They are the kind of ads that splash "blood money" on Mitt Romney's record or whip out Newt Gingrich's ethics "baggage" without forcing a rival candidate to take responsibility for the message.

One station manager called "shocking" the surge of hundreds of thousands of dollars of ad buys in the last six days in the West Palm Beach area alone, on pace for $1.5 million for the month.

That's double what local broadcasters expected just weeks ago, in a state where the central Interstate 4 corridor and Miami's Cuban-American community tend to grab lots of love from GOP candidates, and nearly all the pro-Gingrich spending is coming in the final, furious long weekend.

Welcome to a brutal air war fought in all 10 of the state's media markets ahead of Tuesday's GOP primary, where adding up the spending estimates by and for each candidate is a dizzying exercise that points to something like $20 million. It's the age of the unshackled super PACs.

They're the political action committees that are not officially connected to candidates, but happen to drop TV bombs on the other guy. The Supreme Court says they can spend what they want and say what they want about particular candidates, not just issues.

"What's changed this year is the Supreme Court ruling that took all the restrictions off the PACs," said General Manager Steve Wasserman at WPTV, West Palm Beach's NBC affiliate. "Spending seems to be twice as much as we anticipated."

Six days before Tuesday's primary, WPTV was running political ads from at least five organizations: the campaigns of Gingrich and Romney, super PACs working on their behalf, and a union-funded PAC that supports President Obama and wants to take some starch out of Romney.

Total spending in the market for January will be about $1.5 million, estimated John Heislman, general manager of Fox affiliate WFLX. Palm Beach County and the Treasure Coast constitute Florida's fourth-largest TV market and the nation's 38th-biggest.

"And it's compressed into a one-week window," Heislman said. "It's shocking the amount of money thrown at this market."

A $5 million donation from the wife of casino mogul Sheldon Adelson to a pro-Gingrich super PAC, Winning Our Future, set off a series of big moves last week. That was followed by word of a $6 million statewide ad buy by the PAC. The counteroffensive was on against an estimated $13 million to $15 million in spending by Romney and allies.
One Winning Our Future ad puts the words "blood money" on the screen in reference to Romney's dealings at Bain Capital with a medical testing company that paid millions for defrauding Medicare, though Romney was not personally implicated. Another spot paints him as a phony conservative, a near replica of Obama on such issues as health care.

In its own advertising, pro-Romney group Restore Our Future - whose biggest contributors include hedge fund and private equity executives - blasts Gingrich for mentioning Ronald Reagan's name 50 times in debates but concludes he's no Reagan. Another spot says Gingrich carries "a ton of baggage" such as ethics violations and consulting money from housing agency Freddie Mac.

Trailing in the polls, Rick Santorum and Ron Paul have less money to play the game, though Paul has aired program-length commercials on independent station WHDT in West Palm Beach and Miami.

Florida is a massive prize that can change the tenor of the GOP race, but even a victor can pay a heavy price in this kind of battle. PAC-fueled advertising in Florida, and in the South Carolina primary Gingrich won in stunning fashion, has increased the negative ratings of both front-runners with groups such as independent voters.

In Florida, Gingrich has called Romney "fundamentally dishonest," drawing a return volley that the former House speaker "can't tell the truth." U.S. Rep. Tom Rooney, R-Tequesta, honorary co-chairman of Romney's Florida campaign team, called it a "full contact sport" by early last week.

Negative campaigning is virtually as old as the nation itself - the campaigns of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams called each other "hideous" and "mean-spirited" - but the court's decision has released a major brake on corporate spending in an age of unprecedented reach by TV and Internet communication.

"Because this phenomenon is so novel, I'm not sure we can say where it's headed or what it means yet," said Evan Bennett, assistant professor of history at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton. "People seem to say they don't like the negative ads - or the ads in general - but the election results continue to show they are effective."

Still, even key advisers to the super PACs doing the saturation bombing lament how things got this way.

Rick Tyler, a former Gingrich spokesman and now a senior adviser to Winning Our Future, said he found it "extremely dangerous to have third parties having a greater ability to shape the message for the candidate than the candidates themselves."

He wants to see the rules change but concludes "we are stuck with it for this cycle."

In the meantime, he said, "this is a way for Newt Gingrich to compete."