WHO IS BOBBY RUSH?

HE MORPHED FROM
BOY SCOUT TO BLACK PANTHER
TO CONGRESSMAN AND
MINISTER—BUT CLAIMS HE
NEVER REALLY CHANGED
Bobby Rush has two vivid memories about the death four years ago of his son Huey Rich. He remembers the screams of one of his daughters, and he recalls his feelings of utter powerlessness. Rich, 29 years old and a recent cosmetology school graduate, was gunned down in a robbery by two men on a South Side street in mid-October 1999. He died four days later at Christ Hospital and Medical Center in Oak Lawn, the victim of multiple organ failure brought on by massive blood loss. Rush, the congressman from Illinois’ 1st District, says that when the doctor attending his son told the family that it was all over, “My daughter Faron fell to the floor and just screamed: ‘Daddy! Daddy! Can you help, Daddy? Don’t let them take him away.’” “That was the most impotent moment of my life,” says Rush, 56, “because what can you say? You know you don’t
Bobby Rush, congressman and minister, was deputy defense minister of the Illinois Black Panther Party (opposite page, at left) when its headquarters were raided by police in 1969 and two party members slain.
by killing leaders and members.

Rush says he was well aware that his leadership role with the Chicago Panthers was dangerous. "During this whole period of my involvement with the Panther Party, I just did not believe I would live to be 30 years old," he said. "I mean, I was starting on a life of serving my country as a U.S. Army officer."

Although he was killed in action, he said, "I believe that the Panthers were the right thing to do. They were the right thing because they were fighting for justice and freedom."

"In Chicago, we fought against police brutality, discrimination, and racial inequality," he said. "We were fighting for the rights of all people, not just African Americans."
deserved pension.

Rush brushes aside such criticisms, and he bristles when asked about the Hayes race. Hayes, he says, failed to show the sort of leadership black Chicagoans needed when the community was facing its political base apart after Washington's death. The occupants of the 1st District seat had a special obligation to exert leadership and influence by bringing funding community leaders together to try to work out their differences.

Then he adds impatiently, "Oh, come on, this is politics, you know! If Hayes had announced this was going to be [his] last term, things would have been different. But there was no public announcement that this was going to be his last term. And if it hadn't been for the House bank problem, or the check-cashing problem, he might still be [in there]—a reference to the 1992 controversy over House members, including Hayes, who repeatedly overdrawn their accounts at the House bank.

What his critics really are angry about, says Rush, is that "strategically, I knocked them. Hayes and his pension are what they're saying as a rationale for why they didn't [run]. Because when I did it, when I announced, I was a long shot. How many people take long shots nowadays?"

Rush's appreciation for long shots doesn't extend to those taken against him. Following Rush's unsuccessful race against Richard M. Daley for mayor in 1991, State Sen. Barack Obama mounted a long-shot challenge to Rush and lost, overwhelmingly, in the 2006 primary election. Even though Rush says he is "not vindicating or pursuing a vendetta," his behavior toward Obama ever since has looked suspiciously punitive. Indeed, his decision this year to sign on as campaign chairman for Blair Hull, the millionaire investor, instead of supporting Obama in the race for the Democratic nomination for the U.S. Senate has inspired bitter anger and deep suspicion among many opinion leaders in Chicago's black community.

James Montgomery, the city's corporation counsel during the Washington administration, is credited by Rush with helping him in some critical situations during his Black Panther days. But Montgomery could scarcely contain his bitterness when he was asked recently about Rush's alliance with Hull. "I think," he said, snapping his words off, "that probably Bobby is making a big mistake in endorsing a candidate with no ideological or historical tie to the black community." Especially, he added, when there is a candidate like Obama available who does have such ties and is regarded as having a realistic chance of winning.

Obama now admits that he was inexperienced in taking Rush on in 2006, but deliberately avoided commenting substantively on his current relationship with him. He says only, "I am looking forward to receiving Congressman Rush's support in the general election."

