Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

January 7, 2005

The President
The White House
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We are writing about the Administration's use of taxpayer dollars to influence public opinion. Recent investigations have revealed at least three separate instances in which the Administration has used covert propaganda to shape public perceptions.

Today, *USA Today* reported that "[s]eeking 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." According to the article, the Department of Education paid Armstrong Williams, a conservative political commentator, to promote the No Child Left Behind Act during his broadcast television and radio shows and to encourage other prominent black journalists to take similar actions.[1]

Yesterday, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported that video news releases concerning the dangers of marijuana, involving actors pretending to be reporters and distributed by the Office of National Drug Control Policy, were illegal "covert propaganda."[2]

Last May, GAO made a similar finding regarding video news releases that also involved fake reporters and were distributed by the Department of Health and Human Services in support of the Medicare Modernization Act.[3]

Covert propaganda to influence public opinion is unethical and dangerous. It violates fundamental principles of open government and it distorts the free press and the public's right to know. And it is illegal. GAO found that both sets of video news releases violated prohibitions against publicity and propaganda because they did not identify the federal government as the source of the fabricated news reports.

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[1] *White House Paid Commentator to Promote Law*, USA Today, (Jan. 7, 2005).

[2] U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Office of National Drug Control Policy — Video News Release* (Jan. 4, 2005) (GAO/B-303495).

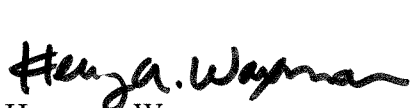
[3] U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services — Video News Releases* (May 19, 2004) (GAO/B-302710).

We are concerned that these three incidents, while serious and disturbing on their own, may not be isolated incidents but rather a deliberate pattern of behavior by your Administration to deceive the public and the media in an effort to further your policy objectives.

We ask you to publicly renounce the use of covert propaganda to influence public opinion. And in furtherance of official congressional oversight, we request that you direct all department and agency heads to immediately provide to us all past and ongoing efforts to engage in covert propaganda, whether through contracts with commentators, the distribution of video news releases, or other means.

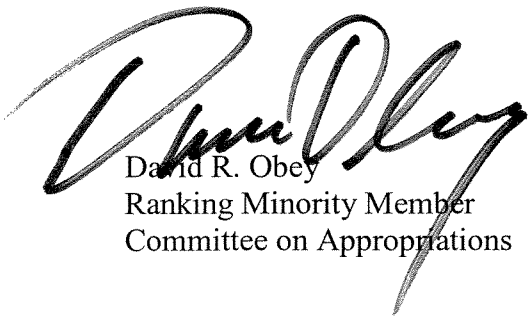
Sincerely,

Nancy Pelosi
Democratic Leader

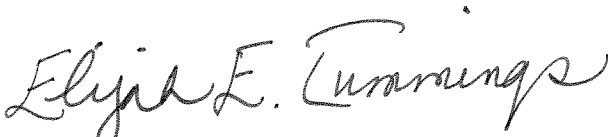


Henry A. Waxman
Ranking Minority Member
Committee on Government Reform

George Miller
Ranking Minority Member
Committee on Education and the Workforce



David R. Obey
Ranking Minority Member
Committee on Appropriations



Elijah E. Cummings
Ranking Minority Member
Subcommittee on Criminal Justice, Drug Policy and Human Resources
Committee on Government Reform