

Tancredo invokes imprisoned agents

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U.S. Rep. Tom Tancredo, R-Colo., speaks during a campaign stop in Manchester, N.H., on Saturday, Jan. 27, 2007. (AP / Jim Cole)

Tom Tancredo is using the plight of two imprisoned Border Patrol agents to raise money for his potential presidential campaign.

In his latest campaign mailing, the Republican congressman from Littleton asks those who are "angered and outraged by the unjust imprisonment," of agents Ignacio Compean and Jose Ramos to sign a petition to President Bush asking for their pardon, and mail it back "along with a special, emergency donation," payable to Tancredo's campaign.

"Do not delay your response," Tancredo's letter urges. "I am counting on your contribution by March 31st and Agents Compean and Ramos are counting on us to help them get the justice they deserve."

Ramos and Compean were convicted of assault with a deadly weapon for shooting a Mexican drug smuggler in the buttocks as he ran away. They were sentenced to 11 and 12 years in prison, respectively.

"A person could reasonably conclude from this that somehow Tom Tancredo is going to help these Border Patrol Agents in their defense," said Massie Ritsch, spokesman for Center for Responsive Politics, a non-partisan group that tracks money in politics. It's not clear, he said, whether Tancredo will help them with money, or by becoming president and giving them a pardon.

"It's cleverly worded, but these always are," Ritsch said.

Tancredo has a presidential exploratory committee and has not made a decision about whether he will run for president.

The first quarter of the year ends March 31 and candidates will file reports after that detailing their contributions. The reports will indicate the viability of campaigns, so candidates are pushing hard to beef up money caches.

An anti-illegal immigration hardliner, Tancredo has visited Ramos and Compean in prison and has repeatedly argued that they should be freed.

Tancredo campaign spokesman Tyler Houlton said the letter makes clear the donations are for the campaign and that the agents are highlighted because "we just like highlight to everyone out there that we're punishing our border patrol agents rather than the drug smuggler."