

Politicians cast opponents as villains

By NANCY BENAC, Associated Press Writer *Thu Sep 14, 2:07 PM ET*

Shadowy corporate figures who cut backroom deals. Stealthy terrorists who drive cabs by day. Immigrants who steal across the border by night.

Politicians are finding no shortage of boogeymen to associate with their opponents this campaign season.

And it turns out that some of the most popular targets of opportunity at this early stage in the elections are simply other politicians — those whose mere mention is enough to raise partisan hairs on the backs of loyal party members.

Sure, candidates are tying their opponents to Big Oil and Islamic fascists. And to special interests and partisan bloggers. But they're also doing their best to link their rivals with the likes of George Bush and Nancy Pelosi. And Tom DeLay and Hillary Rodham Clinton.

In many areas of the country, Democrats are the ones running ads that feature Bush, whose job approval ratings are stuck in the 30s.

"Arnold Schwarzenegger is for George W. Bush," intones an ad by Democrat Phil Angelides, who is hoping to unseat California's Republican governor. "Is he for you?"

Likewise, it is often Republican candidates who are eager to drop names like Pelosi, Clinton and Kerry in an attempt to associate their opponents with liberals and raise fears about what would happen if Democrats took control of Congress.

Pelosi, for example, isn't just billed as the House Democratic leader who could become speaker. She's a "partisan, obstructionist San Francisco liberal," as a spokesman for the Republican congressional campaign committee put it.

As for Democratic efforts to demonize Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, White House spokesman Tony Snow cautioned earlier this month that turning him into a "boogeyman may make for good politics but would make for very lousy strategy."

The man both sides hate, Osama bin Laden, figured prominently in Bush's Sept. 11 anniversary speeches and was quoted at length in one as the president sought to rally support for his anti-terrorism policies and, by implication, paint his party as the one to trust in these dangerous times.

Even though it's still early in the campaign season — the time when candidates traditionally are still defining themselves and running policy-oriented ads — both parties

have installed plenty of other figures in this year's political rogue's gallery, everyone from North Korean strongman Kim Jong Il to liberal Daily Kos blogger Markos Moulitsas Zuniga.

The Republican National Committee last month distributed a seven-page "research briefing" on Zuniga labeling him "a partisan nutroot who turned his hate-filled blog Daily Kos into a leadership post in the Democrat Party." An RNC Internet ad included a photo montage titled "Meet the Defeat-ocrats" that showed Zuniga along with Ned Lamont, the Democrats' Senate nominee in Connecticut, filmmaker Michael Moore and other high-profile Democrats.

In the same guilt-by-association vein, the head of the Republican Main Street Partnership PAC, which supports moderate Republicans, said GOP candidate Stephen Laffey "should be absolutely humiliated" that someone like "radical" conservative Ann Coulter wrote a column supporting his effort to defeat Republican moderate Lincoln Chafee in the Senate primary in Rhode Island.

Painting the opposition as soft on illegal immigrants is turning out to be particularly tricky business for both parties this year.

Hispanic leaders cried foul over the way a Democratic Senate campaign committee Web ad questioned Republican national security efforts. The ad showed a montage of GOP Senate candidates and Bush, followed by images of men sneaking across the border sandwiched between shots of bazooka-toting terrorists, bin Laden and the North Korean president. The ad was quickly withdrawn.

Republicans, too, have tried to use fears about illegal immigration and national security against their opponents — some more deftly than others.

GOP Sen. Conrad Burns (news, bio, voting record) of Montana, facing a tough challenge from Democrat Jon Tester, raised eyebrows last month when he said the nation is up against faceless enemy terrorists "who drive taxi cabs in the daytime and kill at night."

Sen. Rick Santorum (news, bio, voting record) of Pennsylvania walked a more careful line with a radio ad that stresses his Italian immigrant background yet accuses his opponent, Democrat Bob Casey, of joining "Ted Kennedy and other liberals in supporting a bill granting amnesty to millions who've entered our country illegally."

In Arizona, GOP congressional candidate Randy Graf ran ads showing a little girl wandering toward her front door, which is standing slightly ajar, as he warned that U.S. borders are an open door that thousands illegally step through each day. He added, "drugs, criminals, even terrorists, we just don't know."

"I fear not only for the safety of my family but for all Americans," he said.

Cecilia Munoz, vice president of the National Council of La Raza, said candidates risk offending a huge swath of voters by targeting immigrants.

"It does feel like immigrants are the whipping boy of choice this election season, and by implication Hispanic-Americans as well," she said. "It crosses the line into demonizing an entire community."

Marty Kaplan, associate dean of the University of Southern California Annenberg School for Communication, said all political races "end up with an attempt to scare people about the consequences of an opponent winning. And the way to scare them is by filling out the picture of who the opponent's friends and mentors are, and what masters they serve."

To that end, the ever-popular unnamed "special interest" is back in a big way.

Evan Tracey, president of a company that tracks political issue advertising, said roughly a third of congressional ads have been making the pitch that special interests are corrupting Washington, with Big Oil an especially popular target for Democrats. Since April, for example, Democrats have spent close to \$13 million on ads critical of the oil and gas industry, according to Tracey's company, TNS Media Intelligence/Campaign Media Analysis Group.

In Indiana, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee ran an ad labeling Republican Rep. Chris Chocola (news, bio, voting record) "for big oil, not you."

The special interest bashing has taken on a regional flavor in hurricane-prone Florida, where Big Insurance is the target of choice. An ad by Democratic gubernatorial hopeful Jim Davis shows two shadowy men in suits shaking hands on a deal as the announcer accuses big insurance companies of denying coverage to homeowners after hurricanes.

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