

Special-Interest Groups Widening Political Attack Ads

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Body

It was one of the more astonishing **political** images of the year: a newspaper advertisement that linked Osama bin Laden, the suspected international terrorist, with Senator Spencer Abraham, the Michigan Republican.

Why is the senator, asked the advertisement that ran in some of Michigan's largest newspapers, "trying to make it easier for terrorists like Osama bin Laden to export their way of terror to any street in America?"

The question not only puzzled readers, but the advertising campaign, sponsored by a Washington-based **group** that regularly inveighs against any form of immigration, the Federation for American Immigration Reform, also infuriated institutions like the Michigan Catholic Conference, the voice of the state's seven Roman Catholic dioceses on social and **political** issues.

"It has been real ugly and I think very vicious," said Paul A. Long, vice president for public policy of the conference, which asked television stations around the state to stop broadcasting anti-immigration spots sponsored by the federation. "We felt compelled to speak out."

The federation's advertisements -- which include television and radio spots that warn viewers and listeners that immigration legislation sponsored by Mr. Abraham would "import more than 200,000 foreign workers a year to take good American jobs" -- are among the nastiest running anywhere this **political** season. They are also an extreme example of a trend that is changing the face of **political** advertising: the increasing insertion of **special-interest groups** into the process as masters of the **attack**.

Just last week, for instance, Handgun Control, the antithesis of the National Rifle Association, began running a spot in eight cities around the country that implied that the N.R.A. would work out of the Oval Office if Gov. George W. Bush should be elected president.

Groups as well known as the Sierra Club and individuals as obscure as the Republican campaign donors Sam and Charles Wyly -- they of the **attack** commercial on Senator John McCain's environmental record -- are on the air with spots leveling ominous accusations about Republican and Democratic candidates alike.

Two weeks ago, in fact, the Sierra Club began running commercials in 17 Congressional races across the nation, about evenly divided between candidates it considers good for the environment and those it views as bad, including Mr. Abraham.

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"Interest-group ads have been a growth industry ever since 'Harry and Louise' appeared in '93 and '94," said Darrell West, a Brown University political science professor who studies campaign advertising. Harry and Louise were the ubiquitous television couple in the insurance industry spots that helped kill the Clinton administration's national health care proposals.

"Since that time, we have seen a virtual explosion of interest-group ads," Professor West said, adding that the groups sometimes serve as surrogates for candidates, who, at a time when voters are prone to punish office-seekers for seeming too negative, cannot afford to be perceived as attacking an opponent.

"This decade, candidates have been less likely to employ attack ads for fear of the backlash," he said. "The groups can provide a candidate with a level of insulation."

The Michigan Senate race is a microcosm of the trend. So far, the only significant television advertising in the race has been by organizations ostensibly unaffiliated with either political party, including the A.F.L.-C.I.O., the Sierra Club, Michigan Right to Life and a business group called Americans for Job Security. Mr. Abraham, engaged in what polls show is a tight race, and his Democratic opponent, Representative Debbie Stabenow, have yet to begin advertising in any concerted way.

And then there is the Federation for American Immigration Reform, known by its acronym, FAIR. The Catholic Church was condemning a \$700,000 advertising campaign that the federation describes as an effort to defeat the immigration legislation sponsored by Mr. Abraham. But many people here view the federation's effort as a virulent campaign to defeat the senator himself in the fall election. Mr. Abraham, a first-term senator of Lebanese descent, is chairman of a Senate subcommittee on immigration.

At least one television station, a Fox Network affiliate in Detroit, pulled a federation commercial.

The nonprofit federation, founded in the late 1970's by Dr. John Tanton, an ophthalmologist from northern Michigan, has long viewed a ban on immigration as the key to population control. It advocates a moratorium on all immigration, with the exceptions of spouses and children of American citizens, and "a limited number of refugees."

The group, which claims a dues-paying membership of 70,000, has attracted a smorgasbord of support from both the left and the right, and had been running harshly anti-immigration commercials on radio and television in high-visibility primary states like Iowa and South Carolina.

(Former Gov. Dick Lamm of Colorado, a Democrat, is on the federation's board of directors. Former Senator Alan K. Simpson of Wyoming, a Republican, resigned from the advisory board over the federation's Michigan advertising campaign.)

"They've always been controversial," said Frank Sharry, executive director of the National Immigration Forum, a Washington advocacy group for immigrants. "Their work has always been surrounded by accusations of racism and white supremacy."

What often raises hackles about the federation is its past financial backing from the Pioneer Fund, an organization formed in the 1930's in part to promote racial purity.

