

New Groups Spring to Life To Fight Hagel



Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images

Conservative groups financed by anonymous donors are running television advertisements against Chuck Hagel, President Obama's nominee for secretary of defense.

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A brand new conservative group calling itself Americans for a Strong Defense and financed by anonymous donors is running advertisements urging Democratic senators in five states to vote against [Chuck Hagel](#), [President Obama](#)'s nominee to be secretary of defense, saying he would make the United States "a weaker country."

Another freshly minted and anonymously backed organization, Use Your Mandate, which presents itself as a liberal gay rights group but purchases its television time through a prominent Republican firm, is attacking Mr. Hagel as "anti-Gay," "anti-woman" and "anti-Israel" in ads and mailers.

Those groups are joining at least five others that are organizing to stop Mr. Hagel's confirmation, a goal even they acknowledge appears to be increasingly challenging. But the

effort comes with a built-in consolation prize should it fail: depleting some of Mr. Obama's political capital as he embarks on a new term with fresh momentum.

The media campaign to scuttle Mr. Hagel's appointment, unmatched in the annals of modern presidential cabinet appointments, reflects the continuing effects of the Supreme Court's [2010 Citizens United decision](#), which loosened campaign finance restrictions and was a major reason for the record spending by outside groups in the 2012 election. All told, these independent and largely secretly financed groups spent well over \$500 million in an attempt to defeat Mr. Obama and the Democrats, a failure that seemed all the greater given the huge amounts spent.

While the campaign against Mr. Hagel, a Republican, is not expected to cost more than a few million dollars, it suggests that the operatives running the independent groups and the donors that finance them — many of whom are millionaires and billionaires with ideological drive and business agendas that did not go away after the election — are ready to fight again.

“We were anxious to get back into the battle,” said Nick Ryan, a Republican strategist and the founder of the American Future Fund, which started as a small, Iowa-based political committee in 2007 and has grown larger since taking a leading role now against Mr. Hagel. “Postelection we have new battle lines being drawn with the president; he kicks it off with these nominations and it made sense for us.”

Groups like his would have been able to operate freely against Mr. Hagel even before Citizens United. But the ruling has served to erase what had been traditional fears among donors that their involvement in the fight of the day would lead to legal trouble or, for those who prefer to stay anonymous, unwanted public exposure. That confidence, in turn, has helped spur the increase in the number of political organizations that pop up to engage in the big political entanglement of the moment.

American Future Fund was formed under a section of the tax code that allows it to keep its donors secret. It spent more than \$20 million seeking to defeat Mr. Obama and the Democrats last year, according to the Center for Responsive Politics, a nonpartisan research group. Other major conservative groups like Americans for Prosperity — partly financed by the industrialist Koch family — and Crossroads GPS are not involved in the Hagel nomination, but have made it clear that they will continue to combat the president's agenda on several fronts.

The outside activity is not confined to Republicans. Mr. Obama's campaign apparatus has transformed itself into a nonprofit political group, though it said it would disclose the names of its donors (and it is not getting involved in the Hagel fight).

After Mr. Obama won re-election in November and Democrats kept their majority in the Senate and made inroads in the House, Republican Party officials and senior strategists with conservative outside groups predicted that some of the big financiers of the larger outside efforts would pull back and reassess their involvement and whether their millions were wasted. But while the donors have said they will insist that the groups they finance find lessons in last year's losses, their interest and stakes in what happens in Washington have certainly not waned.

For instance, the biggest individual financier of the so-called [super PACs](#) that sought to defeat Mr. Obama, Sheldon Adelson, is so invested in the fight over Mr. Hagel that he has reached out directly to Republican Senators to urge them to hold the line against his confirmation, which would be almost impossible to stop against six Republican "yes" votes and a unified Democratic caucus.

Given the more than \$100 million he donated to the anti-Obama effort last year, no lawmakers need to be reminded of his importance to their future endeavors. People briefed on his involvement said Mr. Adelson, chairman of the Las Vegas Sands Corporation and a longtime supporter of Israel, was calling in conjunction with the Republican Jewish Coalition, a group he has financed for several years.

In an interview with The Wall Street Journal in December, Mr. Adelson said he was prepared to "double" his investment in politics in the coming year.

But it is unclear whether he is directly financing any of the anti-Hagel advertising. An associate of his, speaking about Mr. Adelson's thinking on condition of anonymity, said he did not believe that expensive television campaigns are the answer to every political push given that Mr. Obama's re-election team accomplished so much of its success through online and volunteer efforts.

Citing similar reasons, another major Republican donor, Foster Friess, said in an interview that he had developed his own skepticism over "the whole idea of these multimedia ads from 45,000 feet." After last year's losses he said he was devoting most of his resources to an effort he called "Left-Right, Left-Right Forward March," which finds projects liberals and conservatives can support together, like water purification in developing countries.

Still, he said, "no one in this effort is going to give up the values that they think are important." For him, that extends to Mr. Hagel, whose "past statements about Israel should be really taken into consideration" Mr. Friess said, adding, "and I would hope they could find a better person to serve in that position."

Whatever its chances of success, the blitz against Mr. Hagel is of a sort that has generally been reserved for elections and some Supreme Court nominations. The last major cabinet skirmish, over President George W. Bush's nomination of John R. Bolton as the United States ambassador to the United Nations, had no comparable outside media blitz. Though goaded along by a phone campaign organized by the political action arm of the liberal group MoveOn, Democrats succeeded in blocking him in the Senate, forcing Mr. Bush to appoint him during a congressional recess.

That was before the Citizens United decision.

"This is the first big cabinet fight since Bolton," said Michael Goldfarb, a strategist for a conservative group opposed to Mr. Hagel called the [Emergency Committee for Israel](#) and a founder of a conservative Web site called The Washington Free Beacon, which is running a steady stream of anti-Hagel news articles. "And things have evolved in the last seven years."

The most mysterious of the new groups is Use Your Mandate. Portraying itself as a gay rights group, it has sent mailers to voters in seven states — including New York, New Jersey, Maryland and Montana — and run television ads against Mr. Hagel in New York and Washington. It has sent out posts on Twitter questioning his gay rights record and asking, "Is this what we worked so hard for?" Established gay rights activists have expressed skepticism about the group's authenticity.

It has no Web site and it only lists as its address a post office box in New York. But paperwork filed with the Federal Communications Commission link it back to Tusk Strategies, a bipartisan political group founded by Bradley Tusk, a former strategist for Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg of New York.

In an interview, Mr. Tusk would only identify its financiers as Democratic "gay and L.G.B.T. people who have been active in campaigns around the country."

Yet federal records show that Use Your Mandate uses Del Cielo Media, an arm of one of the most prominent Republican ad-buying firms in the country, Smart Media, with clients that have included the presidential campaigns of former Gov. Jon M. Huntsman Jr. of Utah and Senator John McCain of Arizona; the 2010 Senate campaign of Christine O'Donnell, who was known for positions against homosexuality, in Delaware; and, as it happens, the Emergency Committee for Israel.

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