush's proposal.

"The White House is running this as if it's a political campaign," says Moore, who did not attend the Feb. 24 meeting. "There are regular meetings the White House has with all the groups to make sure everyone is singing from the same hymnal."

'Election-Year Intensity'

Bush traveled to nine states, from Florida to North Dakota, during a three-week period last month to lead rallies and stir up public support. He'll intensify his campaign by continuing to travel the country, including trips to New Jersey and Indiana March 4.

The Republican National Committee has laid the groundwork for him. In an echo of the last presidential campaign, the Republicans started a research operations center and an online petition drive, led by RNC Chairman Ken Mehlman, who headed the Bush-Cheney re-election effort before moving to the national committee.

"We're setting up an operation that is employing a campaign-type infrastructure, campaign-style tactics and really bringing election-year intensity to the debate," says Brian Jones, communications director of the RNC, which maintains a database of 1.4 million volunteers.

Bush critics charge that the Rove-devised Social Security campaign is politically driven and may not even resolve the central funding issue facing the retirement system.

'Athletic Contest'

"It seems to be about selling rather than listening," says Paul O'Neill, Bush's first Treasury secretary. "If it just turns out to be an athletic contest, then it's worthless."

To address the funding shortfalls facing Social Security and Medicare, O'Neill, who was fired in December 2002, has proposed mandatory investment saving that over time would eliminate the 12.4 percent Social Security payroll tax. Bush's call for voluntary use of private accounts would render those who opt against them part of "the problem," O'Neill says.

Rove, who declined to be interviewed, has expressed confidence that Bush will win over voters. He said in a Feb. 17 speech to the American Conservative Union that conservatives have seized the "mantle of idealism."

"Next time one of your smarty-pants liberal friends says to you, 'Well, he didn't have a mandate,' you tell him this delicious fact: This president got a higher percentage of the vote than any Democrat candidate for president since 1964," he said to cheers. Bush got 51 percent of the vote in November to Kerry's 48 percent.

Tapping Donor Network

Rove's elevated role in promoting issues came with a new title last month, when Bush made him deputy chief of staff overseeing domestic and international policy. Previously, he was a senior presidential adviser.

That put an official imprimatur on Rove's already strong hand in policy making. On Social Security, he and the RNC are drawing on the same donor network that helped Bush shatter fund-raising records in 2000 and 2004 to spread the word about the merits of private accounts.

In addition to Compass, Progress For America, a political group that includes Bush contributors such as A. Jerrold Perenchio, chief executive of Los Angeles-based Univision Communications Inc., is airing commercials. The ads use images of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who created Social Security in 1935, saying: "It took courage to create Social Security; it'll take courage and leadership to protect it."

Democratic Counterattack

Representative Sander Levin of Michigan, the senior Democrat on the House Social Security subcommittee, says his party has begun a counter-offensive.

The Democrats have "launched an unprecedented effort to get out the facts" through town hall meetings, Levin says. "The more people find out about private accounts, the less they will favor them."

Polls underline his point. Bush's approval rating for his handling of Social Security slid to

35 percent from 43 percent last month in a Gallup Organization poll for USA Today and Cable News Network. Fifty-six percent of the 1,008 adults surveyed Feb. 25-27 by Washington-based Gallup said they disapprove of the job Bush is doing on Social Security, up from 48 percent in a Feb. 4-6 poll. The poll has an error margin of plus or minus 3 percentage points.

The White House is seeking to enlist the aid of a few visible Democrats who back the president. That's another Rove tactic, which was used last year when Zell Miller of Georgia, then a U.S. senator, was asked to be the keynote speaker at the Republican National Convention in New York.

The strategy is netting some results. Former Representative Tim Penny, a Democrat from Minnesota, stood next to Bush at a town-hall event on Social Security in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, on Feb. 16, one of a series of functions the White House asked him to attend.

'Hard to Say No'

"When the White House calls, you try to be helpful," says Penny, whose own ideas on revamping Social Security were cited by Bush in his State of the Union address. "It's hard to say no."

Bush backers were out in force at another rally, on Feb. 10 in Blue Bell, Pennsylvania. The president spoke for 15 minutes about what he said was Social Security's path to bankruptcy, interviewed pre-selected citizens on stage who said they support him, and then called on the audience to urge lawmakers to approve the private accounts.

As during the presidential campaign, few people who oppose Bush's plans have made it to the rallies, since tickets are distributed by Republican lawmakers.

'Rip It Up'

"We were told automatically to stop people that had protest signs, or any type of sign, and if they tried getting that in then we would ask to see their ticket and then rip it up," says Jesse Branch, a 21-year-old volunteer usher at a rally Bush held in Great Falls, Montana, which was attended by Rove.



Tough tactics are also a calling card of Rove campaigns. USA Next, a Washington-based group, plans to spend about \$10 million to advertise on television and radio and to reach people through e-mail, direct mail and by telephone, Chairman Charlie Jarvis says. The group placed an ad on the Web site of the American Spectator magazine last week saying that AARP, the largest lobby for elderly Americans and an opponent of private savings accounts, supports same-sex marriage.

Jarvis denies he was working with the Bush administration. Even so, he says he's using some of the same consultants who worked with the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, a group that caused a furor last August when it ran advertisements questioning Kerry's war record. The Swift Boat Veterans were financed partly by Houston homebuilder Bob Perry,

a friend of Rove.

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