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AP Interview: Thompson defends lobbying on behalf of family planning group, Aristide

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On the verge of joining the presidential race, Republican Fred Thompson on Friday unapologetically defended his career as a Washington lobbyist paid to influence the government on behalf of an abortion-rights group, a leftist Haitian leader and other special interests.

"Don't confuse the lawyer with the client," Thompson told The Associated Press.

The former Tennessee senator and actor discussed his eclectic career path, the war in Iraq and his ambitious plans to reshape the GOP during a 30-minute interview after introducing himself to Iowa Republicans in classic Midwest fashion: He toured the state fair with popular Sen. Charles Grassley, R-Iowa.

Any doubts that Thompson will soon enter the race were erased the moment he cuddled a baby pig and gawked at a cow carved out of butter.

"Keep your powder dry," Thompson told Iowa Republicans during a brief speech at the fair's "soapbox."

The actor on NBC's "Law & Order" plunged hesitantly into retail politics Iowa-style. Unlike Democrat Barack Obama, who a day earlier sought out state fairgoers, fried food and rides, Thompson raced through the jam-packed fair, stopping only to shake hands and chat with people who approached him.

He was formal and stiff compared to the folksy Grassley.

"Fred Thompson! Fred Thompson!" yelled a group of middle-aged fairgoers.

The TV star kept walking, until Grassley gently steered Thompson toward the group.

"Somebody likes you that much, we better go talk to them," Grassley told Thompson.

Thompson, who plays a gruff, straight-talking district attorney, ranks second in most national polls and has crept as high as third in recent surveys of Iowa caucus-goers, who cast the first ballots of the 2008 presidential campaign.

He has been raising money, issuing policy statements, courting activists and building a staff in short, running for president. But he is doing so under federal laws governing candidates who are merely "testing the waters," a loophole that has helped Thompson avoid the scrutiny of other leading presidential candidates. Aides say he will formally enter the race shortly after Labor Day.

In the AP interview, Thompson said he had no regrets over any of the lobbying jobs he took before entering the Senate in 1994, including his representation of the National Family Planning and Reproductive Health Association and deposed Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide.

"I have no apologies to make about it," he said of a 20-year lobbying career that earned him at least a \$1 million.

The abortion-rights work complicates Thompson's efforts to court social conservatives, most of whom strongly oppose abortion.

Thompson, who called himself "unabashedly pro-life" despite a sometimes inconsistent abortion record, said there is nothing wrong or unusual about a lawyer representing a client with views different from his own.

"It has nothing to do with one's political views," he said. "Lawyering is a profession and it's also a business."

The influence of lobbyists is an issue in the Democratic presidential primary, with John Edwards challenging the field to forsake donations from influence peddlers. Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton refused to accept the challenge and defended lobbyists, saying many represent average people.

Thompson echoed Clinton's defense.

"Not everybody can come to Washington and look out for themselves," he said.

Thompson's advisers initially denied that he worked for the abortion-rights group. Thompson himself told the AP that his memory was foggy.

"I clearly did some work. I proceeded after that to go to the United States Senate and oppose them on every matter that came up," he said.

Another client, Aristide, was widely denounced for endorsing "necklacing," the gruesome practice of execution where gasoline-soaked tires are thrown over a person's head and set ablaze. In September 1991, Aristide said: "The burning tire, what a beautiful tool! ... It smells good. And wherever you go, you want to smell it."

Lobbying records show that in 1991 Thompson called then White House Chief of Staff John Sununu on Aristide's behalf.

Thompson said neither he nor Sununu recall that conversation. He noted that Aristide was popularly elected and "had the support of the United States of America, George Bush. He had the support of the Organization of American States and he was deposed by a dictatorship."

Thompson said his work on behalf of Aristide was limited to a single phone call. "I never met with the client. I never met anybody on behalf of Haiti or received any compensation for it."

On Iraq, Thompson said the Bush administration was not prepared for the insurgency that arose after the invasion, and troop levels were initially too low. Still, he urged voters to be patient and allow the current strategy to work, speaking in the generalities that have marked his recent campaign appearances.

"We've got to make very, very sure that we don't run up the white flag when there's an opportunity there to prevail," Thompson said during his address to about 200 fairgoers.

He broadly outlined the principles of his campaign and potential presidency. They including making the country "stronger and tougher" to fight the war on terrorism, steering the U.S. clear of a looming economic crisis and restoring the public's faith in a government that is "totally out of touch" and incompetent.

Thompson took aim at his own party.

"Republicans have to realize that not only do we have to do things differently and better as a country, we need to do things differently and better as a party," he said, promising to appeal to independent and Democratic voters.

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