

Journalist took \$240,000 to push Bush education program

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The revelation that Armstrong Williams, a black conservative journalist, received \$240,000 in US government money to promote the “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) program before black audiences further demonstrates the extent to which the American media has become a vehicle for official propaganda.

Williams’ contract, with the US Department of Education and the public relations firm Ketchum, required him to comment on Bush’s education program on his nationally syndicated television and radio shows (“The Right Side”), interview Education Secretary Rod Paige, produce radio spots that aired on his show and convince other black journalists and producers to interview Paige and publicize the Bush policy. During the course of the contract, he also penned numerous opinion columns in support of the program, distributed by Tribune Media Services and appeared on various television news programs as a commentator advocating No Child Left Behind.

Last May, for example, Williams wrote in a column, “Fifty years after *Brown v. Board of Education*, we need to ensure that our children are receiving a decent education, regardless of income, background or race. This need was not lost on President Bush, who passed the bi-partisan No Child Left Behind Act. Among other things, the act holds public schools accountable for failing to properly educate our children. That constitutes an important victory because up until recently, the teachers unions would be damned if they were going to allow public school teachers to be held accountable for the job they do educating our children.”

Williams only played a part in a larger, apparently illegal, propaganda initiative run by Ketchum with money from the Department of Education. According to *USA Today*, Ketchum received a million dollars for its services. A letter from Reps. Rosa L. DeLauro (Connecticut), Sherrod Brown (Ohio) and Rahm Emanuel (Illinois), all Democrats, alleges that Ketchum engaged in a national propaganda campaign that included:

“1. A compilation of journalists and news organizations writing favorable stories on President Bush and his political party’s commitment to education;

“2. Marketing tactics to improve public perception of the NCLB and improve the image of the Department;

“3. A video news release that fails to identify the government as the source of the report, and does not make clear the person purporting to be a reporter was someone specifically hired for the promotional video.”

It should come as no surprise that the Bush administration would

resort to such measures. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that the Department of Health and Human Services has similarly promoted changes to Medicare by issuing “video news releases.” These video news releases feature actors playing the part of reporters with a script written by the government. These videos were aired by at least 40 television stations, without any indication that they had been created by the government for propaganda purposes.

The Office of Drug Control Policy made and distributed similar videos, also featuring actors playing reporters and delivering an anti-drug use message. This department’s propaganda videos were played on more than 300 news programs, reaching over 22 million households, also with no indication of their origin.

Not only is covert propaganda released by the government antidemocratic and unethical, it is also apparently illegal. *USA Today* listed a number of applicable laws:

* The Anti-Lobbying Act of 1919, which prohibits “the use of any federal funds to ‘directly or indirectly’ influence government policy through any ‘personal service, advertisement, telegram, telephone, letter, printed or written matter, or other device.’”

* The Anti-Deficiency Act of 1906, which bars government officials from spending money for any purpose not authorized by congress.

* Appropriation bills routinely contain provisions that forbid the use of federal funds for “‘publicity or propaganda purposes within the United States not heretofore authorized by Congress.’”

The GAO released a report in May that said the purpose of the above laws was to “mark the boundary” between illegally “creating news reports unbeknownst to the receiving audience” and legally “making information known to the public.”

An unapologetic statement released by the Department of Education claimed the Williams deal was a legitimate way to explain its policy to “minority parents.” The statement said: “The contract paid to provide the straightforward distribution of information about the department’s mission and N.C.L.B.—a permissible use of taxpayer funds.”

A letter from Congressman George Miller of California said, “The use of covert propaganda is unethical and illegal and is extremely dangerous to our society. For our government to participate in the undermining of public confidence in government is deeply disturbing and troublesome. Such behavior must not be allowed to continue.”

