The Bush administration waded in last week to one of the most divisive issues facing modern American society, backing opponents of affirmative action in a landmark Supreme Court case that could force US universities to stop using race as a factor in deciding who to admit.

“We must be vigilant in responding to prejudice whenever we find it, yet, as we work to address the wrongs of racial prejudice, we must not use means that create another wrong, and thus perpetuate the divisions,” President Bush said, as he gave White House lawyers the go-ahead to file papers urging the Supreme Court to rule that the University of Michigan acted unconstitutionally in denying places to three white students.

But the administration is publicly split over the issue. The secretary of state, Colin Powell, voiced disagreement with the White House’s role in supporting the case. He said in a television interview that while he believes President Bush is “committed to diversity”, he took a different view.

His statement also put him at odds with the administration’s other high-profile black official, the national security advisor, Condoleezza Rice.

The President is eager to court ethnic-minority voters, not least after Senator Trent Lott last month spoke nostalgically of former Senator Strom Thurmond’s segregationist 1948 presidential campaign. But the issue of affirmative action could yet prove a new source of conflict.

The Michigan case challenges the university’s policy, also adopted by numerous institutions, of awarding extra points to black, Hispanic and Native American candidates in its scoring system for entry. Potential students must score at least 100 out of 150, and while full marks in high-school SAT test, for example, bring 12 points, membership of an ethnic minority qualifies for 20.

Jennifer Gratz and Patrick Hamacher say they were denied admission as under-graduates in 1995 because of the race-scoring policy, while Barbara Grutter argues that the law school, which takes ethnic background into account but does not explicitly score applicants, did the same to her in 1997. Their actions have sparked the fiercest debate on affirmative action in a decade.

“At their core, the Michigan policies amount to a quota system that unfairly rewards or penalises prospective students based solely on their race,” Mr Bush said in a brief public appearance. They were, he went on, “impossible to square with the constitution”, which “makes it clear that people of all races must be treated equally under the law”.

The university says its policies are “essential to assembling a diverse student body, which is critical to the quality of the educational experience the students receive”. 

The Legal Defence Fund of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People, which is representing a group of minority students on the university’s behalf argues that “race-conscious admissions policies are justified to remedy both past and present discrimination at the university”.

Fixed quotas have been outlawed since 1978, after the case of Bakke vs the University of California Regents. Allan Bakke, a white aspiring doctor, claimed he had been passed over for entry to medical school despite higher grades than successful black applicants. The Supreme Court ruled against quotas, saying Bakke had been denied the constitutional guarantee of equal protection under the law - but arguably delivered a bigger victory to supporters of affirmative action, ruling that the broader goal of classroom diversity was “a compelling state interest”.

Wary of the political hazards, the president’s chief strategist, Karl Rove, had been understood to be urging for a more palatable stance, but Ted Olson, the solicitor-general, a staunch opponent of any role for race in admissions, appeared to have won out.

Republican opponents of affirmative action have long sought to forge a third stance, called “affirmative access”, promoting policies they claim would lead to diversity without specifically targeting race.

As governor of Texas, Mr Bush supported a court case that forced the state’s public universities to abandon ethnicity-based admissions, but he argued that his alternative strategy-making the top10% of all high-school students eligible for admission – served black and Hispanic students better, since many public high schools are mainly non-white.

“If you look back at the history, the result was a slight increase in diversity,” said Taylor Griffin, a White House spokesman. “The President has a record of believing that the strength of our nation derives in large part from diversity”.

But David Gersten, executive director of the centre for Equal Opportunity, which opposes affirmative action, said any equivocal position by the administration would please nobody.

Diversity, Mr Gersten said, “is a worthy goal, but not one that can be proven to supersede equal rights and individual opportunity”, while affirmative action, he argued, often ended up harming those it was intended to serve.

Even President Clinton, an energetic supporter of affirmative action, was forced to review the policy in 1997 after a school board in New Jersey, facing budget cutbacks fired a white teacher, Sharon Taxman, rather than her black colleague and made the racial basis for the decision explicit.

Bill Lann Lee, Mr Clinton’s assistant attorney general for civil rights and now a San Francisco lawyer, said there was a general acceptance of the procedures Mr Bush opposed.

A very significant brief was filed by General Motors in the Michigan cases. It lays out the case why GM, which employs many graduates of the university of Michigan, would like to see the diversity-admissions programme continue: because GM and other companies have become global enterprises,” he said. “Diversity equips American students to deal with people from different backgrounds, cultures and races – to be better business people”.

