Bush campaign ads provoke protests from families of September 11 victims

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President Bush has undoubtedly spent far more time filming campaign commercials exploiting the September 11 terrorist attacks than he will devote to answering questions posed by the independent commission investigating the attacks. His cover-up of the facts surrounding the events of 9/11 is a major factor behind the outraged reaction to the first Bush campaign commercials on the part of many family members of victims of the attacks in New York and Washington.

The initial commercials were broadcast Thursday in several states expected to be closely contested in the November election. Three of the four commercials show the ruins of one of the twin towers of the World Trade Center, while two show firefighters carrying flag-draped remains from "Ground Zero." All of the ads seek to capitalize on the tragedy by suggesting that Bush's response demonstrated leadership.

One group of families of victims killed at the World Trade Center joined with New York City firefighters to protest the use of 9/11 imagery in the campaign ads, and called on the Bush campaign to stop broadcasting the commercials.

A statement posted on the web site of September 11 Families for Peaceful Tomorrows quoted several family members and firefighters opposing the Bush ads. Andrew Rice, whose brother died in the World Trade Center, said, "To use these images of a scene of destruction and murder in a political campaign is inappropriate at best, and politicians from across the spectrum should know that there is bipartisan opposition among 9/11 families to this type of offensive exploitation."

Colleen Kelly, whose brother, William Kelly, Jr., died at the World Trade Center, said, "I am afraid these ads, and others to follow, will be part of an ugly political jousting match between candidates, where one side attacks the other as somehow indifferent to the horrors of the day." Kelly has been active in antiwar activities, traveling to Iraq early in 2003 to show her opposition to the impending US invasion, and to declare that the war did not represent a legitimate response to the September 11 attacks.

Tim Ryan, a firefighter stationed in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan, said, "As a firefighter who spent months at Ground Zero, it's deeply offensive to see the Bush campaign use these images to capitalize on the greatest American tragedy of our time."

Kelly Campbell, co-director of September 11 Families for Peaceful Tomorrows, said that there was sharply divided opinion among relatives of victims. "There's no consensus around this, but for the most part 9/11 families are very sensitive to someone using images of our loved ones' death for their own ends," she said. "And that's what's pretty blatantly happening here."

Several survivors of September 11 victims were caustic in their comments to the press about Bush. Kristen Breitweiser, whose husband Ronald died at the World Trade Center, said, "It's offensive that he would have the audacity to use 9/11 in a political campaign." Lorie Van Auken, 48, of New Jersey, who lost her husband in the attacks, said, "Everybody's outraged that I've spoken to, completely outraged." Ron Willett, whose 29-year-old son John Charles was killed at the World Trade Center, told Reuters he was so upset, "I would vote for Saddam Hussein before I would vote for Bush."

Officials in both the White House and the Bush re-election campaign defended the ads and declared that none of them would be pulled from the airwaves in response to protests from the September 11 families. A bevy of Republican Party spokesmen went on television interview programs Sunday to justify the advertising campaign.

Bush himself responded to questions about the controversy, telling reporters Saturday that he would not withdraw the ads. " First of all, I will continue to speak

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about the effects of 9/11 on our country and my presidency," Bush said. "How this administration handled that day, as well as the war on terror, is worthy of discussion," he added. "And I look forward to discussing that with the American people."

As the families of the September 11 victims know quite well, the Bush administration has actually done everything possible to avoid any accounting for its actions during the period leading up to the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, as well as Bush's own conduct on the day of the attacks.

One parent of a World Trade Center victim touched on this contradiction while responding to the televised statement of Bush campaign spokeswoman Karen Hughes, who described the 911-themed ads as "tasteful" and non-exploitative.

"My son was murdered on September 11," said Bob McIlvaine, whose son, Bobby, was working at the Twin Towers. "To argue that using footage of the wreckage of the towers to further someone's political career is 'tasteful' really needs to be rejected outright, and I condemn it. Instead of playing on people's emotions with images of that day, the President would do right to cooperate more with the independent commission investigating the 9/11 attacks so we can learn the truth about what happened on that day and why."

The White House for many months opposed the establishment of an independent commission to investigate the September 11 attacks. When it could no longer withstand the pressure of the families, it named former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger to head the panel, putting an expert in cover-ups in charge of the investigation. Kissinger, however, was compelled to resign because of his close business ties with Saudi Arabian and other Mideast clients, and former New Jersey Governor Thomas Kean, a Republican, replaced him.

Despite efforts by Kean and his Democratic vice chairman, former congressman Lee Hamilton, to accommodate the White House, there have been a series of bitter disputes between the commission and the Bush administration, which has refused to turn over documents or make witnesses available.

The National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States was originally scheduled to deliver a public report by May 27 of this year, but in the face of stalling tactics by the administration, the panel requested more time. Leading Republicans opposed this request, trying to force the commission to drop its probe of some of the most contentious issues and file a report that would whitewash the administration's performance.

After protracted wrangling, in which House Speaker J. Dennis Hastert threatened to block any extension, the commission and the administration ultimately agreed to a deadline of July 26.

The political considerations involved in this wrangling are demonstrated by the fact that July 26 is the first day of the Democratic National Convention. Bush campaign officials are concerned that the commission's report, which they expect will cast a harsh light on the administration's performance before and during September 11, be released well before the fall election campaign. Alternatively, Republican Senator John McCain and Democratic Senator Joseph Lieberman proposed to extend the deadline to early next year, well after the election.

More important than the deadline has been the conflict over whether Bush, Cheney and other top officials are to testify in person before the commission, for how long, and whether that testimony would be public. National Security Adviser Condoleeza Rice refused to testify in public, while the White House proposed the questioning of Bush and Cheney be limited to one hour apiece, in private, with only two members of the panel, Kean and Hamilton, permitted to participate.

Administration negotiators have treated the commission as though it were an independent counsel investigating criminal behavior by the White House, insisting on the narrowest possible access to the president and vice president. This despite the fact that Bush appointed all of its members, who are divided equally between Republicans and Democrats, with the Democrats selected entirely from conservative elements who uncritically endorse the "war on terror" and supported the invasion of Iraq.

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