

P53299

January 11, 2005  
BY FACSIMILE - (410) 966-4304

Social Security Administration  
Jonathan Cantor  
FOIA Office, Room 3-A-6 Operations  
6401 Security Boulevard  
Baltimore, MD 21235  
telephone number: (410) 966-6645  
fax number: (410) 966-4304

RE: Freedom of Information Act Request And Request for Expedited Processing

Dear Mr. Cantor:

This letter constitutes an expedited request under the Freedom of Information Act ("FOIA"), 5 U.S.C. § 552, and is submitted on behalf of Ryan Singel.

I am seeking the following agency records (including but not limited to electronic records):

1. Any contracts or subcontracts or monetary negotiations with public relations firms, media consulting firms, journalists, media outlets or commentators from 2001 to the present
2. Any documents, correspondence or materials related to any such contracts, including but not limited to discussions of the legality or propriety of such contracts, reports from contracting firms, and media clips (whether video, oral or written) created by the firm or submitted as proof of its work.
3. Any documents, correspondence or materials about such contracts or the use of outside contractors to further the department's message, regulations or legislation affecting the department
4. Any documents or correspondence related to the Ketchum public relations firm

#### Request for Expedited Processing

This request warrants expedited processing because it pertains to a matter about which there is an "urgency to inform the public about an actual or alleged federal government activity," and the request is made by "a person primarily engaged in disseminating information." 6 CFR § 5.5(d)(1)(ii).

On January 7, 2005, the USA Today reported<sup>1</sup> that " 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

---

<sup>1</sup> USA Today, January 7, 2005, A1, Education Dept. paid commentator to promote law, Greg Toppo

There is a particular urgency for the public to obtain information about the government's use of public relations firms to manipulate media coverage of government objectives. Such contracts draw into question whether the government is misusing taxpayer funds to manipulate citizens and the media, which is intended to be a watchdog of the government. As both independent observers and members of Congress have noted, such contracts may also violate the law.

The records requested would reveal the manner and extent to which the Social Security Administration is involved in such activities and clearly meet the standard for expedited processing.

Further, as I explain below in support of my request for "news media" treatment, as a journalist I am "primarily engaged in disseminating information."

**Request for "News Media" Fee Status**

I am a full-time contributing writer for Wired News ([www.wired.com](http://www.wired.com)), a daily news site with a readership in the millions.

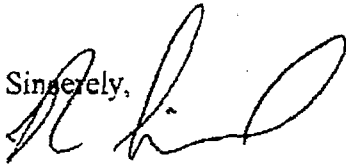
Based on my status as a "news media" requester, I am entitled to receive the requested records with only duplication fees assessed under 6 CFR § 5.11.

Further, because disclosure of this information will "contribute significantly to public understanding of the operations or activities of the government," as described above, any duplication fees should be waived.

Thank you for your consideration of this request. As applicable Department regulations provide, I will anticipate your determination on my request for expedited processing within ten (10) calendar days.

Should you have any questions about this request, please call me at \_\_\_\_\_ contact me via email at \_\_\_\_\_

Under penalty of perjury, I hereby affirm that the foregoing is true and correct to the best of my knowledge.

Sincerely,  


Ryan Singel

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 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.

[...]

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."

The revelation was front page news the next day in the New York Times, Washington Post, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution and Los Angeles Times<sup>2</sup>.

Furthermore, there are suggestions that this is a widespread occurrence within the government.

In 2004, the Government Accountability Office criticized the Department of Health and Human Services for producing advertisements designed to tout Medicare reforms in advance of the election.

In 2005, the GAO sharply criticized a White House anti-drug abuse ad campaign that used ads that appeared to be news reports, but were, in fact, paid announcements in the disguise of journalism.

---

<sup>2</sup> *The Washington Post*, January 8, 2005 A1, Administration Paid Commentator; Education Dept. Used Williams to Promote 'No Child' Law, Howard Kurtz; *The New York Times*, January 8, 2005 A1, TV Host Says U.S. Paid Him To Back Policy, David D. Kirkpatrick; *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, January 8, 2005 1A, U.S. paid TV commentator to push policy, Eunice Mosocco; *LA Times*, January 8, 2005 A1, Tax-Funded White House PR Effort Questioned, Tom Hamburger, Nick Anderson and T. Christian Miller.)