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The right's well-funded answer to MoveOn.org

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WASHINGTON — They raise millions of dollars, conduct provocative ad campaigns, work with a vast network of like-minded allies and have the power to frame the presidential election going forward as much as the candidates themselves.

That used to define only the liberal MoveOn.org, an organization of 3.3 million members that has raised \$25 million in the past 18 months and is helping spearhead an anti-war coalition.

Now, a group of conservatives and Republicans with close ties to the White House have formed their own enterprise, Freedom's Watch, landing on the political scene with a \$15 million ad campaign to defend President Bush's Iraq war strategy.

But this is just the start. Its organizers don't see themselves as the single-cause Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, who aimed to sink John Kerry's presidential bid in 2004. Instead, they hope to fill what they say is a void on the right, becoming a permanent, well-financed conservative voice on social, economic and national security issues.

"We decided to build something that transcends election cycles," said Bradley Blakeman, the president of Freedom's Watch and a former deputy assistant to Bush. "What we decided was to build an organization that is a never-ending campaign."

As such, Freedom's Watch and MoveOn.org could be the left and right bookends not only on the war, but on a number of issues that will decide the 2008 elections and shape congressional debate beyond. Freedom's Watch organizers said they are considering whether to create a political subgroup, like MoveOn has, that could directly play a role in elections.

When Blakeman speaks of "we," he is referring to "friends, former administration people, party leaders, decision makers." Unlike MoveOn, which has its roots in California's Silicon Valley, Freedom's Watch is clearly a Washington creature.

Many in its inner circle of strategists and donors are close to Vice President Dick Cheney or held high posts at the White House. Blakeman, whose 26-year-old nephew died when the World Trade Center collapsed in the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, was director of scheduling and appointments at the Bush White House.

Among those who brainstormed with him this summer was Mary Matalin, Cheney's counselor until 2003 and still an adviser to the vice president. Ari Fleischer, the former White House spokesman, is a member of the Freedom's Watch board.

The group's donors include Mel Sembler, a friend of Cheney's and longtime Republican fundraiser. Sembler was chairman of the legal defense fund for I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, Cheney's former chief of staff who was convicted of lying and obstruction of justice in the investigation into the leak of a CIA operative's identity. Another donor is Kevin E. Moley, a former U.S. ambassador to international organizations in Geneva and a senior aide to Cheney during the 2000 presidential campaign.

The group organized itself as a nonprofit lobbying organization and, unlike political organizations that advocate for or against candidates, it is not required to identify its donors. Still, when it launched its multimillion-dollar ad

campaign on the war in August, Blakeman listed some of its supporters, several of them pro-Israel conservatives.

He said all Freedom's Watch backers share a frustration that conservatives in the past were unable to mobilize in a sustainable way. "We'd form a (political group), everybody would get ginned up, we'd take on an issue and then after the election, we'd disappear," he said. "And all that brain trust and all those resources are gone."

On the left, MoveOn had become a force that teamed up with other liberal organizations and labor-backed groups to influence elections and press liberal causes in Congress. MoveOn created a furor this month, angering even Demo-crats, when it ran an ad in The New York Times that asked: "General Petraeus, or General Betray Us?" in advance of Gen. David Petraeus' testimony to Congress about the status of Bush's strategy in Iraq.

These days, several of these groups operate out of a building in Washington's K Street corridor, once the realm of corporate lobbyists, where they meet every morning at 10:30 to coordinate their messages on the war, children's health care, the minimum wage and other causes.

Working behind the scenes through most of the summer, Blakeman assembled big-dollar donors and quietly helped pro-war groups ranging from the American Legion to Rolling Thunder make a case for Bush's war strategy. Freedom's Watch also formed partnerships with other groups backing the war, such as Families United, Vets for Freedom and the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

But none have the financial power of Freedom's Watch.

In August, the group announced itself to the public with its ad campaign. The ads ran in 20 states in Republican and Dem-ocratic congressional districts, aimed at lawmakers whose views of the war were in flux.

The ads feature soldiers who lost limbs in Iraq and mothers or wives who lost sons or husbands in the war. Their ads portray efforts in Congress to set timelines for withdrawal of troops from Iraq as "surrender" and, much the way Cheney has done, draw a direct link between the Sept. 11 attacks and the Iraq war.

Well-financed outside groups have become a recurrent feature in national politics. During the 2004 presidential campaign, liberals had America Coming Together and the Media Fund, conservatives had Progress for America and Swift Boat Veterans for Truth. They operated as special political entities to help presidential candidates. This year, the Federal Election Commission, in separate cases, fined several of them for violations of campaign-finance laws.

Grover Norquist, a conservative strategist and head of Americans for Tax Reform, spoke for many critics of campaign-finance laws when he said that groups such as Freedom's Watch are the natural result of laws that banned the political parties from accepting contributions of unlimited size.

"Normally that would be the party's job," he said of the advocacy that such groups perform. "But if you can only write a \$2,000 check to the parties, five guys can't get together and do that. But five guys can get together and set up Freedom's Watch ... and can make an impact."

MoveOn.org used to operate as a nonprofit but reorganized its political activity under a political action committee. Its donors are limited to contributions no greater than \$5,000 and their identities must be disclosed in reports filed with the FEC.

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