WASHINGTON, Jan. 17 — Condoleezza Rice, President Bush's national security adviser and the highest ranking African-American in the White House, said today that she believed universities should be able to use race as a factor in admissions policies, a view that may put her at odds with Mr. Bush.

Ms. Rice's statement came one day after the president had his lawyers file a pair of briefs with the Supreme Court arguing that the University of Michigan's admissions programs designed to increase minority enrollment in both the undergraduate and law schools were actually quota systems in disguise and were unconstitutional.

Ms. Rice, in a rare public foray into domestic issues, said today in the statement that she supported the president both in his views about the need for diversity and his stand on the Michigan cases.

"I agree with the president's position, which emphasizes the need for diversity and recognizes the continued legacy of racial prejudice and the need to fight it," she said.

But in the final line of her statement she added, "I believe that while race-neutral means are preferable, it is appropriate to use race as one factor among others in achieving a diverse student body."

Mr. Bush and his lawyers refused to say if race could ever be a factor.

The admissions program at the law school does use race as a factor, but as one of many in assessing an candidate's application. Bush administration lawyers said that the law school program operated as a quota.

Ms. Rice, who was provost of Stanford University for six years, was one of the handful of aides who participated in discussions with Mr. Bush before he decided to file the briefs with the Supreme Court on Thursday night.

Mr. Bush sided with three white students who said they were unfairly denied admission to the undergraduate and law schools in favor of less-qualified minority applicants. The president said that he favored the goal of diversity but that universities should rely on race-neutral methods to increase minority enrollment.
Administration officials said that Ms. Rice was troubled by an article in The Washington Post today quoting unnamed officials that depicted her as one of the "prime movers" behind Mr. Bush's decision, a report that suggested the president had the full support of an important African-American aide. One official said that she was so dismayed by the article that she discussed it with Mr. Bush and they agreed she should issue a clarifying statement.

Ms. Rice, a White House official said, remained an opponent of racial quotas, and Mr. Bush opposed the two Michigan programs after deeming them the equivalent of quotas.

Civil rights advocates gleefully seized on Ms. Rice's statement as evidence that black government officials close to Mr. Bush are uncomfortable with his stance on affirmative action.

Ralph Neas, the president of People for the American Way, said it was excellent news that Ms. Rice believed race should be used as a factor in university admissions.