

Republicans will be outspent

By Rory O'Connor

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George Bush's media ace Mark McKinnon claims John Kerry and his allies have millions more than his guy. He says the Democrats break the law to get the cash.

Whose is bigger? Everybody assumes George Bush's is. But ask the president's media director, Mark McKinnon. He says the guy with the biggest war chest is John Kerry. OK, the money isn't technically coming from Kerry's campaign, but so what? MoveOn.org, the Media Fund, and America Coming Together are raising millions to bash Bush.

In fact, so concerned are McKinnon and company about MoveOn.org ads, that the Republican National Committee (RNC) filed a formal complaint April 1 with the Federal Election Commission (FEC). The Republican ire comes as the commission considers placing broad new limits on soft-money spending by "527s", the tax-exempt political groups.

"It will surprise people to know we are likely to be outspent. Ninety percent of these 527s are Democratic. Labor and other core constituencies," he claims. "Our base of support comes more from corporations-and they are far more fearful of violating the law."

Counters senior Kerry campaign adviser Michael Meehan: "Republicans perfected the use of 'shadow groups' when close friends of Bush attacked 2000 GOP primary rival John McCain. The president's job-approval rating is in the 40s," he says, ridiculing the GOP's courtroom gambit. "Republicans are launching their lawyers to save their campaign."

The Dems say their money quest, aided by billionaire George Soros and Peter Lewis, among others, is simply playing catch-up with the Republicans. Unable to compete on the hard-money turf-Bush has raised some \$170 million, twice what Kerry has amassed-Dems sought other avenues, which McKinnon charges are blatantly illegal.

While the FEC debate rages, one fact is irrefutable: MoveOn.org and The Media Fund are giving McKinnon, who heads one of the most well-financed media operations in history, a run for Bush's money. The two groups have matched Bush spot for spot in key media markets.

Republicans will be outspent | 2

McKinnon can make his case, and Democrats can spew their spin, but one thing is clear: TV wins big. Big. Sanford Bernstein media analyst Tom Wolzien says election-year commercial spending will jump to \$1.6 billion—a boon to broadcasters and cable systems. Stations in 17 swing states will get the lion's share of revenue, led by the top four—Florida, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Michigan—which have won almost half the ad dollars thus far.

What aggravates McKinnon? “One guy [George Soros] is spending \$35 million to affect the process. Whole corporations are limited to giving us \$5,000,” he laments. “Now that’s one of the ironic outcomes of supposed campaign-finance reform!”

No, that’s politics. A subject that McKinnon, 49, knows well. Married to his high-school sweetheart, Annie, a homemaker, and the father of two daughters, 16 and 19, McKinnon is the powerhouse behind Georgewbush.com, located in an office complex in Arlington, Va.

Inside, all is carpeted and calm. Young, well-dressed, well-coifed campaign workers sit at humming terminals and talk in hushed, respectful tones. McKinnon himself inhabits a small, nondescript cubicle that overlooks the Greater Washington sprawl.

Like his surroundings, McKinnon, who lives in Austin, Texas, is suburban, not urban. Yet by all accounts, he’s the hippest member of the Bush team. He’s a casual dresser who favors jeans. When he wears a suit, it’s sans tie. “And it’s neither Prada nor Men’s Wearhouse,” says assistant Kelly Ann Doherty, “but a solid in-between.” Slim and affable, McKinnon boasts an independent spirit. No wonder he calls his firm Maverick Media.

His vaunted independent streak is evident in the Bush strategy. Months before the election, the campaign decided to forsake the Rose Garden and enter the fray. Bush has already spent an estimated \$30 million on advertising—and there’s no end in sight.

Isn’t it risky to present the president as partisan so early?

“Absolutely not,” says McKinnon. “The real risk is not engaging. We have been the subject of \$50 million–\$60 million in negative ads over the past six months. We’ve taken a lot of incoming.” Such strategic decisions come from the top, he adds. “It starts with the president, and he has made it clear he’s anxious to engage. We have a clear plan, and we’re executing it. We want to pre-act, not react.”

McKinnon believes the next few months represent “an important window” for the Bush media messengers. “You have to catch people when they are interested—and the time is now.” Critics contend this strategy sounds awfully negative for a man who says, “Negativity drove me out of politics in the mid ‘90s.” But McKinnon says it just ain’t so.

