

AP

Online poker thriller 'Runner Runner' quickly politicized

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This undated image provided by 20th Century Fox shows actors Ben Affleck, right, and Justin Timberlake during a scene from the film "Runner, Runner." The American Gambling Association has bought ads on major websites framing the movie as a "cautionary tale" that underscores the need for Congress to legalize online poker. The Stop Predatory Gambling Foundation, a national nonprofit, sent a letter to the casino lobby Thursday, Oct. 3, 2013, calling the ads misleading and demanding that they be taken down. (AP Photo/20th Century Fox)

LAS VEGAS (AP) — The thriller "Runner Runner" starring Justin Timberlake and Ben Affleck hasn't even opened yet, but it's already in the center of the fight over online gambling regulation.

The American Gambling Association has bought ads on major websites including Twitter, Facebook and the IMDb movie database framing the film as a "cautionary tale" that points to the need for Congress to legalize online poker. The ads also pop up when people Google the movie's title.

The screenwriters have said their story of a young gambler pulled into the criminal dealings of an offshore poker site was never intended as a political parable. The movie is scheduled to open later Thursday.

The Stop Predatory Gambling Foundation, a national nonprofit, sent a letter to the casino lobby Thursday pointing to the writers' comments, and calling the ads dishonest. The group is demanding that the ads — one of which warns, "sometimes movie villains are real" — be taken down.

National director Les Bernal wrote that there was no reason to think shady offshore operations would disappear if online gambling was legalized in The U.S. and accused the casino lobby of wanting a cut of the illegal operators' business.

"Casino operators now hope to expand another key demographic to their base: young people, especially those of college age, which is why the AGA greedily seized upon 'Runner, Runner,'" Bernal wrote.

Internet poker, never fully legal, has been strictly outlawed since 2011, when the Department of Justice seized the domain names of the largest offshore sites catering to U.S. customers and blacked them out.

This crackdown, dubbed "black Friday," left poker fanatics with two options: Get dressed and visit a card room, or break the law and log into an offshore site.

Offshore gambling sites took in roughly \$2.6 billion from U.S. players last year, according to Geoff Freeman, president of the association.

More recently, the federal government softened its stance on Internet betting, and three states — New Jersey, Delaware and Nevada — legalized some form of online wagering within their borders.

The gambling lobby, which counts MGM Resorts International and Caesars Entertainment among its members, supports a federal approach. It warns that a patchwork of state laws will be unworkable for corporations and could leave gamblers exposed to dishonest dealings.

The lobby is seizing any opportunity to try to jumpstart stalled federal legislation.

"Washington is changing, and how you share your message in Washington is changing," Freeman said. "You've got to break through the clutter."

Freeman dismissed the predatory gambling group's complaint. He said online gambling empires like the one depicted in the movie often fail to verify gamblers' ages and locations, and they offer no guarantee they're playing fair.

"Runner Runner," released by Twentieth Century Fox, tells the story of a Princeton University graduate student, played by Timberlake, who believes he's been cheated after gambling away his

tuition money. He travels to Costa Rica to stick it to an online poker tycoon, played by Affleck, who then offers him a job.

Writers David Levien and Brian Koppelman, who also created the 1998 gambling classic "Rounders," told Reuters that they were surprised by the casino lobby's campaign and found it amusing.

Early reviews have been mostly negative.

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