Others point out that one crucial factor in university admissions – the extra points awarded to those whose parents attended it – overwhelmingly favours white applicants.

Senator John Edwards, a Democratic contender for the 2004 presidential nomination, recently called for “legacy preferences” to be abolished. Such a move may be unlikely: the preferences carry favour with wealthy alumni who are big donors.

The debate grew more charged this month when a report from the American Association of University Professors said affirmative action had failed to improve the educational prospects of ethnic minority students. “thirty years of affirmative action, largely as preferential admissions, has failed, and it has failed at individual institutions,” wrote Edward Renner, a former professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, who conducted the study.
A. GLOBAL UNDERSTANDING

1. This news item focuses on: (choose the statement that suits best)

   a- a minor spat* on an educational issue.
   b- a contention* on racial segregation.
   c- A heated public polemic on race-driven admission policies in some universities.π
   d- Minority students going on strike because of what they see as an unfair system.

2. Match the following verbs:

| a. back | §1 | 1. ban |
| b. address | §2 | 2. refuse |
| c. voice | §3 | 3. trigger |
| d. court | §5 | 4. take precedence over |
| e. deny | §7 | 5. correct |
| f. spark | §6 | 6. express |
| g. outlaw | §11 | 7. attract |
| h. supersede | §16 | 8. support |

3. Say whether the following statements are RIGHT OR WRONG:

   a- the White House (the President, his cabinet and advisors) has a clear position on the issue.
   b- President Bush addressed the nation on the problem of racial prejudice.
   c- He sides with the University of Michigan in a law suit against it.
   d- All the members of the Bush administration share the same opinion on the issue.
   e- This issue could be politically unpopular for the president.
   f- University admission criteria are biased.
   g- Jennifer Gratz & Patrick Hamacher were allegedly denied admission because of their colour.
   h- The incident went unnoticed.
   i- The systems of quotas has always been applied legally and no precedent has been set before.
   j- The President’s advisor and the solicitor general are of the same mind.
   k- For some Republicans, promoting policies should not be race-driven.
   l- According to David Gersten, the Bush administration is in an uncomfortable position.
   m- GM, the big car maker, doesn’t back “affirmative action”.
   n- Thanks to the “legacy preference” system, a student is awarded extra points and can be allowed entry in any university except those his/her parents attended.
   o- According to a study, “affirmative action” has achieved its goals.

B. DETAILED UNDERSTANDING:

1. Choose the definition that suits best:

   - backing opponents of affirmative action §1:
     a. backing off from the rivals of affirmative action.
     b. disdaining the pro affirmative action
     c. supporting the adversaries of affirmative action
     d. denouncing the enemies of affirmative action
- and thus perpetuate the divisions §2:
  a- and therefore perpetuate
  b- and above all perpetuate
  c- and at least perpetuate
  d- and almost perpetuate

- put him at odds with… §4:
  a. engendered dissension between him and…
  b. made him strange to…
  c. brought him closer to…
  d. helped him appreciate…

- at their core the Michigan policies…§8:
  a- their consequences
  b- their most essential part
  c- their top
  d- their hidden parts

- to square with …§8:
  a- to comply with
  b- to defend
  c- to be incompatible with
  d- improve

- on the university’s behalf §10:
  a- representing half of the university students
  b- acting for the majority of university students.
  c- representing the university without official delegation
  d- representing the university because deputised to do so

- a compelling state interest §11:
  a- a superfluous state interest
  b- an avoidable state interest
  c- a mandatory state interest
  d- an unaffordable state interest

- political hazards §12:
  a- political rivalries
  b- political uncertainties
  c- political stability
  d- political mischance

- a palatable stance §12:
  a- a plausible idea
  b- an acceptable position
  c- a humane reaction
  d- a firm response
- overwhelmingly §20:

a- almost exclusively
b- secretly
c- openly
d- shyly

2. Fill in the blank with the appropriate preposition from the box:
to / in / in / in / at / of / on / in / for / of / in / on / over / by.

The controversy ..........affirmative action takes .......... particularly bitter proportions .......... the trenches. "resentful white men" blame this policy ..........robbing them .......... promotions and other opportunities. And while many minorities and women support affirmative action, a growing number say that its benefits are outweighed by its side effect: the perception that their success is unearned. Judging simply .......... the results, the playing field would appear .......... still be tilted very much .......... favour .......... white men. Overall, minorities and women are .......... vastly lower paying jobs and still face active discrimination .......... some sectors. ..... this point ...... the nation's history, does affirmative action make things better or worse? The debate rages ......