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ONE HUNDRED NINTH CONGRESS

# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT REFORM

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April 6, 2005

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INDEPENDENT

The Honorable David M. Walker  
Comptroller General  
U.S. General Accounting Office  
441 G Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20548

Dear Mr. Walker:

I am writing to request that GAO assess the costs of President Bush's "60 Stops in 60 Days" tour and related Administration efforts designed to support the President's efforts to privatize Social Security.

In recent months, questions have been raised about the Administration's use of taxpayer funds for propaganda purposes. Two GAO reports have found that the Administration violated the law by disseminating fabricated video news releases on Medicare and drug policy.<sup>1</sup> Other investigative reports have revealed that taxpayer dollars have been spent to hire journalists to promote Administration initiatives, such as the contract with commentator Armstrong Williams to tout the No Child Left Behind Act.<sup>2</sup> Another investigation revealed that TV news stations across the nation have — without disclosure to the public — aired countless video news reports fabricated by the Administration on topics from women in Afghanistan to the activities of the Department of Agriculture.<sup>3</sup>

Now serious questions are being raised about whether the Administration is inappropriately using federal resources to rally political support for his Social Security proposals. A report that I released in February presented evidence that the Social Security Administration,

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<sup>1</sup> 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); U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Office of National Drug Control Policy — Video News Release* (Jan. 4, 2005) (GAO/B-303495).

<sup>2</sup> *White House Paid Commentator to Promote Law*, USA Today (Jan. 7, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> *Under Bush, A New Age of Prepackaged News*, New York Times (Mar. 13, 2005).

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contrary to its history of nonpartisanship, has been systematically rewriting its communications to the public to build support for the President's Social Security proposals.<sup>4</sup>

President Bush's "60 Stops in 60 Days" tour and related Administration efforts to promote the President's efforts to privatize Social Security raise similar questions. Recent reports have indicated that individuals with views that differ from the President's are excluded from the events, while the speakers at these events appear to be restricted to supporters of the President's plan.<sup>5</sup> These are the hallmarks of campaign events, not government-funded public meetings. At one recent event, the President threatened "a political price" for those who disagree with the Administration about the need to overhaul the Social Security program.<sup>6</sup>

No one disputes the right of the President to make his policy recommendations known to Congress and the public. Yet there is a vital line between legitimately informing the public, as the President did in his State of the Union address, and commandeering the vast resources of the federal government to fund a political campaign for Social Security privatization. Informing the public is the President's responsibility; using taxpayer resources to mount a sophisticated propaganda and lobbying campaign is an abuse of the President's high office.

I believe GAO can play a significant role in helping members of Congress and the public assess whether the Bush Administration has crossed the line from education to propaganda and lobbying. Currently, no one in Congress or the public knows the full extent and cost of the federal resources being devoted to promoting the President's Social Security agenda. This is basic factual information that is essential to an evaluation of the legality and appropriateness of the Administration's actions. Yet it is currently unavailable to members and the public.

For these reasons, I am requesting that GAO:

1. Identify the official events since January 1, 2005, at which the President and other Administration officials have promoted the President's Social Security agenda. To date, the Administration has apparently held more than 100 of these events with speakers including President Bush, Vice President Cheney, Treasury Secretary Snow, Labor Secretary Chao, Commerce Secretary Gutierrez, and other Administration officials.
2. Assess the costs to the taxpayer of these events, including the costs of any travel associated with the events.

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<sup>4</sup> Minority Staff, House Committee on Government Reform, *Politicization of the Social Security Administration* (Jan. 2005).

<sup>5</sup> *Three Are Told to Leave Bush Town Meeting*, Washington Post (Mar. 29, 2005)

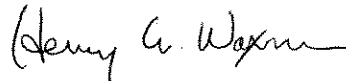
<sup>6</sup> *Bush Invites Critics to Show, Tell*, Los Angeles Times (Mar. 31, 2005).

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3. Identify other federal initiatives pursued since January 1, 2005, to promote the President's Social Security agenda, such as the creation of a Social Security Information Center within the Department of Treasury.
4. Assess the costs to the taxpayer of these initiatives.

Thank you for your attention to this request. My staff contact on this issue is Anna Laitin at (202) 225-5051.

Sincerely,



Henry A. Waxman  
Ranking Minority Member