If Rush is bothered by any of the criticism, he doesn't let on. He says African-Americans must "deliberately and intelligently develop some alliances in statewide races," and his support of Hull is a way to do that. He says he likes Hull personally and sees he would be the kind of senator "who would shake the place up." Obama, he says in a sly reference to the younger man's Harvard Law School credentials, is "very educated" but "there is a common touch that needs to be developed somewhere."

Political insiders assume that Rush is getting something more tangible than a sense of personal satisfaction in return for his support of Hull. Asked at a August news conference whether Hull had donated any money to him in return for his endorsement, Rush denied it indignantly. "I want you to know there has not been a red cent—not one red cent—exchanged between Blair Hull and myself with regards to this campaign."

But in an interview he acknowledged that Hull has visited his church and made an offering, along with all the others, in attendance at the service. He declined to say how much Hull gave, but noted that "some members of the church were disappointed." Additionally, he said, one of his brothers, Marion Rush, works as a deputy campaign manager for Hull. But he noted that Marion was hired before the endorsement of Hull and was not a quid pro quo arrangement.

Clockwise from left: Rush stands over the coffin of Fred Hampton, one of two Black Panthers killed in the Dec. 4, 1969, police raid on the party headquarters; Rush announces his candidacy for alderman in 1974, saying he would finance his campaign with deposits from poor bondholders outside the Capitol in September; he encounters former UN Ambassador Andrew Young.

Continued on page 26.
Bobby Rush is now in his sixth term in the House. His legislative efforts are directed mainly toward helping his district, though he has been involved in drafting telecommunications and Internet legislation as a member of the Committee on Energy and Commerce.

He moves comfortably through the hallways, elevators and meeting rooms, flinging an arm around a colleague's shoulder as they exchange confidences on the way to the House floor for a vote, bantering with staff members in his cramped suite of offices on the fourth floor of the Rayburn office building, exercising a member's prerogative to take half a dozen guests aboard a "members only" elevator and introducing them to a celebrity colleague. Rep. Katherine Harris (R-Fla), who had a high-profile role in the disputed 2000 presidential balloting in his state.

It is evident that Rush loves this life, loves being part of this elite body, loves where he has gotten to be as he approaches his 67th Birthday.

And yet, Rush talks almost as much these days about what politics can't do as about what it can. Here, for example, is Rush on the problem of urban violence;

"This pandemic of violence, we've got to address it. And you cannot address it strictly from a law-enforcement perspective. ... There's a spiritual void that exists there; a spiritual voidness that you've got to deal with. It centers around love and hope, and we don't hear enough or see enough of that from leadership."

And here he is on the limitations of government power: "Government will never liberate us. We have to assume a lot of that responsibility for ourselves, and I don't see Congress or elected officials as being a cure-all for our problems. It's something that we have to use advisedly, aggressively. At the end of the day, it can help deliver resources, but it doesn't have the ability to transform lives and transform communities. Ultimately, you've got to make up your mind to change yourself."

At times, Rush sounds more like George W. Bush, or even Ronald Reagan, than a liberal black Democrat from an inner-city district. Indeed, Rush says he and Bush got on famously when the president invited him and several other members of the Illinois congressional delegation to ride with him aboard Air Force One to Chicago for an appearance in June: Their shared devotion to religion was a big part of the reason.

"There's a separation between church and state, as there should be," he says. "But I believe that politics should respond to a prophetic voice. Otherwise, we keep recycling the same ideas and rhetoric." Eventually, he says, it will be time for him to put aside electoral politics for good and teach and pursue his ministry full-time. He's just waiting for God to tell him when.

"Look back on my life. I find situations [where] I really should have been done and in my grave. ... I was supposed to have been in that apart- ment the night when Fred was killed. They came to my house the very next day ... and shot my door down. The Lord saved me. So I got to think, 'I'm on his agenda. I'm not on their agenda.'"