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Presidential campaigns let fly a barrage of combative ads

By Mark Memmott, USA TODAY

President Bush and Sen. John Kerry would have to wrestle at mid-stage during their debate Thursday night to exceed the intensity of the TV ad wars underway between their campaigns.



A scene from a new ad by RealVoices PAC, an anti-Bush group.

RealVoices

For a week now, each campaign has released about one ad per day, a frenzy of activity that far outpaces the one or two ads per week released throughout most of the campaign. Twice in the past week, the Kerry-Edwards campaign has followed a Bush-Cheney commercial or conservative group's ad with a "response ad" a few hours later.

The frenetic pace continued Wednesday with the release of two more Kerry-Edwards commercials. One says Bush "can't tell us why he went to Iraq. But it's time he tells us how he's going to fix it." The other has Kerry saying "alternative fuels and the cars of the future" could help make the USA "independent of Mideast oil in the next 10 years."

Some of the ads may not be seen by many viewers. The Associated Press reported Wednesday that the Kerry campaign has released some ads to get attention in the news media and then run them only a few times or not at all.

Also Wednesday:

- A newly formed anti-Bush organization called RealVoices PAC released the first commercial to spotlight a parent of an American soldier killed in Iraq. The mother, Cindy Sheehan of Vacaville, Calif., tearfully asks why Bush hasn't "been honest with us" about the reasons for going to war with Iraq. (**Related item:** [Ad analysis](#))
- Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, a group that opposes Kerry's presidential bid, said it will start running an ad today on national cable TV and in the closely contested states of Pennsylvania, Nevada and New Mexico. In the ad, two wives of former American prisoners of war in Vietnam say Kerry's anti-war activities in the 1970s "gave aid and comfort to the enemy."

Experts who study campaign advertising say the rapid-fire release of commercials is likely to continue until Election Day, Nov. 2.

"The elbows will only get sharper, and the messages will only come quicker," predicts Evan Tracey, chief operating officer of TNSMI/Campaign Media Analysis Group, which tracks political ads. "Now they really have to go after those remaining 'undecided' voters. The campaigns want to get them involved in the conversation, and they'll use ads to help do it."

Neither side wants to let a commercial or allegation go unchallenged, for fear of looking weak to supporters and

undecided voters.

"It's gotten so cheap and so easy over the years to produce commercials and get them out quickly that we'll only see more," says John Geer, political science professor at Vanderbilt University in Nashville. "It used to be, just a few years ago, that campaigns would respond to each other with faxes. Then it was e-mails. Now it's also ads."

The 2004 presidential race has smashed the previous record on television spending. In 2000, the Gore and Bush campaigns spent about \$200 million on TV commercials during the general election. This year, the Bush and Kerry campaigns have topped that figure and are headed above \$300 million. Their spending has mostly been to run the ads in up to 20 hotly contested states and on some national cable TV networks.

Although each campaign has produced a large number of different spots (at least 35 so far from the Kerry-Edwards campaign and 47 from the Bush-Cheney campaign), the themes are generally consistent.

"Most are restatements and repackagings of things they've said before," Geer says, "just as what they say in the debates will probably be restatements of what they've been saying on the campaign trail all along."

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