Protesters Take On Conservative Retreat

By IAN LOVETT and ERIC LICHTBLAU

RANCHO MIRAGE, Calif. — So much for a quiet little weekend getaway.

An invitation-only political retreat for rich conservatives, run out of the spotlight for years by a pair of Kansas billionaires, became a public rallying point for liberal outrage on Sunday, as 11 busloads of protesters converged on a resort in the Southern California desert.

An estimated 800 to 1,000 protesters from a spectrum of liberal groups vented their anger chiefly at Charles and David Koch, brothers who have used many millions of dollars from the energy conglomerate they run in Wichita to finance conservative causes. More than two dozen protesters, camera crews swarming around them, were arrested on trespassing charges when they went onto the resort grounds.

Organizers depicted the Koch brothers as symbols of the “unbridled corporate power” that they maintain was loosed by last year’s Supreme Court ruling in the Citizens United campaign finance case, which lifted a ban on corporate spending in elections.

“You don’t very often get a chance to be across the street from a bunch of billionaires who are scheming to do things against our democracy,” said Kathy Clearly, 63, a retired schoolteacher who arrived by bus from Los Angeles and brandished a protest sign at the rally.

The political retreat, held at the Rancho Las Palmas Resort and Spa about 130 miles east of Los Angeles, amounted to a victory lap for the Koch brothers, who helped finance conservative candidates in the fall campaigns through their company’s political action committee, which spent $2.5 million, as well as through advocacy groups like Americans for Prosperity.

Many candidates they supported, including a number backed by the Tea Party, gained election as part of the Republican takeover of the House.
The Koch brothers themselves and their guests — Representative Eric Cantor of Virginia, the House majority leader, was expected to attend — were nowhere to be seen near the protest Sunday and made no public statements. Sport utility vehicles with tinted windows shepherded attendees in and out of the complex, and two dozen Riverside County sheriff’s deputies in riot gear, their batons out, guarded the entrance to keep out anyone not registered as a guest.

Liberal groups have begun a calculated political and legal strategy in recent weeks to make the Koch brothers a target of their efforts to stop the Republican momentum.

Common Cause, a liberal advocacy group that helped organize the rally and a panel discussion nearby on the brothers’ influence, filed a petition with the Justice Department this month challenging the Citizens United ruling and arguing that Justices Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas should not have taken part in the case because they had attended the Koch brothers’ retreat as speakers and were biased. It was not known if the justices attended Sunday’s gathering.

“This is a critical moment for us,” Mary Boyle, vice president for communications at Common Cause, said in an interview. “The Koch brothers embody this ability to tap vast corporate profits and influence policies that undermine the public welfare.”

She said the Citizens United case had given the Koch brothers and others license to create “shadowy networks” of well-off but largely anonymous donors to further their agenda.

But some conservatives said they considered the protest a misguided attempt to stanch the bleeding from the November elections.

The protest was “an open assault on rights of association,” said Bradley A. Smith, a professor at Capital University Law School, whose writings on easing campaign finance restrictions have been influential among conservatives.

The Koch retreat “will harm no one,” Professor Smith said. “They are not going to do any more than talk and listen to speakers. That this alarms these protesters is an ironic commentary on their lack of faith in the American electorate and the power of their own ideas.”

Ian Lovett reported from Rancho Mirage, Calif., and Eric Lichtblau from Washington.