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IRS admits targeting conservatives for tax scrutiny in 2012 election

By Zachary A. Goldfarb and Karen Tumulty, May 10, 2013



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The Internal Revenue Service on Friday apologized for targeting groups with “tea party” or “patriot” in their names, confirming long-standing accusations by some conservatives that their applications for tax-exempt status were being improperly delayed and scrutinized.

Lois G. Lerner, the IRS official who oversees tax-exempt groups, said the “absolutely inappropriate” actions by “front-line people” were not driven by partisan motives.

Rather, Lerner said, they were a misguided effort to come up with an efficient means of dealing with a flood of applications from organizations seeking tax-exempt status between 2010 and 2012.

During that period, about 75 groups were selected for extra inquiry — including burdensome questionnaires and, in some cases, improper requests for the names of their donors — simply because of the words in their names, she said in a conference call with reporters.

They constituted about one-quarter of the 300 groups who were flagged for additional analysis by employees of the IRS tax-exempt unit’s main office in Cincinnati.

It was not clear whether the IRS had anticipated the firestorm that it would ignite with its disclosure. Indeed, it appeared to have happened by chance when Lerner, appearing Friday at a conference held by the American Bar Association, responded to a question about the allegations by conservative groups.

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The IRS's subsequent conference call with reporters was clumsily handled. At one point, Lerner attempted to do arithmetic on the phone and blurted out: "I'm not good at math." That admission was understandable, given that her training is as a lawyer, but it produced a quote that is likely to haunt the agency that handles the nation's tax returns.

Nor did IRS officials appear to have prepared much for the questions they would get.

"The IRS did not acknowledge the use of names as part of the process earlier because the details were not initially known to senior leadership, and [the Treasury inspector general for tax administration] has been reviewing the situation," IRS spokeswoman Michelle L. Eldridge said. "Their work is now far enough along that it was appropriate to address the issue when it came up during today's tax conference."

Of the 300 groups affected, the IRS said, 130 have had their tax-exempt status approved and 25 have withdrawn their applications.

The sensitivity arises in no small part because of the IRS's history as an agency that presidents have used to intimidate, harass and punish their political enemies. Most infamous was Richard M. Nixon, but the practice went back at least as far as Franklin D. Roosevelt. Post-Watergate reforms made the IRS more independent and were designed to insulate it from politics.

"I call on the White House to conduct a transparent, government-wide review aimed at assuring the American people that these thuggish practices are not underway at the IRS or elsewhere in the administration against anyone, regardless of their political views," Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) said. "An apology won't put this issue to rest."

One of the nation's largest tea party groups, the Tea Party Patriots, said it rejected the IRS's explanation and demanded the resignations of all officials involved. The group also called on President Obama to apologize for ignoring its concerns.

"The IRS has demonstrated the most disturbing, illegal and outrageous abuse of government power," said Jenny Beth Martin, national coordinator of Tea Party Patriots. "This deliberate targeting and harassment of tea party groups reaches a new low in illegal government activity and overreach."

Lerner said she has had no contact with Obama administration officials about the issue.

When questioned by reporters, she said the problem came to the IRS's attention only after officials read reports in the media of complaints by tea party groups that their applications for tax-exempt status were being unfairly scrutinized and delayed.

Although the IRS is part of the Treasury Department, it "is an independent enforcement agency," White House press secretary Jay Carney said. "What we know about this is of concern and we certainly find the actions taken, as reported, to be inappropriate. And we would fully expect the investigation to be thorough and for corrections to be made in a case

like this.”

Carney did not describe what contact, if any, administration officials have had with the IRS regarding the issue.

The IRS admission comes amid a debate about when political groups on both sides deserve tax-exempt status — a complex question that turns on whether the group is working mainly to support a general philosophy or a specific party or candidate.

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OpinionatedWimp wrote:

5/10/2013 10:14 AM PST

I don't understand the problem. "Tea Party" today does mean political. There is no other way to define them. They are political. What if Liberals set up organizations they called Socialist Party, and they wanted to be designated as a charity rather than a political organization so their members (thing Soros, for instance) could get a deduction from their taxes for donating to them?

Think about that, conservatives. Would you want the IRS to scrutinize them more carefully than real charities?

I can promise you that any organization that calls itself Socialist Party or Tea Party is NOT a charity. By their very name, they inspire donations with politics in mind. And those donors would not be donors long if these organizations that, by their very names, promised political favors, did not come through on the political expectations.

I'm amazed that this IRS representative is apologizing rather than trying to educate those who are giving her the inquisition on this. I have to think she's a conservative and that she didn't like what the IRS did BECAUSE she's a conservative. So, she's crucifying her own people to make Brownie points with the downtown gang.



Grant Johannessen responds:

5/10/2013 10:19 AM PST

there are organizations on the left that are just as political as those on the right, but they did not face the same scrutiny. so for you is it okay that the left does this, but not the right? how hypocritical can you be?



Mowald responds:

5/10/2013 10:21 AM PST

grant...I'm sure you had an equal amount of outrage when Bush fired 7 attorney generals for political reasons (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dismissal_of_U.S._attorneys_controversy)

or is your outrage reserved for democratic presidents?

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