

Republican super PAC blasts Landry on crime

AG gets endorsements from eight sheriffs and DAs

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A super PAC supporting Stephen Waguespack's gubernatorial bid aired a TV ad Wednesday attacking Jeff Landry's crime-fighting credentials - and was quickly blasted by Louisiana's highest-ranked congressional Republican.

The 30-second spot from Reboot Louisiana aired statewide on the same day that Landry received the endorsements of a host of sheriffs and district attorneys.

"Louisiana's top law enforcement official, Jeff Landry, has failed us," a narrator said in the ad as ominous music played in the background. "Murder, rape, carjackings. Under Landry's watch, Louisiana is the most dangerous state in America."

Hours after the ad was released, U.S. Rep. Steve Scalise, R-Jefferson, the House majority leader, took the unusual step of urging Reboot to pull it from the airwaves, calling it divisive.

"We must learn from the mistakes of the 2015 and 2019 governor's races, where Republican infighting ultimately squandered our opportunities to win the Governor's Mansion," Scalise said.

In 2015, then-Lt. Gov. Jay Dardenne and then-Public Service Commissioner Scott Angelle beat up on then-U.S. Sen. David Vitter, the frontrunner. Vitter secured a spot in the runoff against John Bel Edwards, then a little-known state representative from Amite. But he was so badly tarnished that Edwards, a Democrat, won the election handily.

In 2019, then-U.S. Rep. Ralph Abraham and business owner Eddie Rispone attacked each other, paving the way for Edwards' reelection.

Both Landry, the state's attorney general, and Waguespack, a former business lobbyist and aide to then-Gov. Bobby Jindal, are Republicans.

Lionel Rainey, a spokesperson for Reboot, did not respond to a request on whether his group will pull the ad.

The Reboot spot marks an important milestone in this year's governor's race, more than four months before the Oct. 14 primary, because it is the first negative TV ad.

"Game on," texted one Capitol insider on Wednesday.

The attack ads provide the public's first real engagement with the race.

In the 2015 and 2019 races, such ads did not begin airing until after the three-day period when candidates qualified for the fall races. This year's qualifying dates are Aug. 8-10 for the primary.

Wednesday's developments also revealed competing game plans among leading Republicans in Louisiana on the best path to secure the most powerful political seat in Louisiana. Scalise, siding with Landry, urged a move away from the political attacks he believes lost the GOP the governorship in the last two elections, while those sour on Landry are intent on tearing apart the attorney general.

Landry has continued to maintain his front-runner status in the race by virtue of polling data, endorsements and his fundraising prowess. One recent private poll showed him leading the governor's race with 37% of the vote, followed by Democratic candidate Shawn Wilson with 30%. The other five candidates, including Waguespack, were all below 10%.

Reboot Louisiana is attacking Landry for a simple reason, political analysts said.

"The other four Republicans know that their ticket to the runoff goes through him, and they think Landry's lead today is the high-water mark for him," said Preston Robinson, the campaign manager for attorney Hunter Lundy, an independent candidate for governor. "I expect to see more of this them working to erode his support and him trying to hang on."

Scalise argued, however, that the attacks could backfire and benefit Democrats.

"As we work towards getting Louisiana back on track in 2023, Republican candidates must focus on their positive vision for our state, not instigating intraparty attacks and provoking defensive retaliation," he said. "Ultimately, this unproductive discourse only benefits those who want to keep our state on the wrong track."

By law, Reboot Louisiana cannot coordinate its activities with the Waguespack campaign. But the group is facing controversy because it has received more than \$1.5 million in contributions from secret donors outside of Louisiana.

Landry has been attempting to establish himself as the best crime-fighter in this year's governor's race.

Since April, he has been rolling out a get-tough-on-crime TV ad across the state in select media markets in which an announcer says, "Jeff Landry knows what it takes to fight crime."

The ad has led to accusations that he is pandering to White voters by showing images of Black elected officials amid snippets of crime scenes.

"Jeff Landry playing to the worst of people's fears and racism," said Gary Chambers Jr., the top vote-getting Democrat in last year's U.S. Senate race. "To only act like violent crime happens with Black people through the images in his ad is just terrible."

On Wednesday, Landry announced the endorsements of sheriffs Craig Webre, of Lafourche Parish; Julian Whittington, of Bossier Parish; Steve Prator, of Caddo Parish; and Jayson Richardson, of Desoto Parish. Landry also received the backing of district attorneys Lauren Heinen, of Jefferson Davis Parish; Phillip Terrell, of Rapides Parish; Chad Pitre, of St. Landry Parish; and Bo Duhe, who represents St. Martin, Iberia and St. Mary parishes.

"As a former police officer and sheriff's deputy, there is no better friend of law enforcement than Jeff," said Webre, the sheriff of Lafourche Parish. "He understands what it takes to keep our communities safe, and he is someone we can count on to be the law-and-order governor Louisiana needs."