

Bush education secretary calls teachers union a “terrorist organization”

Patrick Martin
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The top education official in the Bush administration said he regarded the largest US teachers union as a “terrorist organization,” in remarks to a delegation of state governors visiting the White House Monday.

Secretary of Education Roderick Paige made the comment in the course of a discussion on the implementation of the No Child Left Behind law, which the Bush administration is using to undermine public education and promote private schools.

The National Education Association, with 2.7 million members, initially supported No Child Left Behind, the product of a bipartisan agreement in 2001 between the Bush White House and leading House and Senate Democrats, headed by Senator Edward Kennedy. The legislation mandated regular testing of students in both elementary and secondary schools, with the threat of financial penalties and even outright closure for schools that failed to meet federal standards.

The NEA and the smaller American Federation of Teachers subsequently turned against the bill when it became clear that the standards were rigged to designate thousands of public schools as failing, in order to force them to close and push their students out of the public education system and into private schools. The unions accused the Bush administration of reneging on promises to provide sufficient funding to meet the goals mandated for local school districts.

These charges have been taken up by the Democratic presidential candidates, including Senator John Kerry, the frontrunner and likely nominee, and Senator John Edwards, Kerry’s last major challenger, both of whom voted for No Child Left Behind but now denounce it.

The education “reform” bill served two purposes for the Bush administration: in the short run, it was to co-opt a traditional Democratic issue and allow Bush to campaign for reelection as the “education president.” In

the long term, Republican Party operatives assured their Christian fundamentalist base, No Child Left Behind would lead to branding public schools as failures and open the way to state funding of private religious schools.

Paige’s remark reveals the frustration of these political calculations, as No Child Left Behind is now widely opposed by educators and has been a target of political attack during the presidential election campaign. Even state legislatures controlled by Republicans—in Utah and Virginia—have objected to the federal standards as arbitrary and impossible to meet with the resources available.

The education secretary was speaking only four days after he was compelled to announce a relaxation of the testing requirements for schools in areas heavily populated by immigrants, whose children have greater difficulty meeting English proficiency standards. It was a significant climb-down by the administration, which had insisted that such waivers would not be granted.

In a written statement issued a few hours after his meeting with the governors, Paige apologized for his remark, but in language nearly as provocative. He called his statement “an inappropriate choice of words to describe the obstructionist scare tactics the NEA’s Washington lobbyists have employed against No Child Left Behind’s historic education reforms.”

Paige’s comment is not merely a “gaffe.” His slip of the tongue reveals the mindset of a right-wing, anti-working class government which regards domestic political opposition as illegitimate. Bush has declared himself a “war president” commanding an administration which is waging a “war on terror.” In that context, branding opponents as terrorists—i.e., the equivalent of Al Qaeda—has the most ominous implications. It suggests that the Bush administration is

preparing to use the same methods of repression and violence at home that it is carrying out abroad.

The response from the teachers' union to Paige's comment, however, was typically flaccid. NEA President Reg Weaver said, "It is morally repugnant to equate those who teach America's children with terrorists. Yet this is the kind of rhetoric we have come to expect from this administration whenever one challenges its worldview."

Weaver did not call for Paige's dismissal or resignation, concluding only that the NEA's disagreement with the education law "is no cause for the administration or anybody else to call anybody a name."

The Democratic governors who witnessed the verbal assault were likewise restrained in their reaction. Edward Rendell of Pennsylvania said of Paige's remark, "I'm not sure he was being entirely serious, but it was probably inappropriate." Bob Holden of Missouri said the governors were startled by Paige's outburst, adding, "He is, I guess, very concerned about anybody that questions what the president is doing." Governor Jennifer Granholm of Michigan said, "I know he wasn't calling teachers terrorists, but to even suggest that the organization they belong to was a terrorist organization is uncalled for."



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