

White House Paid Commentator

Written by Greg Toppo; USA Today ID678
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Seeking to build support among black families for its education reform law, the Bush administration paid a prominent black pundit \$240,000 to promote the law on his nationally syndicated television show and to urge other black journalists to do the same.

The campaign, part of an effort to promote No Child Left Behind (NCLB), required commentator Armstrong Williams "to regularly comment on NCLB during the course of his broadcasts," and to interview Education Secretary Rod Paige for TV and radio spots that aired during the show in 2004.

Williams said Thursday he understands that critics could find the arrangement unethical, but "I wanted to do it because it's something I believe in."

The top Democrat on the House Education Committee, Rep. George Miller (news, bio, voting record) of California, called the contract "a very questionable use of taxpayers' money" that is "probably illegal." He said he will ask his Republican counterpart to join him in requesting an investigation.

The contract, detailed in documents obtained by USA TODAY through a Freedom of Information Act request, also shows that the Education Department, through the Ketchum public relations firm, arranged with Williams to use contacts with America's Black Forum, a group of black broadcast journalists, "to encourage the producers to periodically address" NCLB. He persuaded radio and TV personality Steve Harvey to invite Paige onto his show twice. Harvey's manager, Rushion McDonald, confirmed the appearances.

Williams said he does not recall disclosing the contract to audiences on the air but told colleagues about it when urging them to promote NCLB.

"I respect Mr. Williams' statement that this is something he believes in," said Bob Steele, a media ethics expert at The Poynter Institute for Media Studies. "But I would suggest that his commitment to that belief is best exercised through his excellent professional work rather than through contractual obligations with outsiders who are, quite clearly, trying to influence content."

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The contract may be illegal "because Congress has prohibited propaganda," or any sort of lobbying for programs funded by the government, said Melanie Sloan of Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington. "And it's propaganda."

White House spokesman Trent Duffy said he couldn't comment because the White House is not involved in departments' contracts.

Ketchum referred questions to the Education Department, whose spokesman, John Gibbons, said the contract followed standard government procedures. He said there are no plans to continue with "similar outreach."

Williams' contract was part of a \$1 million deal with Ketchum that produced "video news releases" designed to look like news reports. The Bush administration used similar releases last year to promote its Medicare prescription drug plan, prompting a scolding from the Government Accountability Office, which called them an illegal use of taxpayers' dollars.

Williams, 45, a former aide to U.S. Supreme Court (news - web sites) Justice Clarence Thomas (news - web sites), is one of the top black conservative voices in the nation. He hosts The Right Side on TV and radio, and writes op-ed pieces for newspapers, including USA TODAY, while running a public relations firm, Graham Williams Group.

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