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Administration Paid Commentator

Education Dept. Used Williams to Promote 'No Child' Law

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Saturday, January 8, 2005; Page A01

The Education Department paid commentator Armstrong Williams \$241,000 to help promote President Bush's No Child Left Behind law on the air, an arrangement that Williams acknowledged yesterday involved "bad judgment" on his part.

In taking the money, funneled through the Ketchum Inc. public relations firm, Williams produced and aired a commercial on his syndicated television and radio shows featuring Education Secretary Roderick R. Paige, touted Bush's education policy, and urged other programs to interview Paige. He did not disclose the contract when talking about the law during cable television appearances or writing about it in his newspaper column.

Congressional Democrats immediately accused the administration of trying to bribe journalists. Williams's newspaper syndicate, Tribune Media Services, yesterday canceled his column. And one television network dropped his program pending an investigation.

Williams, one of the most prominent black conservatives in the media, said he understands "why some people think it's unethical." Asked if people would be justified in thinking he sold his opinions to the government for cash, he said: "It's fair for someone to make that assessment."

The Education Department contract, first reported yesterday by USA Today, increased criticism of the administration's aggressive approach to news management. The department already has paid Ketchum \$700,000 to rate journalists on how positively or negatively they report on No Child Left Behind, and to produce a video release on the law that was used by some television stations as if it were real news. Other government agencies -- including the Census Bureau and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention -- also have distributed such prepackaged videos, a practice that congressional auditors have described as illegal in some cases.

The Williams incident follows a series of other media embarrassments in the past 18 months involving such high-profile outlets as the New York Times, USA Today and CBS News that have further eroded the credibility of the news business.

Rep. George Miller (Calif.), the ranking Democrat on the House education committee, said the Williams contract "is propaganda, it's unethical, it's dangerous and it's illegal" and called it "worthy of Pravda." Committee Chairman John A. Boehner (R-Ohio) agreed to join Miller in requesting an inspector general's investigation, a spokesman said.

Miller cited two Government Accountability Office opinions that the administration violated federal law with video news releases. In May, the GAO criticized the Department of Health and Human Services for using the technique to promote Medicare's new prescription drug benefit. This week, it criticized the Office of National Drug Control Policy for distributing similar reports with a contractor posing as a journalist, including a "suggested live intro" for anchors to read.

Miller, joined by House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and other Democrats, asked Bush in a letter to put an end to "covert propaganda."

In a separate letter, Senate Minority Leader Harry M. Reid (D-Nev.) and Sens. Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.) and Edward M. Kennedy (D-Mass.) asked the president to recover the money paid to Williams. "We believe that the act of bribing journalists to bias their news in favor of government policies undermines the integrity of our democracy," they wrote.

The Education Department defended the contract, which Paige knew about in advance, as a minority outreach effort through Williams's syndicated program, "The Right Side."

"Our contract was for advertising," said department spokesman John Gibbons. "Our intent was to reach out to minority audiences. Armstrong went out and talked about it -- we didn't have anything to do with that."

But the contract also required Williams to "utilize his long term working relationship" with black producers to "encourage" them to "periodically address the No Child Left Behind Act."

"Our objective was to put out basic information to audiences. . . . We certainly had no intention to do it in an underhanded way," Gibbons added. He said the department stopped putting out video news releases after the first GAO report and has no other contract involving payments to journalists. Ketchum executives declined to comment.

Alex Jones, director of Harvard's Shorenstein media center, said he is "disgusted" by what he called "the worst kind of fakery and flackery" on Williams's part. "It's propaganda masquerading as news, paid by government, truly a recipe from hell," he said. "It would make any thinking person hearing any pundit speak want to say, 'Okay, how much did they pay you to say that?'" Jones said the contract also shows that "the Bush administration neither understands nor respects the idea of an independent media."

Williams, a onetime aide to Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas, is the founder and chief executive of the Graham Williams Group, a public relations firm on Capitol Hill, and, according to his Web site, a "multi-media wonder." He frequently discusses politics on CNN and other networks and on his own radio show. "The Right Side," owned and hosted by Williams, is carried by the Lynchburg, Va.-based Liberty Channel, which is affiliated with Jerry Falwell; Sky Angel satellite network, a Christian organization; and Sinclair Broadcast Group.

His other show, "On Point" -- on which Williams interviewed Paige last year, as well as Vice President Cheney, Secretary of State Colin L. Powell and national security adviser Condoleezza Rice -- is carried by TV One, a Silver Spring-based network aimed at African Americans. Williams said he had disclosed his contract to TV One, but chief executive Johnathon Rodgers said the network knew nothing about it and has taken the show off the air while it investigates.

"As a former journalist, I'm bothered by things like this -- people being in the pay of various political groups and pressing their messages without a declaration," Rodgers said.

As a longtime supporter of No Child Left Behind, Williams said, he was receptive in the summer of 2003 when Education Department and Ketchum officials approached him about buying an ad on "The Right Side" to promote the law. Although he "agonized" over the first of two six-month contracts, he said, the law "is something I believe in."

Williams said he aired the spot twice on each "Right Side" broadcast and disclosed the contract on that show. He said he successfully urged another black television personality, Steve Harvey, to twice interview Paige.

Williams has written several newspaper columns defending administration education policy. Last January, he wrote that the No Child Left Behind law "has provided more funds to poor children than any other education bill in this country's history." In May, he wrote that the law "holds entire schools accountable."

Chicago-based Tribune Media Services dropped Williams's column yesterday, saying he had violated his contract. "Accepting compensation in any form from an entity that serves as a subject of his weekly newspaper columns creates, at the very least, the appearance of a conflict of interest," prompting readers to ask whether his opinions "have been purchased by a third party," a company statement said.

In October, Williams praised the law on CNN. He "didn't disclose to us that he was a paid spokesman, and we believe he should have," said CNN spokesman Matthew Furman. "We will obviously take that into serious consideration before booking Armstrong in the future."

Williams said he will not accept such government contracts again.

Spokesmen for other federal agencies acknowledged yesterday that they also have distributed prepackaged video news releases. Last March, the Census Bureau sent out a video release to trumpet Women's History Month. "Women are breaking the gender barrier in one field after another," contractor Karen Ryan, who produced and narrated the videos, said, citing a Census Bureau analysis. The story included comments by Sen. Susan Collins (R-Maine) and Rep. Louise M. Slaughter (D-N.Y.) and ended with the sign-off: "I'm Karen Ryan reporting."

Census officials said yesterday that they no longer distribute tapes that could be broadcast as complete news stories.

As recently as October, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shipped a video package on the flu vaccine that mimics a real news report. Spokesman Tom Skinner said he expects broadcasters to use the information as components of their own stories.

Staff writer Ceci Connolly contributed to this report.

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