

Tea Party Groups Emotionally Describe Harassment by IRS

Tea party and other conservative groups delivered an emotional plea for Washington to rein in government overreach on Tuesday as they told lawmakers about how the Internal Revenue Service targeted them with relentless paperwork and intrusive questions when they sought tax-exempt status.

The House Ways and Means Committee invited a collection of groups to speak about their experiences as details continue to emerge about how and why **IRS** officials in a Cincinnati, Ohio, field office began targeting conservative groups for extra scrutiny.

"This was not an accident. This is a willful act of intimidation intended to discourage a point of view," said Becky Gerritson, president of a **tea party** group in Wetumpka, Ala.

She tearfully described how she and her husband had to seek legal counsel when confronted with questionnaires about their donors, communications with legislators and their voter education activities.

"I'm not interested in scoring political points. I want to protect and preserve the America I grew up in," Gerritson said.

Multiple congressional committees and the Department of Justice have opened probes into the matter, which has become a distraction as **President Barack Obama** pursues an aggressive second-term agenda.

They are trying to determine if the IRS had a political agenda in subjecting these groups to extra scrutiny, or if workers in the tax-exempt division chose partisan criteria as a way to

cope with a flood of applications starting in 2010.

Current and former officials have defended IRS employees by saying they were given a challenging task of determining the level of political activity among 501(c)4 groups. Those social welfare groups are eligible for tax-exempt status as long as their activities are not primarily political.

Lawmakers on both sides of the aisle on Tuesday condemned the IRS and pledged to find out who was responsible for the targeting and what their motivation was.

"We have found a cancer someplace in Cincinnati ... and we have to find out what caused this," Democrat Rep. Charles Rangel of New York said during the hearing.

The leaders of tea party and **religious groups** said they were harassed by IRS officials and said the demanding questionnaires reflected an intolerance for their views.

Coalition for Life of Iowa president Sue Martinek recounted how an IRS employee asked that her group, which opposes abortion rights, agree in writing not to picket the abortion provider Planned Parenthood.

"We had done nothing wrong. We had not indicated that we would do anything but peaceably assemble and hold up signs like 'Stop abortion' and 'Pray to end abortion,'" she said.

Democrat Jim McDermott, while expressing outrage at the IRS mismanagement, challenged some of the groups' assertions that they were repressed by the IRS's treatment. He said the groups were seeking a tax exemption and the IRS had to ask questions.

"None of your organizations were kept from organizing or silenced. We are talking about whether or not the American public will subsidize your work," said McDermott. "Each of your groups is highly political."

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