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Election 2004

Rival's ad raps Castor on Al-Arian

Advisers for Rep. Peter Deutsch say the ad does not break a pledge not to use negative tactics.

By Associated Press
Published August 23, 2004

MIAMI - U.S. Rep. Peter Deutsch aired his first critical ad of Democratic rival Betty Castor during the weekend, suggesting her Senate campaign would be damaged in the general election by her handling of the Sami Al-Arian case.

"Betty Castor didn't speak out about terrorist professor Sami Al-Arian when she was USF president," says the voice of a woman in the ad, interrupted by another woman saying, "Shhhhhh."

"Said she didn't have one iota of information but the FBI told her," the voice says before another "Shhhhhh," adding, "Al-Arian was calling the '93 World Trade Center bombers."

It ends with the woman saying: "Can we talk about finding a candidate who can win?"

The ad, appearing in the Tampa and Orlando television markets beginning Saturday, underscored a growing intensity in a campaign where Deutsch has trailed Castor by double-digits in recent polling but mounted a large advertising campaign to try to win the Aug. 31 primary.

Deutsch campaign advisers said Sunday the spot cost between \$200,000 and \$300,000 but may be broadcast in other parts of the state.

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It draws upon criticism raised earlier by an independent group with ties to Deutsch that questioned her handling of the Al-Arian case.

Castor has said her hands were tied in the Al-Arian case during her tenure as president of the University of South Florida.

She said in a debate in June that the FBI failed to provide her with "one iota" of information that would have allowed her to fire the former USF professor now awaiting trial on charges he raised money for the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

Castor's campaign said the ad broke a pledge signed by Castor, Deutsch and Miami-Dade County Mayor Alex Penelas earlier this month to refrain from negative campaigning in the primary. Spokesman Matt Burgess said it shows Deutsch "can't be trusted to tell the truth."

"This 11th-hour attack really comes as no surprise, with all the polls showing Betty as the front-runner in the race and the strongest candidate against the Republicans," Burgess said in a statement. "Deutsch isn't just nasty, he's desperate."

The pledge was brokered by Florida's two Democratic senators, retiring Sen. Bob Graham and Sen. Bill Nelson.

Graham, who was speaking at a forum on foreign policy in Italy, released a statement, calling on "the Democratic Senate candidates to run positive campaigns discussing their vision of the future and not to disparage each other's past."

Nelson was "disappointed" by the ad appearing just 10 days after the candidates agreed to the pledge, spokesman Dan McLaughlin said. It was unclear, however, whether Deutsch would face any repercussions from the party elders.

Mark Penn, a Deutsch consultant, said the ad "raises questions about her electability in light of how she's responded to Al-Arian in the campaign."

He said by signing the pledge, Deutsch was not barred from questioning other candidates' voting records and their judgments during the campaign.

Penn said the issue would likely resurface against the Republican nominee if Castor secures the nomination.

Earlier in the day, Deutsch was endorsed by the Rev. Jesse Jackson.

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