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## A New Target for Advisers to Swift Vets

By GLEN JUSTICE

**W**ASHINGTON, Feb. 20 - Taking its cues from the success of last year's Swift boat veterans' campaign in the presidential race, a conservative lobbying organization has hired some of the same consultants to orchestrate attacks on one of President Bush's toughest opponents in the battle to overhaul Social Security.

The lobbying group, USA Next, which has poured millions of dollars into Republican policy battles, now says it plans to spend as much as \$10 million on commercials and other tactics assailing AARP, the powerhouse lobby opposing the private investment accounts at the center of Mr. Bush's plan.

"They are the boulder in the middle of the highway to personal savings accounts," said Charlie Jarvis, president of USA Next and former deputy under secretary of the interior in the Reagan and first Bush administrations. "We will be the dynamite that removes them."

Though it is not clear how much money USA Next has in hand for the campaign - Mr. Jarvis will not say, and the group, which claims 1.5 million members, does not have to disclose its donors - officials say that the group's annual budget was more than \$28 million last year. The group, a membership organization with no age requirements for joining, has also spent millions in recent years vigorously supporting Bush proposals on tax cuts, energy and the Medicare prescription drug plan.

So far, the groups dueling over Social Security have been relatively tame, but the plans by USA Next foreshadow what could be a steep escalation in the war to sway public opinion and members of Congress in the days ahead.

Already, AARP is holding dozens of forums on the issue, has sent mailings to its 35 million members and has spent roughly \$5 million on print advertisements in major newspapers opposing private accounts. "If we feel like gambling," some advertisements said, "we'll play the slots."

AARP is spending another \$5 million on a new print advertising campaign beginning this week.

To help set USA Next's strategy, the group has hired Chris LaCivita, an enthusiastic former marine who advised Swift Vets and P.O.W.'s for Truth, formerly known as Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, on its media campaign and helped write its potent commercials. He earned more than \$30,000 for his work, campaign finance filings show.

Officials said the group is also seeking to hire Rick Reed, a partner at Stevens Reed Curcio & Potholm, a firm that was hired by Swift Vets and was paid more than \$276,000 to do media production, records show.

For public relations, USA Next has turned to Creative Response Concepts, a Virginia firm that

represented both Swift Vets - the company was paid more than \$165,000 - and Regnery Publishing, the publisher of "Unfit for Command," a book about Senator John Kerry's military service whose co-author was John E. O'Neill, one of the primary leaders of Swift Vets.

Swift Vets captured headlines for weeks in last year's presidential race, when it spent millions of dollars on incendiary commercials attacking Senator Kerry's war record. Because federal law prohibits outside groups from coordinating with presidential campaigns during elections, the organization came under fire when it was revealed that a lawyer for Mr. Bush's campaign was also advising Swift Vets.

Mr. Bush criticized groups like Swift Vets last year, and his campaign kept its distance from the groups' attacks on Mr. Kerry. In policy battles like the one looming over Social Security, though, there is no prohibition against coordination. Several huge business lobbies, like the Business Roundtable, have become closely linked to Mr. Bush's plans for Social Security and have assembled coalitions to promote the proposals across the country.

In the case of USA Next, the group and the White House say they are not working together. Trent Duffy, a White House spokesman, said the administration was familiar with the group and has interacted with it on issues in the past, but said that it had no input on its current efforts. USA Next says it has taken pains to disassociate itself from the administration, even declining to join the large lobbying coalitions the White House is working with to pass Social Security legislation.

"We don't like asking anyone for permission to do anything," Mr. Jarvis said. "We totally support the president's boldness on Social Security, but we don't coordinate with the White House or the Hill. We know the people at the White House agree with us and we agree with them."

USA Next has been portraying AARP as a liberal organization out of step with Republican values, and is now trying to discredit its stance on Social Security. USA Next's campaign has involved appearances by its leaders, including Art Linkletter, its national chairman, on Fox News and various television programs. Its commercials are to be broadcast around the country in coming weeks.

AARP, the largest organization representing middle-aged and older Americans, is considered a major obstacle to Mr. Bush's Social Security plan in part because of its size and influence with the elderly. Though it is officially nonpartisan, and it stood beside the administration to help pass a prescription drug bill in 2003, many Republicans have long characterized the group as left-leaning.

Officials at AARP say that their organization has weathered attacks and allegations of partisanship over the years and that they were not overly concerned about the current barrage.

"I don't ever want to see someone attack us, but we haven't found they had a significant impact in the past," said David Certner, the group's director of federal affairs.

One USA Next official predicted that this time around, the campaign would be so aggressive that the White House might not want to associate with it.

"It doesn't take a rocket scientist to see that the White House doesn't want anything to do with a group that is attacking the AARP," the official said, adding, "We are not going to drag them into this mess."

At one point recently, USA Next was also talking to Terry Nelson, the former national political director

of Mr. Bush's campaign who is a partner at Dawson McCarthy Nelson Media, about working as a consultant. But Mr. Nelson was already employed by Compass, a coalition of major trade associations working with the White House to support Mr. Bush's plan, and that stopped the deal. "They wanted to maintain absolute independence," Mr. Nelson said. "They felt it was a conflict for them."

Mr. Jarvis said the group's goal is to peel off one million members from AARP, by presenting itself as a conservative, free-market alternative. He says USA Next surveys show that more than 37 percent of AARP members call themselves Republicans.

"We are going to take them on in hand-to-hand combat," said Mr. Jarvis, who is biting in his remarks about AARP, calling the group "stodgy, overweight, bureaucratic and out of touch."

Formerly known as the United Seniors Association, USA Next was founded in 1991 by Richard Viguerie, a Republican pioneer and mastermind of direct mailings, who raised millions of dollars from older Americans using solicitations that sent alarming messages about Social Security. In 1992, there were allegations that the group was used as a device to enrich other companies owned by Mr. Viguerie, drawing criticism from watchdog groups and Democratic lawmakers.

Mr. Jarvis, who joined the group in 2001, said he knew little about the allegations, and Mr. Viguerie could not be reached for comment. The group persevered and has grown in the years since then. The group spent years primarily working with direct mail before changing to a model that emphasized the use of heavy television and radio advertising to get its message across, fueled by millions of dollars from wealthy donors, trade associations and companies that share its views.

Mr. Jarvis said donors have included food, nutrition, energy and pharmaceutical companies, which have given money to support various advertising campaigns.

In previous years, and often during elections, the money was used to saturate the airwaves with advertisements. In 2002, for example, the group relied partly on money from the pharmaceutical industry to spend roughly \$9 million on television commercials and mailings supporting Republican prescription drug legislation and the lawmakers who backed it.

The group spent more money than any other interest group on House races that year, according to a study by the Wisconsin Advertising Project, and drew charges from Democrats that it was a stealth campaign by the pharmaceutical industry to support House Republicans. The group denied the allegations. Critics contended that the group was a front for corporate special interests. In a 2002 report, Public Citizen's Congress Watch denounced it, calling its leadership "hired guns."

In 2003 and 2004, USA Next was again heavily represented, spending roughly \$20 million, according to the group's own numbers. It sponsored more than 19,800 television and radio advertisements last year alone.

To USA Next, the battle lines have already been drawn, and it does not shy away from comparisons to the veterans' campaign against Senator Kerry. "It's an honor to be equated with the Swift boat guys," Mr. Jarvis said.