Winning the war of words is crucial, and, while he concedes that the campaign is testing those words in focus groups, he declines to provide details. Still, he wants to position the president as a “steady” leader and Kerry as a “flip-flopper” who changes positions, often for political expediency. If the slam sticks, it will be repeated over and over as part of what The

Republicans will be outspent | 3

New York Times has termed a “coordinated blitz” aimed at defining Kerry as “indecisive and lacking conviction.”

“It’s not negative to define John Kerry,” McKinnon states. “We’re not doing attack ads, we’re doing strong contrast ads. That’s legitimate, not negative. We aren’t saying Kerry is ‘Weak on Defense’; we’re saying he’s ‘Wrong on Defense.’ There’s a big difference.”

But some think defense is Bush’s Achilles’ heel, too. Prior to the Richard Clarke explosion and the 9/11 hearings, McKinnon jump-started a controversy with the first round of Bush ads, which used images of Ground Zero and a flag-draped body being carried away from the rubble. He says he anticipated the hue and cry and welcomes it.

“Controversy is good. Those ads had a strong upside effect,” he says. “First, 9/11 is central to our campaign. Second, I estimate we got about \$7 million or \$8 million worth of free media as a result. That translates into about 60 million extra viewers, people who saw the ads on news programs. What’s not good is when people ignore your ads!”

No one, however, not even his political adversaries, would ignore McKinnon. He’s so agreeable it’s hard to find a Democrat, much less a Republican, to badmouth him. Even Paul Begala, former Clinton operative and ultimate Democratic insider, exclaims, “I love him! He’s a wonderful, terrific guy.” And Democrat pundit James Carville counts him as a friend.

Bush’s media director is good friends with Democrats? It gets better: McKinnon, a one-time songwriter for Kris Kristofferson, started his political life to the left of Begala. Remember, he’s a maverick. And he’s driven to win—whether he’s working to elect Democrats, such as Ann Richards governor of Texas in 1990 or Bob Lanier mayor of Houston in 1991, or George W. Bush in 2000 and 2004. “It all started with Hank the Hallucination,” he grins. “Hank and Paul Begala are the reasons I got into politics.”

Hank is the comic-strip character McKinnon supported against Begala in a 1982 contest for student-government president at the University of Texas in Austin. “I was a bit of an anarchist in those days,” McKinnon admits, noting that Hank won.

McKinnon worked in Texas Democratic campaigns till 1996, when he overdosed on partisan politics and “last-minute attack and response ads.” He switched gears, concentrating on corporate clients and public affairs, such as a successful 1997 effort to preserve affirmative action.

Then he fell in love, and everything changed.

The object of McKinnon’s affection was George W. Bush, then governor of Texas. “It is unusual” for a conservative Republican politician and a liberal Democrat media maven to hook up, McKinnon admits. “The nexus was Lieutenant Governor Bob Bullock, who was my mentor.” McKinnon and Bush became jogging partners and fast friends. Soon, Bush began courting McKinnon—professionally speaking.

Republicans will be outspent | 4

“Even as governor, President Bush was famously skeptical about political consultants,” McKinnon says. “Hiring me was a counterintuitive move. He liked the idea I wasn’t looking to work in politics anymore.” In the end, McKinnon says, he decided to work for Bush “out of respect, loyalty, and friendship.” Those feelings are reciprocated by the president, who trusts McKinnon with his media image.

Yet McKinnon believes that paid media is no longer the prime determinant in presidential races. “Yes, I would feel naked without it, and maybe it will make more of a difference now with the 527s. But with so much free media,” he says, “our ads are in danger of being overwhelmed. There is such a powerful tsunami of coverage 24/7 now, you need an enormous amount of money just to cut through the clutter.”

Does Begala worry his friend has gone over to the Dark Side? “He was way to the left of me in college, and now he’s way to the right. Mark has changed his life, but I don’t believe he had a conservative epiphany. I believe him when he says this is based on a deep and personal love for George Bush.”

McKinnon concedes, “I haven’t taken as many shots as I thought I would. Probably because Begala blessed me.”

Would he describe himself as a Republican now? McKinnon grins: “Let’s just say I’m a man of evolution.”

Rory O’Connor is the director of MediaChannel.org’s 501(c)3 fiscal sponsor, The Global Center. This article also appeared on Broadcasting & Cable