The Bush administration sacrificed truth for political gain this week when it filed legal briefs urging the Supreme Court to overturn the University of Michigan's use of racial "quotas" in admissions. Michigan's admissions system does not use racial quotas. But the administration has clearly decided the best way to appease its right-wing supporters without alienating the rest of the country is to disguise its anti-affirmative-action agenda as an anti-quota crusade. The administration should start leveling with the American people about race, and it should stop trying to turn back the clock.

President Bush said this week that Michigan's policies were fatally flawed because they "amount to a quota system that unfairly rewards or penalizes prospective students based solely on their race." The administration has fixed on the word "quota" because it has long been political kryptonite. Pollsters know that many Americans who say they favor "affirmative action" flip sides when asked about "racial quotas."

But "quota" has a specific meaning, and the University of Michigan's admissions policies do not meet it. In University of California Regents v. Bakke, the landmark 1978 case that upheld affirmative action while striking down quotas, the Supreme Court invalidated a medical school admissions system that set aside 16 "special admissions" places in the class, which invariably went to minorities. At Michigan, in both undergraduate and law school admissions, all applicants apply for all positions in the class. The university gives applicants extra points for belonging to an underrepresented racial or ethnic minority. But it also gives diversity points to applicants who come from an underrepresented part of the state, like Michigan's largely white Upper Peninsula, scholarship athletes, and men in the nursing program.

The administration has suggested that the University of Michigan's program is unusually flawed. In fact, most highly selective educational institutions rely on similar admissions criteria. If the Supreme Court holds Michigan's procedures to be unconstitutional, it will force an overhaul in admissions policies nationwide.

Mr. Bush insisted this week that he strongly supports "racial diversity in higher education." But it does no good to support having underrepresented minorities in selective colleges and graduate schools without providing mechanisms that will get them there.
President Bush singled out for praise programs in California, Texas and Florida that guarantee college admission to graduates in the top 10 percent of every high school. But since those programs apply only at the high school level, they cannot ensure minority access to graduate and professional schools, a key issue in the Michigan case. They are also flawed because they rely on segregated elementary and secondary education to integrate higher education.

In its briefs, the Bush administration carefully avoided saying whether it supports Bakke. If the administration's quarrel is truly only with quotas, it should urge the Supreme Court to reaffirm that important case, and to uphold admissions plans that use race as only one diversity factor among many.