

Federal shutdown took months of GOP planning

By Sheryl Gay Stolberg and Mike McIntire, New York Times

WASHINGTON – Shortly after President Obama started his second term, a loose-knit coalition of conservative activists led by former Attorney General Edwin Meese III gathered in the capital to plot strategy. Their push to repeal Obama’s health care law was going nowhere, and they desperately needed a new plan.

Out of that session, held one morning in a location the members insist on keeping secret, came a little-noticed “blueprint to defunding Obamacare,” signed by Meese and leaders of more than three dozen conservative groups.

It articulated a take-no-prisoners legislative strategy that had long percolated in conservative circles: that Republicans could derail the health care overhaul if conservative lawmakers were willing to push fellow Republicans – including their cautious leaders – into cutting off financing for the entire federal government.

“We felt very strongly at the start of this year that the House needed to use the power of the purse,” said one coalition member, Michael A. Needham, who runs Heritage Action for America, the political arm of the Heritage Foundation. “At least at Heritage Action, we felt very strongly from the start that this was a fight that we were going to pick.”

Last week the country witnessed the fallout from that strategy: a standoff that has shuttered much of the federal bureaucracy and unsettled the nation.

To many Americans, the shutdown came out of nowhere. But interviews with a wide array of conservatives show that the

confrontation that precipitated the crisis was the outgrowth of a long-running effort to undo the law, the Affordable Care Act, since its passage in 2010 – waged by a galaxy of conservative groups with more money, organized tactics and interconnections than is commonly known.

With polls showing Americans deeply divided over the law, conservatives believe that the public is behind them. Although the law's opponents say that shutting down the government was not their objective, the activists anticipated that a shutdown could occur – and worked with members of the Tea Party caucus in Congress who were excited about drawing a red line against a law they despise.

A defunding “tool kit” created in early September included talking points for the question, “What happens when you shut down the government and you are blamed for it?” The suggested answer was the one House Republicans give today: “We are simply calling to fund the entire government except for the Affordable Care Act/Obamacare.”

The current budget brinkmanship is just the latest development in a well-financed, broad-based assault on the health law, Obama's signature legislative initiative. Groups like Tea Party Patriots, Americans for Prosperity and FreedomWorks are all immersed in the fight, as is Club for Growth, a business-backed nonprofit organization. Some, like Generation Opportunity and Young Americans for Liberty, both aimed at young adults, are upstarts. Heritage Action is new, too, founded in 2010 to advance the policy prescriptions of its sister group, the Heritage Foundation.

The billionaire Koch brothers, Charles and David, have been deeply involved with financing the overall effort. A group linked to the Kochs, Freedom Partners Chamber of Commerce, disbursed more than \$200 million last year to nonprofit organizations involved in the fight. Included was \$5 million to Generation Opportunity, which created a buzz last month

with an Internet advertisement showing a menacing Uncle Sam figure popping up between a woman's legs during a gynecological exam.

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