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Bush Administration Spent Over $1.6 Billion on Advertising and Public Relations Contracts Since 2003, GAO Finds

WASHINGTON, DC — Today Rep. Henry A. Waxman, Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi, Rep. George Miller, Rep. Elijah E. Cummings, and other senior Democrats released a new Government Accountability Office report finding that the Bush Administration spent more than $1.6 billion in public relations and media contracts in a two and a half year span.

"The government is spending over a billion dollars per year on PR and advertising," said Rep. Waxman. "Careful oversight of this spending is essential given the track record of the Bush Administration, which has used taxpayer dollars to fund covert propaganda within the United States."

"No amount of money will successfully sell the Bush Administration's failed policies, from the war in Iraq, to its disastrous energy policy, to its confusing Medicare prescription drug benefits," said Democratic Leader Pelosi. "The American people know the Bush Administration is on the wrong track and the White House PR machine won't change that fact."

"The extent of the Bush Administration's propaganda effort is unprecedented and disturbing," said Rep. Miller. "The fact is that after all the spin, the American people are stuck with high prescription drug prices, high gas prices, and high college costs. This report raises serious questions about this Administration's priorities for the country and I would hope that my colleagues on both sides of the aisle would agree that changes need to be made to reign in the President's propaganda machine."

"It is unbelievable that the Administration, on several occasions, has used limited taxpayer dollars to secretly promote initiatives such as No Child Left Behind, while underfunding money for our schools, books, technology, and after school programs," said Rep. Elijah E. Cummings.

Democrats requested that GAO conduct the study after evidence emerged last year that the Bush Administration had commissioned "covert propaganda" from public relations firms. Several federal departments had hired firms to develop "video news releases" to promote department initiatives which appeared to television viewers to be independent newscasts. Other revelations that triggered the GAO report included the disclosure that the Department of Education paid conservative commentator Armstrong Williams to promote the No Child Left Behind Act on the radio and in his columns.

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To conduct its study, GAO obtained information from seven federal departments on all public relations, advertising, and media contracts during 2003, 2004, and the first two quarters of 2005. GAO found that during that time:

- The Administration spent $1.6 billion on contracts with advertising agencies ($1.4 billion), public relations firms ($197 million), and media organizations and individual members of the media ($15 million).

- The Department of Defense spent the most on media contracts, with contracts worth $1.1 billion. The Department of Health and Human Services spent more than $300 million on these contracts, the Department of Treasury spent $152 million, and the Department of Homeland Security spent $24 million during this period.

The Administration's public relations and advertising contracts spanned a wide range of issues, including Administration priorities like "marriage-related research initiatives," message development presenting "the Army's strategic perspective in the Global War on Terrorism," and an FDA contract to warn the public of the consequences and potential danger of importing prescription drugs from other nations.

The detailed list of contracts provided by the Air Force demonstrates the wide range of public relations and advertising contracting entered into by the federal government. This list included $179 million for a recruitment advertising campaign, more than $35,000 for promotional materials for a golf program, including "golf towel with embroidered design and golf tees with imprint," and $10, 212 for "prize giveaways, such as cruises to Mediterranean and to Canada/New England."

GAO's accounting of the Bush Administration's public relations and advertising contracts is limited. GAO surveyed only seven of the 15 cabinet-level departments, relied on self-reported information from the agencies, and did not include subcontracts, task orders on existing contracts, or public relations work done by government employees.

For a fact sheet on the GAO report and the report itself, visit www.democrats.reform.house.gov