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# Media Notes

Howard Kurtz



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## The Condi Conundrum

By *Howard Kurtz*  
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Condi and Colin may be off the reservation.

Or is it somehow unfair to raise that question when it comes to affirmative action?

There was an interesting twist over the weekend as newspapers put together their tick-tocks on how Bush decided to have his Justice Department oppose the University of Michigan's affirmative action plan.

[The Washington Post](#) reported Friday that Condoleezza Rice had taken a "rare central role" on a domestic issue as the president decided to intervene in the Supreme Court case. She is, after all, not just the national security adviser, not just very close to the Bush family, not just a former provost of Stanford University, but black.

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Who wouldn't want to know what she thinks about affirmative action? If Bush is proclaiming his support for college "diversity" – even as he insists that only "race-neutral" remedies are acceptable for achieving that diversity – then surely it's news whether or not his closest African-American aide thinks it's a bunch of jive.

The next day, though, Rice put out a statement saying that while she supports Bush's decision, she believes race can be used as a factor in college admissions.

The earlier story, [The Post](#) said, "had the effect of associating a respected African American adviser to Bush with a decision that has been criticized by many black leaders. Rice reportedly was angry about the article in part because she believed it had been written only because she is black."

That may be true, to a point, but the fact that Rice felt strongly enough to lobby her boss on an issue having nothing to do with Afghanistan or Iraq was also newsworthy.

(Colin Powell, meanwhile, said during the 2000 campaign that he thinks affirmative action "is still necessary" and that he hoped the University of Michigan would win this case.)

Rice, who has said she benefited from Stanford's effort to recruit minorities, seemed to be engaging in a bit of damage control, telling American Urban Radio Networks that she agrees with affirmative action "if it does not lead to quotas and if people work hard at it to look at the total individual."

Which, as we see it, means she doesn't really agree with Bush's stance, since he rules out race as a factor and she says it can be at least a limited factor.

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This is one heckuva thorny issue.

If colleges don't consider race at all, some of them would end up looking like the Republican side of the House. (Number of blacks: zero.)

If colleges give minorities extra admissions points, as Michigan does, they are unfairly penalizing some white applicants who otherwise would have gotten in. This is true even if it's just one factor, as Rice suggests.

What's really unfair here is that the child of a black millionaire would get an advantage for admission, while the child of a struggling white truck driver would not. That's why some advocates say the extra points should be based on income, not race, or colleges should follow the Texas-Florida model of automatically admitting the top 10 percent or 20 percent of each high school.

On "Meet the Press," Rice declared that "the impression left by The Washington Post story was one that was actually at odds with what I believe" – that race can be a factor in admissions (even though she backs Bush's position).

"It's also at odds with the president's brief," Tim Russert said.

No, said Rice, "the president's brief is silent on this matter" – which makes you wonder what all the fuss over Bush's "opposition" to race-based remedies is about.

Powell was more direct, saying on "Face the Nation" that "I'm a strong believer in affirmative action" and admitting that the Bush brief "doesn't go to the underlying issue."

However they try to square the circle, it's clear that Rice and Powell still see some need for some degree of affirmative action, even if their boss does not.

[Slate's](#) Mickey Kaus takes issue with a [New York Times](#) analysis by Linda Greenhouse that says, among other things, that the actual administration brief didn't go as far as Bush's televised rhetoric suggested, but by then the media's attention had wandered.

Kaus skewers "the opinion Justice Greenhouse has issued on the announcement of Bush's affirmative action brief, which she sneeringly praises as 'impressive even by the standards of a White House unusually skilled at spin control.'

"Greenhouse produces a 'lawyer . . . with Supreme Court experience' who wonders 'whether the theatrics of the past few days would prove counter-

productive' to the Bush position ('theatrics' being Greenhouse's word). But can you imagine how the press would have responded if Bush had filed his brief without issuing a public statement? 'Stealth filing . . . midnight brief . . . filed in the dead of night to avoid publicity,' etc., etc. If Bush had failed to file a brief at all, he'd have been accused of cravenly ducking a politically explosive decision. Most of the 'theatrics,' in other words, were demanded by the press and public, which rightly recognized an important case when it came down the chute."