Dan Stein, the federation's executive director, says the group long ago severed its connections with the Pioneer Fund, and that the purpose of the Michigan television and radio spots and print advertisements is to educate Mr. Abraham's constituents about the issues, not the election. One of the commercials' objectives is the defeat of a bill sponsored by Mr. Abraham that would increase the number of visas granted to foreigners seeking to work for high-tech companies, which complain of a shortage of skilled applicants.

In its television spot, the federation characterized the measure as a threat to American college graduates, and urged constituents to call the senator on a toll-free number that the group arranged to have connected to Mr. Abraham's Washington office.

"We are a charitable entity," Mr. Stein said. "We are not interested in affecting the campaign."

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The Abraham camp thinks otherwise. "Their goal is to defeat Abraham and show his colleagues what they can do," said Joe McMonigle, the senator's campaign manager.

As a nonprofit charity whose donors can receive tax deductions, the federation is permitted to engage in lobbying but is barred by the Internal Revenue Service from campaigning for or against **political** candidates, legal experts say. (The Sierra Club has more leeway in campaigns. It is also a nonprofit **group** but the money it receives from donors is not tax deductible.)

Doug Varley, a lawyer in the Washington offices of Caplin & Drysdale who advises tax-exempt and nonprofit organizations, including Mr. Sharry's, said, "I think most charities try very hard to comply with the electioneering ban. Most are scrupulous, because the stakes are so high."

Mr. Stein maintained that his commercials do not cross the line. "We have the ability and the right to engage in grass-roots lobbying," he said. "Unless your **ad** says 'Vote against Abraham,' you're really on terra firma."

The federation's advertising has become an issue in the Michigan race, but which of the candidates will benefit remains unclear. Ms. Stabenow has told reporters that while she disagrees with the shrillness of the federation's commercials on immigration, she feels the **group** raises a legitimate issue for debate.

The federation said it was not working with Ms. Stabenow.

Mr. McMonigle, meanwhile, said that he has had to devote a lot of time to alerting the news media to the **group's** background and refuting its accusations.

Ed Sarpolus, a pollster with EPIC/ MRA in Lansing, said the federation might be doing some damage to Mr. Abraham simply by its ability to distract his campaign. "It has taken Spence off message and strategy," he said, adding that his latest poll showed the two candidates in a virtual dead heat.

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Graphic

Photos: The Handgun Control **group** implies that the National Rifle Association would have great influence on George W. Bush if he becomes president.; An organization opposed to immigration is running this commercial in Michigan against a measure sponsored by Senator Spencer Abraham.; Senator Spencer Abraham, a first-term Michigan Republican. (Associated Press)

Classification

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Subject: IMMIGRATION (92%); **POLITICAL** ADVERTISING (90%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (90%); CHRISTIANS & CHRISTIANITY (90%); US REPUBLICAN PARTY (89%); TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS (89%); TERRORISM (89%); IMMIGRATION LAW (89%); **POLITICAL** SCIENCE (78%); PUBLIC POLICY (78%); IMPORT TRADE (78%); CAMPAIGNS & ELECTIONS (78%); EXPORT TRADE (78%); US FEDERAL ELECTIONS (78%); POLITICS (78%); **POLITICAL** CANDIDATES (78%); PLATFORMS & ISSUES (77%); US DEMOCRATIC PARTY (77%); FOREIGN LABOR (75%); RELIGION (74%); CAMPAIGN FINANCE (73%); SOCIETAL ISSUES (70%); US PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES 2008 (70%); NATIONAL HEALTH INSURANCE (70%); CATHOLICS &

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CATHOLICISM (69%); US PRESIDENTS (67%); GUN CONTROL (66%); COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY PROFESSORS (62%)

Company: MICHIGAN REPUBLICAN (62%); SENATE (US); FEDERATION FOR AMERICAN IMMIGRATION REFORM; NATIONAL RIFLE ASSN; HANDGUN CONTROL INC MICHIGAN REPUBLICAN (62%); FEDERATION FOR AMERICAN IMMIGRATION REFORM; NATIONAL RIFLE ASSN; HANDGUN CONTROL INC MICHIGAN REPUBLICAN (62%); NATIONAL RIFLE ASSN; HANDGUN CONTROL INC MICHIGAN REPUBLICAN (62%); HANDGUN CONTROL INC MICHIGAN REPUBLICAN (62%); NATIONAL RIFLE ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA (84%); BRADY CENTER TO PREVENT GUN VIOLENCE (84%); BRADY CENTER TO PREVENT GUN VIOLENCE (84%); FEDERATION FOR AMERICAN IMMIGRATION REFORM (83%)

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Person: OSAMA BIN LADEN (73%); GEORGE W BUSH (58%); JOHN MCCAIN (58%)

Geographic: UNITED STATES (94%)

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