Justice Thomas's wife now lobbyist

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She started as a congressional aide in the 1980s, became a midevel Republican operative, then briefly left politics, reemerging in 2009 as founder of a tea party group before stepping down amid continued questions about whether her actions were appropriate for the spouse of a Supreme Court justice.

Now, Virginia “Ginni” Thomas, wife of Justice Clarence Thomas, has recast herself yet again, this time as the head of a firm, Liberty Consulting, which boasts on its website using her “experience and connections” to help clients “with governmental affairs efforts” and political donation strategies.

Thomas already has met with nearly half of the 99 GOP freshmen in the House and Senate, according to an e-mail she sent last week to congressional chiefs of staff, in which she branded herself “a self-appointed, ambassador to the freshmen class and an ambassador to the tea party movement.”

But her latest career incarnation is sparking controversy again.

Thomas’s role as a de facto tea party lobbyist and — until recently — as head of a tea party group that worked to defeat Democrats last November “show a new level of arrogance of just not caring that the court is being politicized and how that undermines the historic image of the Supreme Court as being above the political fray,” said Arn Pearson, a lawyer for Common Cause, the left-leaning government watchdog group.

“It raises additional questions about whether Justice Thomas can be unbiased and appear to be unbiased in cases...
dealing with the repeal of the health care reform law or corporate political spending when his wife is working to elect members of the tea party and also advocating for their policies."

Even among congressional Republicans, with whom Thomas boasts she has close ties, the reaction to the entreaties from her new firm, Liberty Consulting ranged from puzzlement to annoyance, with a senior House Republican aide who provided Thomas’s e-mail to POLITICO, blasting her for trying to “cash in” on her ties to the tea party movement.

Freshman Rep. David Schweikert (R-Ariz.) — who courted tea party activists and who was endorsed by Liberty Central, the tea party nonprofit group she headed until December — was unaware of Thomas’s new effort.

“This is the spouse of Justice Thomas?” he said, when asked by POLITICO on Tuesday about her outreach. “No, I’ve never met her. It’s not something I’ve heard about. And I hang out with a lot of freshman,” he said.

While Thomas was well-known in conservative circles as an aide to former House Majority Leader Dick Armey, as a midlevel staffer at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and at The Heritage Foundation and as the spouse of one of the court’s most conservative justices, she did not draw much attention until 2009, when she started speaking at tea party rallies.

Late that year, she established Liberty Central, a group she envisioned as forming a bridge between the conservative establishment and the anti-establishment tea party movement. It was a new role and a new measure of prominence for Thomas, and it marked the beginning of a string of headaches for her and her husband.

Legal ethicists asserted that Thomas’s role...
could compromise her husband’s impartiality, especially since the group is not required to report its donors and could have benefitted from the Supreme Court’s Citizens United ruling last year in which Justice Thomas sided with the majority in a decision that **allowed corporations**\(^{10}\) to fund campaign ads, often without disclosing their contributions.

To be sure, other federal judges have politically active spouses, including federal appeals court Judge Marjorie Rendell, whose husband is former Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell, and 9th Circuit Court of Appeals Judge Stephen Reinhardt, whose wife, Ramona Ripston, will step down this month after **decades running**\(^{11}\) the Southern California branch of the American Civil Liberties Union.

Rendell’s political committees were required to reveal all donations. But the ACLU is registered under sections of the tax code that do not require public disclosure of donors, as is Liberty Central — and Common Cause, for that matter.

But the Thomases came under particular scrutiny after **POLITICO revealed**\(^{1}\) that, while the Supreme Court was deliberating over the Citizens United case, Liberty Central **had received**\(^{12}\) a $550,000 anonymous contribution.

Common Cause, in a letter to the Justice Department, **suggested**\(^{13}\) that Thomas should have **recused himself**\(^{14}\) from the case and charged that “the complete lack of transparency of Liberty Central’s finances makes it difficult to assess the full scope of the ethics issues raised by Ms. Thomas’s role in founding and leading the group.”