Anyone who doubts the conservative unhappiness with the White House stance should read Howard Fineman's Newsweek piece on the role of Ted Olson, the solicitor general:

"Olson was a problem. Here was a conservative purist, to whom preferences of any kind were abhorrent and who wanted to advise the Supreme Court to reverse the landmark Bakke case of 1978, which held that race can be 'a factor' in college admissions. But Bush had decided to move surgically, making only a relatively narrow (though still potentially far-reaching) attack on the U of M procedures.

"Olson's shop could draft the briefs, but final decisions would rest with the White House counsel, Alberto Gonzales. Olson was furious: it was a slap at the powers of the SG (who would normally run the show) and, in his view, a cave-in. 'If you want to be SG, that's fine!' he barked at Gonzales. Indeed, [NEWSWEEK](#) learned, Olson even considered quitting.

"Olson on a rampage could hurt the administration – big time – with its conservative base. So Cheney made his call. He told Olson that he was sympathetic to his position, but that wasn't what The Boss wanted to say. Time to get onboard. Cheney didn't have to add – but Olson apparently understood – the rest of the message: shut up. The SG did so, signing the brief but otherwise staying out of sight while other hard-core conservatives were in full cry."

Talk about burying the lead! Check out these tail-end passages from Tucker Carlson's piece in the [New York Times Magazine](#):

"Howard Dean isn't surprised by the Trent Lott scandal. The Republican Party is fundamentally hostile to blacks and Hispanics, he says, riddled as it is with 'institutional racism.' It's also full of liars.

"I find the Republican Party pretty bankrupt intellectually,' Dean says, adding that he doesn't read anything written by conservatives. Nothing? 'No.' Are there any conservatives who are intellectually honest? 'I don't think so. I can't think

of any.' He sounds cheery as he says this.

"Dean's tone has changed a few hours later when he calls back and leaves this message: 'Tucker, this is Howard Dean. I was talking to some staff folks after I got off the phone with you, and they were worried about my term "institutional racism." Probably that might have been not the right word to use. I was a little nervous now that the word "racist" was such a charged word that it might have been better if I talked about "intolerance" and "divisiveness." If you could give me a call back, that would be great.'

"Damn. The consultants. They've gotten to him already. Dean hasn't even had a chance to say anything truly outrageous, and already the campaign professionals, sworn enemies of colorful language, are telling him to tone it down, advising him to dilute his essential Howard Dean-ness. Fire them, I thought. Send them back to Washington before it's too late."

Fat chance.

The Wall Street Journal sees the White House engaging in a little budgetary slight of hand:

"From spending for black colleges to the Securities and Exchange Commission, President Bush is taking advantage of the budget impasse in Congress to put his own funding choices in the most benevolent light.

"Since much of the government is operating without permanent appropriations for this year, the White House enjoys a rare window in which it can pick whatever spending baseline it wants as a point of comparison for its coming 2004 budget, which is due out next month.

"In a series of recent press releases and radio addresses, the administration has seized the chance to maximize credit for popular spending increases that it knows will prove far less generous after lawmakers complete work on spending bills for fiscal 2003, which ends Sept. 30.

"For example, on the eve of Monday's holiday honoring slain civil-rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., the White House announced that Mr. Bush will propose a 5% increase in government aid in 2004 for colleges and graduate institutions serving African-American and Hispanic students. The Education Department said the timing of the announcement was the same as a similar one last year. But the release appeared geared to defuse criticism – and disputes in the administration itself – over the president's recent stance against the University of Michigan's use of race as a factor in admissions."

Nice PR if you can get it.

The [Los Angeles Times](#) looks at the right's agenda:

"Emboldened by the Republican control of Congress, conservative activists are predicting long-awaited legislative victories this year on several contentious social issues, including a ban on late-term abortions and approval of federal judges sympathetic to their causes.

"Fueling their hopes are recent actions by President Bush, who has been tending his political base among social conservatives with assiduous care – even at a time when economic and foreign policy issues are dominant.

"This week, Bush decided to join with anti-affirmative action forces in a major Supreme Court case. He proclaimed today as National Sanctity of Human Life Day, just as the capital prepares for massive demonstrations Wednesday that mark the 30th anniversary of the Supreme Court's landmark decision establishing a constitutional right to abortion. Last week, Bush renominated a controversial conservative judge, Charles W. Pickering Sr., to a federal appeals court.

"Some moderate Republicans fear that their party's efforts to broaden its base and appeal to swing voters could be undermined if Congress overreaches on divisive social issues, especially abortion. . . .

