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Attacks intensifying in Senate contests; [SOUTH PINELLAS Edition]

STEVE BOUSQUET, ANITA KUMAR. *St. Petersburg Times*. St. Petersburg, Fla.: Aug 25, 2004. pg. 3.B

Full Text (668 words)

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The U.S. Senate race heads into the final week before the primary elections with fresh television ads, shifts in strategy and tougher attacks.

In the Democratic primary, U.S. Rep. Peter Deutsch of Hollywood is airing an ad suggesting Republicans would hammer Betty Castor for her handling of former University of South Florida professor Sami Al- Arian while she was president of the university.

Al-Arian was indicted on federal charges last year and accused of raising money for terrorists. He was under investigation by federal law enforcement officials during Castor's tenure at USF, but Castor has said she could not get enough information on the investigation to fire him.

The ad prompted Castor, who leads Deutsch and Miami-Dade Mayor Alex Penelas, to alter her strategy of ignoring Deutsch's attacks. She responded with a new TV ad that quotes media accounts labeling Deutsch "ruthless" and "nasty."

Castor's ad also portrays her as the heir to retiring Sen. Bob Graham. It cites Graham's criticism of Deutsch's campaign tactics and pictures Graham and Castor together.

"We ought to be attacking our problems, not each other," Castor says in the ad.

Deutsch said Castor should have spoken out against Al-Arian, calling him "the epitome of evil in her midst."

Castor has said law enforcement officials would tell her little about their investigation, and she could not justify firing Al- Arian at the time.

The Republican primary also became nastier.

Former housing secretary Mel Martinez's campaign enlisted social conservatives to label Bill McCollum untrustworthy and a liar in a conference call with reporters that was billed as a review of McCollum's "antifamily agenda."

"He lied to me," said Andrea Sheldon-Lafferty of the Traditional Values Coalition in a conference call from Washington.

She described discussions in which McCollum allegedly broke a commitment to oppose a

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federal law that included longer sentences for crimes motivated by a victim's race, religion or sexual orientation.

"At least with Ted Kennedy, you know what you're getting," Sheldon-Lafferty said. "He stands for something, whereas Bill McCollum, one day he's one way, another way he's another."

A McCollum spokeswoman, Shannon Gravitte, said the former congressman co-sponsored a hate crime bill in 1997, three years before he ran for the Senate.

"He believed in the principle that if a crime is committed against someone solely on that basis, they should receive added penalties," Gravitte said.

McCollum was criticized in his first Senate race in 2000 by a number of conservatives who felt betrayed that he joined ranks with Sen. Charles Schumer, a New York Democrat, on the hate-crime bill.

Ken Connor, an abortion rights opponent, trial lawyer and Martinez ally, said McCollum deliberately embraced a hate-crime law to reinvent himself before the 2000 Senate race to get support from moderate Republicans in South Florida.

Not true, McCollum's spokeswoman said.

The intensity of the latest criticism of McCollum suggests that the Martinez campaign is increasingly nervous with a week left. Polls show the race has narrowed, but McCollum has an advantage and Hurricane Charley may depress turnout in some Republican counties.

Martinez is counting on a big turnout in Miami-Dade, where Hispanics are a major force in Republican primaries, relying on a TV ad that features praise from President Bush.

Republican Senate candidate Doug Gallagher blasted Martinez, a former trial lawyer, on Cuban radio in Miami with an ad that says Martinez "filed a lawsuit against a church" and opposed President Bush's limits on malpractice jury awards.

Meanwhile, McCollum launched a new ad Tuesday emphasizing his experience and featuring an endorsement from former Sen. Connie Mack.

In a subtle shift in tactics, the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee turned its sights away from Martinez to McCollum's "extreme" record on health care, crime and other issues.

"We're expecting McCollum's going to win this thing," said the Democrats' spokesman, Alan Stonecipher, "and he's too extreme."

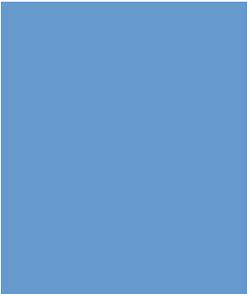
Times staff writer David Karp contributed to this report.

[Illustration]

Caption: Mel Martinez (ran TAMPA & STATE); Bill McCollum (ran TAMPA & STATE);
Doug Gallagher (ran TAMPA & STATE); Photo: PHOTO, (3)

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