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TV Host Says U.S. Paid Him to Back Policy

By DAVID D. KIRKPATRICK

Armstrong Williams, a prominent conservative commentator who was a protégé of Senator Strom Thurmond and Justice Clarence Thomas of the Supreme Court, acknowledged yesterday that he was paid \$240,000 by the Department of Education to promote its initiatives on his syndicated television program and to other African-Americans in the news media.

The disclosure of the payment set off a storm of criticism from Democrats over the Bush administration's spending to promote its policies to the public. According to a copy of the contract provided by the department yesterday, Mr. Williams, who also runs a small public relations firm and until yesterday wrote a syndicated newspaper column, was required to broadcast two one-minute advertisements in which Education Secretary Rod Paige extolled the merits of its national standards program, No Child Left Behind.

But the arrangement, which started in late 2003 and was first reported yesterday by USA Today, also stipulated that a public relations firm hired by the department would "arrange for Mr. Williams to regularly comment on N.C.L.B. during the course of his broadcasts," that "Secretary Paige and other department officials shall have the option of appearing from time to time as studio guests," and that "Mr. Williams shall utilize his long-term working relationships with 'America's Black Forum' " - an African-American news program - "to encourage the producers to periodically address the No Child Left Behind Act."

Mr. Williams, 45, apologized yesterday for blurring his roles as an independent commentator and a paid promoter. "This is a great lesson to me," he told Paul Begala of CNN, who himself has an off-air job as a paid Democratic political consultant but discloses both roles.

Mr. Williams declined to blame the department for his woes. "I can easily sit here and criticize the administration," he said. "But I got my own problems today, and that is what I am trying to deal with."

The disclosure about the arrangement coincides with a decision by the Government Accountability Office that the administration had violated a law against unauthorized federal propaganda by distributing television news segments that promoted drug enforcement policies without identifying their origin. More than 300 news programs reaching more than 22 million households broadcast the segments. The accountability office made a similar ruling in May about news segments promoting Medicare policies, and the Drug Enforcement Agency stopped distributing the segments then.

In a statement, the Department of Education said yesterday that the deal was an appropriate part of its efforts 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."

John Gibbons, a spokesman for the department, said Mr. Williams was the only broadcaster or journalist paid to promote the policy. Mr. Williams and department officials said the department's payments to its public relations contractor, Ketchum, ran to \$1 million.

House Democrats including the minority leader, Nancy Pelosi, and Representative George Miller, senior minority member of the Education and Workforce Committee, both of California, released a letter to the president suggesting "a deliberate pattern of behavior by your administration to deceive the public and the media in an effort to further your policy objectives" and urging disclosure of "all past and ongoing efforts to engage in covert propaganda."

Questioned about the arrangement, Scott McClellan, a spokesman for the president, referred reporters to the Department of Education.

In an interview, Mr. Miller called the release of the news segments and the payments to Mr. Williams part of "a very dangerous practice that deceives the public" by concealing the role of taxpayer dollars in promoting partisan policies. "Are they funding propaganda?" he asked. "Are they funding money to their friends?"

But public relations executives said that the government distribution of prepared news segments without on-air disclosures of their origin was a bipartisan practice that predated the Bush administration.

"The Clinton administration was probably even more active than the Bush administration" in distributing news segments promoting its policies, said Laurence Moskowitz, chairman and chief executive of Medialink, a major producer of promotional news segments. After the Government Accountability Office decision last spring, he said, his firm began advising government clients to disclose each tape's nature in its script.

The arrangement with Mr. Williams "is stupid, it is unseemly, and it is tacky," said Jonah Goldberg, a contributing editor at the conservative National Review.

The National Association of Black Journalists criticized the administration and Mr. Williams alike yesterday, calling on newspapers that use his column and television stations that use his commentary to "drop him immediately."

"I thought we in the media were supposed to be watchdogs, not lapdogs," Bryan Monroe, an official of the black journalists' group and an assistant vice president at Knight Ridder, said in the statement.

In an interview, Mr. Williams said his mistake was thinking like a businessman, without worrying enough about journalistic ethics. He began his career in politics as an aide to Mr. Thurmond of South Carolina. He entered the media business, he said, only after he became known for publicly defending Justice Thomas, his former boss at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, during his stormy confirmation hearings.

After that, he said, he continued to operate a small public relations firm, Graham Williams, with his business partner Stedman Graham, who eventually became known as the partner of Oprah Winfrey and left the business. Aside from the Department of Education, Mr. Williams said, his clients were all private businesses. With about five employees, he said, his company's revenue runs to about \$300,000 a year at most, and last year ended in a loss.

But then he also began writing his newspaper column, syndicated by Tribune Media Services, which dropped him yesterday. He said about 50 papers ran the column. He also began broadcasting a syndicated conservative talk radio show that eventually faded away. And more recently he began a syndicated conservative television show, "The Right Side," and another series for a fledgling African-American cable channel, TV One.

Mr. Armstrong said his news show ran on cable channels including Dr. Jerry Falwell's Liberty Television, Sky Angel television, the Christian Television Network and a handful of local stations. Yesterday, Mr. Williams was counting the lessons learned. "I have realized, you know what? I am part of this media elite club, and I have to be more responsible."