

**PUBLIC POLICY AND ADVOCACY**

**Commentary**

**APA CEMA 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Invitational Breakfast: Social Justice and Psychology – Keynote Address by Congressman Bobby L. Rush (D–IL), Presented at the APA Committee on Ethnic Minority Affairs' 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Breakfast on August 24, 2002**



**Congressman Bobby L. Rush (D–IL)**

Thank you for inviting me to speak at today's breakfast. With the upcoming anniversary of the attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, I have reflected on that day, and the incredible spirit shown by the American people, and national leaders. And I have often thought of the incredible transformation of all of us from White, Black, Hispanic, and Asian into simply Americans.

Almost immediately after the events of September 11, we were reminded by President Bush and leaders nationwide, that a sense of reverence for the ideals which make our country great must be an essential part of any response to those acts that seek to diminish that very greatness.

Unfortunately, we saw with this transformation, an intense hatred for who many perceived as the enemy. And I was saddened that many in Congress followed suit with legislation like the PATRIOT Act, which fails to support the incredibly important idea touted by the Administration.

Among the PATRIOT Act's most troubling provisions are those which create extreme detention authority with regard to non-citizens; expand the ability of the government to conduct secret searches; grant the FBI broad access to sensitive business records about individuals without having to show any evidence of a crime; as well as a number of provisions which allow unfettered investigations of American citizens for vague and unspecified national security and "intelligence" purposes.

All of these factors makes one think of the incredible psychological effects that such legislation must have on those targeted under it. But I am saddened to say that this is not new. Unfortunately for millions in this country, the terror of racial profiling, the terror of neglect, and terror of all forms of racial discrimination have had devastating and decades-long effects.

Indeed, those effects are numerous, but familiar.

As someone who lived under J Edgar Hoover's reign of terror, I have a personal appreciation of just how constant suspicion and surveillance can affect the mind-set of the person targeted by government sanctioned aggression.

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As someone who travels the streets of this city, I understand the effects of racial profiling – or what many simply call driving, walking, and just living while Black or Hispanic. Indeed, I understand the effect that all forms of police misconduct have on the psyche of a young man or woman simply going to – and from school, work, or a social event.

As someone who has seen the effects of drugs on communities of color, I understand how a young African American man convicted of selling 5 grams of crack cocaine, sees no fairness or hope in a society where his supplier, or his suburban counterpart must sell 500 grams of powder cocaine before getting the same sentence.

As someone who grew up in Chicago – THE model of failed public housing in this country, I understand why an ongoing study by the University of Connecticut identified depression as the third most prevalent problem in public housing.

And therefore, I understand the struggle of the single mother – who helps make up 85 percent of the heads of households in Chicago public housing. Indeed, I understand the incredible physical and emotional barriers that she faces in trying to make it out of the public housing system.

As a Representative of a predominantly Black district, I understand that behind the suffering of the abused and neglected **individual**, there is a centuries old legacy of systematic oppression of entire **groups** of people of color in this country, and an equally systematic legacy of repression of our **collective** struggle for self empowerment.

And as a Member of Congress who sits on the Commerce Committee, which has jurisdiction over health care issues – I am not at all surprised at a recent study by the Institute of Medicine which found that even after adjustment for socioeconomic differences and other healthcare access related factors, racial and ethnic disparities remain pervasive in the African American community.

It is my personal charge as a Member of Congress to deal with these problems. And in doing so, I am required to look at entire groups of individuals. Be they women as a group, men as a group, children as a group, or minorities as a group. As mental health professionals, I understand that you are often required only to engage in one on one dealings with your patients or subjects. Many of you can simply hide in your offices, dealing only with those **individuals** seated in front of you. But you have chosen not to do so –for that, I salute you.

I am also encouraged by the APA's participation in the United Nation's World Conference Against Racism, and its unwavering commitment to not only attacking the individual problems of those in your care, but in attacking the collective psychological problems associated with systematic racism. It is unfortunate that America saw no official

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representation in that conference. And it is unfortunate that the current administration failed to recognize what psychologists, and indeed the rest of the world recognized. Namely, that the oppressor has just as much invested in the creation of a truly free open, and just society as the oppressed. In keeping with this idea, I am reminded of this quote by a famous Brazilian educator and philosopher.

“Oppression desecrates the sanctity of life. It corrodes the souls of both oppressed and oppressors. The oppressed are reduced to things. The oppressors are dehumanized by equating their own humanity with the ownership and use which include other human beings.”

As long as the assault on the psyche, self image, and self esteem of minorities in this country continues, we will remain limited to temporary flashes of color-blind patriotism and will never become the true beacon of justice and racial equality that we often project to the world.

Again, I thank you for inviting me to speak before you today, and I encourage you to continue in your charge, and together we will overcome.