WASHINGTON, Jan. 15 — President Bush offered a sweeping denunciation of direct preferences for racial minorities in university admissions today and said his administration would file a brief with the Supreme Court urging that the affirmative action admissions policies at the University of Michigan be declared unconstitutional.

"I strongly support diversity of all kinds, including racial diversity in higher education," Mr. Bush said in a nationally televised address. "But the method used by the University of Michigan to achieve this important goal is fundamentally flawed. At their core, the Michigan policies amount to a quota system that unfairly rewards or penalizes prospective students based solely on their race."

In putting himself on the side of three white students who assert they were denied admission to the undergraduate and law programs in favor of less qualified minority candidates, Mr. Bush moved to the front lines of the nation's debate about affirmative action programs.

The president said that while he believed there should be a way to ensure more minority students in the nation's universities, programs like the ones at Michigan "create another wrong and thus perpetuate our divisions."

Such programs, he said, "are divisive, unfair and impossible to square with our Constitution."

In a sign of the careful political calibration of his words, the president repeatedly used the term "quotas" to describe Michigan's admissions policy, a word that inevitably draws strong opposition in polls.

Despite the broad-gauge language in Mr. Bush's address this evening, the possible scope of the brief that the administration will file with the Supreme Court on Thursday remained unclear.

Shortly after the president spoke, a senior White House official involved in drafting the brief told reporters it would be "very narrowly tailored" to address only the Michigan programs.

The official, who spoke on the condition he not be identified, said the administration's brief would not call for the court to overturn the holding in the landmark 1978 Bakke decision that race could be a factor in university admissions.

When the official was asked whether Mr. Bush and the administration believed race may ever be a factor, he declined to reply directly and said, "We need not address in this case the outer limits of what is constitutional."

The president's statement pleased many in his party's conservative base. Yet it also comes at a time that the Republican Party has been in turmoil over racially charged statements by Senator Trent Lott of Mississippi, which may have set back the party's efforts to increase its appeal to minority voters. Democrats were quick tonight to denounce the administration's position on affirmative action and portray it as a true measure of Mr. Bush and his party.
Senator Tom Daschle of South Dakota, the minority leader, was one of several Democrats who said the president's approach to the University of Michigan should be viewed as a litmus test of the administration's commitment to civil rights.

Senator John Kerry, a Massachusetts Democrat who is seeking the presidency, said, "This administration continues a disturbing pattern of using the rhetoric of diversity as a substitute for real progress on a civil rights agenda."

Ari Fleischer, the president's spokesman, dismissed any idea that the White House deliberations over how to confront the issue had been influenced by politics.

"The president is dismissive of any notion involving the political implications of a decision on a matter as important and sensitive as something involving race and admission to college campuses, which is how Americans get their opportunity to make it in our country," Mr. Fleischer said at the White House briefing.

While Mr. Bush's remarks were strongly criticized by liberals and Democrats, many conservatives were elated. However, there was still uncertainty among some longtime opponents of affirmative action, who worried that his administration's brief might not go far enough.

Linda Chavez, the president of the Center for Equal Opportunity, a group that works to end all racial preferences, said she applauded the president's decision. But Ms. Chavez said it would be a disappointment if Mr. Bush left the door open to even the slightest possibility that it would be acceptable to consider race in university admissions.

"The whole point of this case is that we'd like to see the door shut on taking race into account," Ms. Chavez said. "If the court leaves any door open on taking race into account, you'll just have more and more creative attempts from university administrators to accomplish what they have been doing for years."

Ms. Chavez said that for the administration to maintain its credibility on the issue of racial preferences with its conservative supporters, it would have to say directly that race may not be taken into account because there is no compelling state interest in promoting diversity. In the Michigan cases, the court is set to decide whether there is a compelling state interest in a diverse student body to justify preferences for minority students.

The court will also have to decide whether the Michigan programs were narrowly tailored to meet that goal and did not go too far.

Mr. Bush said today that the programs were unconstitutional because they relied too heavily on race. In Michigan's undergraduate school, minority candidates were given extra points in a formula to decide whether they could be admitted.

The law school simply counted race as as one factor among many. But Bush administration lawyers say it operated as a quota system because in practice it resulted in the incoming class always having a similar percentage of minority students.

Lee C. Bollinger, who was the president of the University of Michigan when the litigation began, said tonight that the president was incorrect in his characterization of the programs.

Mr. Bollinger, who is now the president of Columbia University, said in a telephone interview that Mr. Bush "is simply incorrect" and that "these are not quotas."

He said Mr. Bush was using that label "to try and isolate a program and make it seem exceptional, but the fact of the matter is that Michigan's program is virtually the same as those of selective universities across the
country."

In his remarks, Mr. Bush suggested that it was acceptable to take race into account in what has sometimes been called the original definition of affirmative action, simply reaching out to minorities to apprise them of opportunities.

"University officials have the responsibility and the obligation to make a serious, effective effort to reach out to students from all walks of life without falling back on unconstitutional quotas," Mr. Bush said. "Schools should seek diversity by considering a broad range of factors in admissions, including a student's potential and life experiences."

He also cited a program in Texas, where he was governor, in which students in the top 10 percent of each high school class are guaranteed admission to the University of Texas.

The senior White House official who spoke to reporters said the president believed that, "we need to try, if at all possible, to promote the broadest amount of diversity without taking race into account."

The official said, "If you reach out in a serious way to all parts of the community, if you look at different geographic areas, you look at different socioeconomic factors, you really start to look at people's potential, you look at their life experiences, that you can achieve diversity. The resident wants educators, wants school officials to move in this direction."

In its brief, the university argues that with strictly race-blind admissions, it could not possibly build the "critical mass" of minority students necessary to make diversity more than an empty promise.

Despite strong recruitment efforts, the university said, the law school received only 35 applications from minority students at the top range of undergraduate grades and law board scores that account for nearly all admissions. In contrast, the school received 900 applications from white students in that range.

Even with a "race-blind lottery," the brief said, "the percentage of African-American students enrolled would almost certainly fall below 3 percent."

The court is set to hear arguments in the case in April and is expected to issue a decision this spring.