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Conservative Coalition Pushes Missile Shield on Capitol Hill

By JAMES DAO

WASHINGTON, Aug. 5 — A coalition of conservative organizations, concerned that their top military priority is facing a tough battle on Capitol Hill, has begun a national lobbying campaign to pressure Congress into supporting President Bush's plans for a missile shield.

The coalition, Americans for Missile Defense, intends to collect more than one million signatures, inundate lawmakers with letters and e-mail messages and raise money for a campaign in time for the September budget debate, the organizers said.

"Missile defense, like very few other issues, has the capability to immediately unite conservatives of all stripes," said David A. Keene, the chairman of the American Conservative Union, which is helping to spearhead the coalition.

One of the coalition's goals will be to bolster Congressional Republicans who are being pressured by Democrats to trim the missile defense budget in favor of increasing spending on conventional weapons like jet fighters and warships.

Democrats have argued that President Bush's proposed \$8.3 billion missile defense budget, a \$3 billion increase from last year, is exorbitant when other basic needs, like maintaining ships and buying ammunition, are being squeezed.

They have proposed transferring nearly \$1 billion from the missile defense plan to an array of other programs requested by senior military commanders.

Another major challenge for the administration and its allies will be to convince voters that the nation needs a large increase in missile defense spending when the Soviet Union is gone and military issues are generally considered a low priority, most polls show.

Those polls also indicate that while voters tend to support the idea of building a missile shield, their support declines when they are informed that more than \$60 billion has been spent on the program in the last two decades.

Still, the coalition's organizers said they were confident that once Americans learned that the United States could not defend itself against long-range missile attacks, they would clamor for a shield.

"When you tell people we can't shoot a missile down," said Frank Gaffney Jr., the president of the Center for Security Policy and a founder of the coalition, "people start getting out of their chairs and saying, 'That's crazy.'"



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The coalition includes Americans for Tax Reform; United Seniors Association, which ran a \$2 million advertising campaign for President Bush's tax cut last spring; High Frontier, a leading advocate for missile defenses in the Reagan administration; and the Eagle Forum.

The group also has a celebrity spokesman: Jeffrey Baxter, the ponytailed former guitarist for the Doobie Brothers and Steely Dan.

"When I look at people in North Korea, Libya, Iraq and Iran, understand folks, these folks don't sit around and watch 'Seinfeld' and eat Milky Way candy bars all day," Mr. Baxter said at a recent news conference. "They have a different concept, a different culture and a different way of looking at things."

Though not a member of the coalition, a Democratic union representing defense industry workers has also begun urging its 750,000 active and retired members to push for missile defense.

"To my Democratic friends on Capitol Hill, I would urge them to forgo the short-term, tactical, partisan advantage," R. Thomas Buffenbarger, the president of the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers said recently. "Can our party really afford to be seen as weak on the defense of America's cities? I think not."

Mr. Keene declined to say how much money the coalition hoped to raise for a media campaign, but he suggested that it would be a relatively modest effort intended mainly to influence legislators.

A military industry official said that coalition leaders had begun soliciting money from military contractors. But many companies are wary of the effort lest the money come from other weapons programs.

The coalition's organizers said their first goal would be to energize several million conservative activists through newsletters and the Internet. The coalition's Web site, for