"But others argue that the party cannot afford to give short shrift to social issues dear to conservatives. This is especially true among religious conservatives, whose agenda was thwarted during Bush's first two years by the Democrat-controlled Senate."

The [New York Times](#), though, sees dangers for Dubya:

"President Bush's decision to take strong conservative positions on an array of foreign, economic and social policy issues is drawing warnings from moderates within his party that he could alienate the centrist voters he needs for his re-election.

"As he prepares for the second half of his term – he was sworn in two years ago today – Mr. Bush hardly lets a day go by without pleasing his supporters on the Republican right. He has maintained a hard line against Iraq even as much of the rest of the world urges him to slow down. He has proposed a new round of tax cuts that pleasantly surprised even ardent supply-siders. He has denounced quotas in affirmative action programs. On Wednesday, the 30th

anniversary of the Roe v. Wade decision, he plans to make a supportive statement to demonstrators rallying against abortion. . . .

"But with each conservative principle he emphasizes, Mr. Bush risks alienating crucial constituencies in the center, like working women, suburbanites and Hispanics, that he needs if he is to maintain a governing coalition for his party and firm up his own electoral prospects, analysts and activists in both parties said."

Here's a story we thought we'd never read, from [USA Today](#):

"For the first time in 40 years, most Americans do not think their federal income tax is too high, according to a USA TODAY/CNN/Gallup Poll this month.

"The poll suggests that President Bush might not be able to count on resentment of taxes to help pass his economic stimulus plan, which relies largely on tax cuts.

"Half of those surveyed said the federal tax they pay is about right. That's a remarkable turnaround from two years ago, shortly after Bush took office, when two in three said it was too high."

[The New Republic](#) kinda sorta liked Gary Hart's return to the airwaves:

"Possible presidential candidate Gary Hart--yes, that Gary Hart--turned up on ABC's 'This Week' Sunday. And, boy, did he look old.

"Okay, that's not quite fair. By most reasonable criteria, Gary Hart doesn't look old at all. His face has few age lines, his eyes still have that characteristic twinkle. The only thing that suggests his true age, 66, is his very gray hair. And even that might not be so noticeable were it not for the fact that he has so much of it, particularly by sexagenarian standards.

"But on Hart's head, the gray hair is very conspicuous, even arresting. Youth has always been central to his political persona, after all. He was the first of his generation--of liberals who had cut their teeth on the 1972 George McGovern campaign--with serious presidential aspirations; in 1984 he nearly won the nomination by running as the man of 'new ideas' against the ossified Democratic establishment and its standard-bearer, Walter Mondale. With his mop of wavy dark hair and chiseled facial features, Hart looked the part. And he acted it, too, hanging out with the likes of Warren Beatty before a little too much youthful exuberance--namely, getting caught cheating on his wife--

undermined his presidential prospects for good.

"But if the interview is any indication, Hart's improbable bid for the White House is slightly less ludicrous than it seems. First, Hart capably demonstrated how he might just neutralize the infidelity issue. Then he showed flashes of the qualities that made him such an appealing candidate back in the 1980s."

The [Weekly Standard](#) is starting to have qualms about politics, relatively speaking:

"The evidence is everywhere that nepotism is becoming a major issue in American life. If no one in Washington is calling it a major problem, that's only because to describe it as such would insult virtually the entire leadership of both major parties. We are in the absurd situation where our current president is the son of the president-before-last, the other son of the president-before-last is mentioned as our possible next Republican president, and the pack of possible future Democratic presidents is led by the wife of our last president.

"Imagine that some Rip van Winkle had fallen asleep twenty years ago and been told that our Republican governors included a Taft and a Romney, and that among our newer Republican Senators were Chafee, Dole, Sununu, and Murkowski. And, of course, to assemble a full archive of Democratic congressional legacies--the various Pelosis and Kennedys and Udalls and Bentsens--would require a new hard drive for your computer. . . .

"It is Gov. Frank Murkowski's paternal instincts more than his hardball ones that have landed him (and the GOP) in hot water in Alaska.

"Murkowski, it will be recalled, was elected governor last fall, and in that capacity was permitted by law to fill the Senate seat he had vacated. He chose his daughter Lisa, who is unpopular (partly for her abortion stand) among the very conservatives who were her father's base. In fact, she stands a chance next year of losing a hitherto invincible Republican seat. Dad Murkowski must be proud, but Governor Murkowski surely doesn't need this headache."

But it's a self-inflicted Excedrin headache.

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