Members of both parties have called for an investigation, but no

legal action has been taken with regard to the two previously uncovered instances of covert propaganda this year. *USA Today* wrote, “Administrations have run afoul of those laws periodically, but criminal prosecution is rare.” In fact, Armstrong Williams, though admitting he used “bad judgment,” brazenly even refuses to return any of the illegally obtained \$240,000 to the government!

The Bush administration used payments to members of the media in an attempt to build support for its attacks on public education. The NCLB program penalizes schools that do not perform well on standardized tests and does little to help restore funding lost due to cuts in state and local budgets. The lay-offs of teachers, bankruptcy and closure of schools and the encroachment of profit-hungry private institutions into public education have continued apace. Among the chief victims are those living in poor black neighborhoods. Hence the administration figured that Williams, because of his skin color, would come in handy as a salesman for its program.

The administration cynically believes that with this public relations initiative, with the correct “spin,” it can erase the consequences of its reactionary policies. This media-management method has been used in the past on numerous occasions by various administrations, but it has been used with increasing frequency and blatancy by the current White House. Only 11 percent of the black vote went for Bush in the 2004 election, leading the White House to conclude that it needed a more effective public relations strategy, i.e., covert propaganda. Armstrong Williams fits into this strategy as part of a layer of highly paid conservative minority spokespeople who appear publicly in support of Republican initiatives.

Williams was formerly an aide to Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, and is considered to be this arch-conservative’s political protégé. He also worked for Senator Strom Thurmond, who ran for president in 1948 as a Dixiecrat on a segregationist program. During that campaign, Thurmond declared, “All the laws of Washington and all the bayonets of the Army cannot force the Negro into our homes, our schools, our churches.”

The exposure of Williams’ dealings by *USA Today* raises the obvious question: is he the only one? He received \$240,000 of the contract, so who got the rest of it? According to David Corn of the *Nation*, Williams let the cat out of the bag, stating, “This happens all the time ... There are others.” When asked who else had accepted money from the Bush administration, Williams replied, “I’m not going to defend myself that way.” The *Amsterdam News* quotes Williams as stating, “The syndicate can cancel my column—that is their right.... But they should be careful with this murky road. I am definitely not the only commentator or pundit that does something like this. Let me be clear on that.”

George W. Bush did not invent this strategy, but has merely taken it to new heights. In the 1980s, the State Department under Reagan paid consultants to write opinion pieces for newspapers endorsing the right-wing paramilitary Contras in Nicaragua. In addition, they fed false news reports to journalists who published the lies citing “intelligence sources.” Otto Reich, whose Office of Public Diplomacy took responsibility for organizing this admittedly illegal propaganda effort, never faced prosecution. In fact, Bush nominated him in 2001 for Assistant Secretary of State

and when he was not confirmed, appointed him Latin American envoy.

During Bill Clinton’s presidency, the White House used some of the same methods. Television networks NBC, CBS, ABC, Fox, WB and UPN all have admitted to participating in a secret long-term plan of Clinton’s Office of National Drug Control Policy. The networks agreed to pressure the producers of highly rated shows to create scripts with anti-drug messages. The scripts would then be submitted for the approval of White House officials. If approved, the networks would benefit financially.

Shows airing government-approved messages included “ER,” “Home Improvement,” “Beverly Hills 90210,” “The Wayans Bros.,” and “The Drew Carey Show” and numerous others. After this program was put in place, the number of episodes with anti-drug messages increased from 32 in one season to 109 in another. No one faced criminal prosecution in relation to this program. (See <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2000/jan2000/drug-j24.shtml>)

The domination of news gathering and distribution by a handful of conglomerates and their close collaboration with government officials represents a shift and indicates in its own way the depths of the crisis of American democracy. The mass media now more and more openly operates as a propaganda arm of the administration in Washington.

The government assigns its dirty work to characters such as Armstrong Williams. These “pundits” believe that they can get away with any position they take in front of the camera or behind the microphone. However, the deterioration of the public education system, along with all the other attacks on working people, cannot be wished away with a few articles and scripted appearances by government officials on radio and television shows.



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