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TAXING PARIS

Joshua Glenn

HI, I'M LONDON, and I just wanted to personally thank my Republican friends in Congress for trying to get rid of that mean old inheritance tax," chirps a jewel-bedecked young blonde in a TV spot running this week on network and cable stations in Washington, D.C. "I know the government has a lot of debt, and it has to cut benefits to our soldiers," the ersatz Paris Hilton smirks. "But they're used to making sacrifices. I'm not." The commercial, sponsored by the Boston-based nonprofit United for a Fair Economy, aims to influence a Senate vote this week that could repeal the estate tax. But why parody Paris?

A little research reveals that the anti-repeal campaign, which includes print ads in states represented by moderate Democratic and Republican senators, is the culmination of years' worth of strategizing on the part of liberals about how to seize the moral high ground from politicians who've trotted out compelling figures like Chester Thigpen, a Mississippi tree farmer and grandson of slaves, to bolster their claim that the "death tax" harms farm families and small businesses.

Earlier this year, Michael Graetz and Ian Shapiro, authors of "Death by a Thousand Cuts," a behind-the-scenes account of President Bush's 2001 tax cut (which temporarily phases out the estate tax), made a brilliant suggestion: In order to convey the message that the true beneficiaries of estate tax repeal would be the loathsome scions of America's wealthiest families, pro-tax advocates should nickname the repeal the "Paris Hilton Tax Relief Act."

The phrase rapidly caught on, to the dismay of pro-repeal advocates, one of whom editorialized in the Wall Street Journal last April that "no policy that penalizes the thrifty and busts up family businesses belongs in our tax code, whatever its effects on Paris Hilton."

View the TV spot at faireconomy.org/estatetax/heiressad.