In addition, in a **letter**\(^{15}\) to the Judicial Conference, Common Cause pointed out that Justice Thomas had failed to report on his disclosure filings his wife’s income over the past decade, prompting the judge to **amend**\(^{16}\) 13 years of reports to **indicate sources**\(^{17}\).
— though not amounts — of his wife’s income.

At first, it didn’t seem that the attention affected Thomas’s efforts to build Liberty Central. She assembled an impressive staff and board, while circulating among major conservative establishment donors with whom she and her husband had long, close relationships.

POLITICO has learned, for instance, that the initial $500,000 contribution came from Dallas real estate investor Harlan Crow, a major GOP donor who held an event for Liberty Central at his home a few months after the group launched. He also once gave Justice Thomas a $19,000 “Frederick Douglass Bible” as a gift and donated $150,000 to build a new wing named for Thomas on a Savannah, Ga., library that Clarence Thomas visited frequently in his youth.

But Thomas and Liberty Central ran into problems after it was revealed in October that she had left a voice mail, requesting an apology from Anita Hill, the woman who accused her husband of sexual harassment during his confirmation hearings for the high court in 1991. That prompted another surge of attention and — according to a conservative who knows Ginni Thomas and is familiar with her work at Liberty Central — it “spooked” at least one donor.

About a month later, Thomas stepped down from her leadership post at Liberty Central, and it was announced that the group was merging with another conservative nonprofit group called the Patrick Henry Center for Individual Liberty. Sources told POLITICO that Thomas essentially put Liberty Central on the block because it was struggling to raise enough money to support its big staff and high overhead.
Reached by phone on Wednesday, Thomas said she was having trouble with the signal, telling a POLITICO reporter: “I would be happy to talk with you, but I really can’t understand clearly what you’re asking, so maybe this is not a good time to talk.”

She did not respond to subsequent voice mail or e-mail messages.

In a December interview with the conservative Daily Caller, though, Thomas said she planned to spend the bulk of her time working as a consultant for Liberty Central and the Patrick Henry Center, and would “help them in any way I can think of, whether it’s lobbying on the Hill or connecting with the grass roots, or helping speak or write or fundraise.”

But lobbying records show no registrations for Thomas, Liberty Consulting, Liberty Central or the Patrick Henry Center.

When asked whether Thomas was being paid through Liberty Consulting as a consultant, Liberty Central general counsel Sarah Field did not answer directly. “She was and continues to be the founder of Liberty Central, and we look forward to working with her and with other passionate conservative activists, and that’s all there is to it,” Field said.

Thomas and her friends reject the suggestion that the call to Anita Hill precipitated Ginni Thomas’s stepping down from Liberty Central — Thomas told The Daily Caller that the story line was “laughable.” She did, however, concede that the call was “probably a mistake on my part,” adding that, if her move to an outside consulting role “has the extra benefit of helping reduce distractions, that’s fine with me.”

And Leonard Leo, an executive at the conservative Federalist Society who is a longtime friend of the Thomases and sits on Liberty Central’s board, told POLITICO in...
November that the call had no impact on Liberty Central’s fundraising or on Thomas.

“The people that were supportive of Liberty Central were supportive of her,” he said, adding, “I don’t think that they were going to pull back from her at a time when she needed support more than anything else.”

He called the controversy over the Hill call “a nothing burger” for Thomas. “This is a woman who has been through it all. There are few women in Washington who have had to put up with what she has.”

But the source who knows Thomas and is familiar with her work at Liberty Central said her continuing reinvention of herself — especially so soon after raising big money and assembling a staff for a new nonprofit — has hurt her standing in conservative circles.

“Ginni’s reputation around town is now even more of a fake entitled woman who is only here because of her husband,” the source said. “Now she has opened her own lobbying shop ... not sure how (the) conservative circle will feel when they find that out, or if they’ll care or not.”

So far, they don’t.

Roughly half a dozen aides for new members told POLITICO that their offices received handwritten meeting requests from Thomas the day after they were sworn in, as well as follow-up e-mails requesting a meeting with her — but only one of them had met with her. The rest had no plans to do so.
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