

IRS 'targeting' angers conservative groups

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Disclosures that the Internal Revenue Service conducted special scrutiny of conservative groups seeking tax exemption, including groups associated with Billy Graham, led the Obama administration in May to oust the agency's acting director and to announce that the Justice Department has begun a criminal investigation.

"If you've got the IRS operating in anything less than a neutral and nonpartisan way, then that is outrageous," said Obama, who stated he would "not tolerate" any such abuse of power by the IRS.

On May 17, at the first of three congressional hearings on the matter, Steven Miller, who resigned under pressure as acting director, defended the federal tax agency as overwhelmed by "social welfare" applications for exemption. But he also acknowledged at one point, "I can say, generally, we provided horrible customer service here."

But numerous Republican lawmakers and some Democrats termed the agency's actions biased and intolerable.

A U.S. Treasury Inspector General audit released May 14 said the IRS had flagged dozens of conservative organizations that used terms such as *tea party* to determine how much political activity exceeded the limited amounts allowed the social welfare groups. The audit said "inappropriate criteria" were used.

Many of the nearly 300 organizations were bombarded with extensive questionnaires about activities. As a result, some applications languished for years, according to the *Los Angeles Times*.

Some conservative religious groups have raised questions about whether they were unfairly targeted.

Evangelist Franklin Graham said both the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association and the relief group Samaritan's Purse were audited by the IRS. In a May 14 letter to President Obama, Graham wrote that the two organizations were notified last September that the IRS would review their records for the 2010 tax year.

The IRS inquiry, he noted, occurred months after the BGEA ran ads in April 2012 supporting a North Carolina amendment that banned same-sex marriage. The BGEA also ran ads last fall urging voters to consider candidates who make decisions based on "biblical principles and support the nation of Israel."

The IRS audits were conducted on October 15 at Samaritan's Purse, an international relief organization based in Boone, North Carolina, and on October 29 at the BGEA, in Charlotte.

"I am bringing this to your attention because I believe that someone in the administration was targeting and attempting to intimidate us," wrote Graham, son of evangelist Billy Graham. "This is morally wrong and unethical—indeed some would call it 'un-American.'"

Graham said his organizations learned after the fall election that they could continue to be tax-exempt. But the audits "wasted taxpayer money" and "precious resources."

Rob Boston of Americans United for Separation of Church and State said that after last year's electoral endorsements by the Grahams, Franklin Graham has no grounds to complain.

"I disagree with the politics of the Tea Party, but it sure looks like some of these organizations have legitimate grounds for complaint," Boston said. "These groups had applied for tax-exempt status and were being subjected to additional hurdles and onerous paperwork."

The Graham ministries are already tax exempt. As a condition of keeping that exemption, they are required to refrain from intervening in elections by endorsing or opposing candidates. But the senior Graham had offered to "do all I can to help" when he met October 11 with GOP presidential candidate Mitt Romney.

The Americans United spokesman said that the Graham organizations were rightly scrutinized by the IRS. "My only regret was that the IRS didn't yank his ministries'

tax-exempt status,” Boston said.

Another conservative evangelical group, Family Talk Action, complained of slow and antagonistic replies from an IRS reviewing agent according to Christian Newswire. At the IRS’s request, Family Talk Action submitted sample radio programs, none of which were aired during the election year.

Christian Newswire reported that the IRS reviewer, in a March 19 call to the applicant group, said Family Talk Action was “not educational” because it does not present all views and that it sounded like a “partisan right-wing group.” The broadcaster’s attorney, however, said the IRS granted the request for 501(c)(4) status in a letter received nine days later.

The president and CEO of Family Talk Action is James Dobson, the retired founder of Focus on the Family ministry. “Christian ministries and others supporting the family must not be silenced or intimidated by the IRS or other branches of the government,” Dobson said. —RNS/added sources