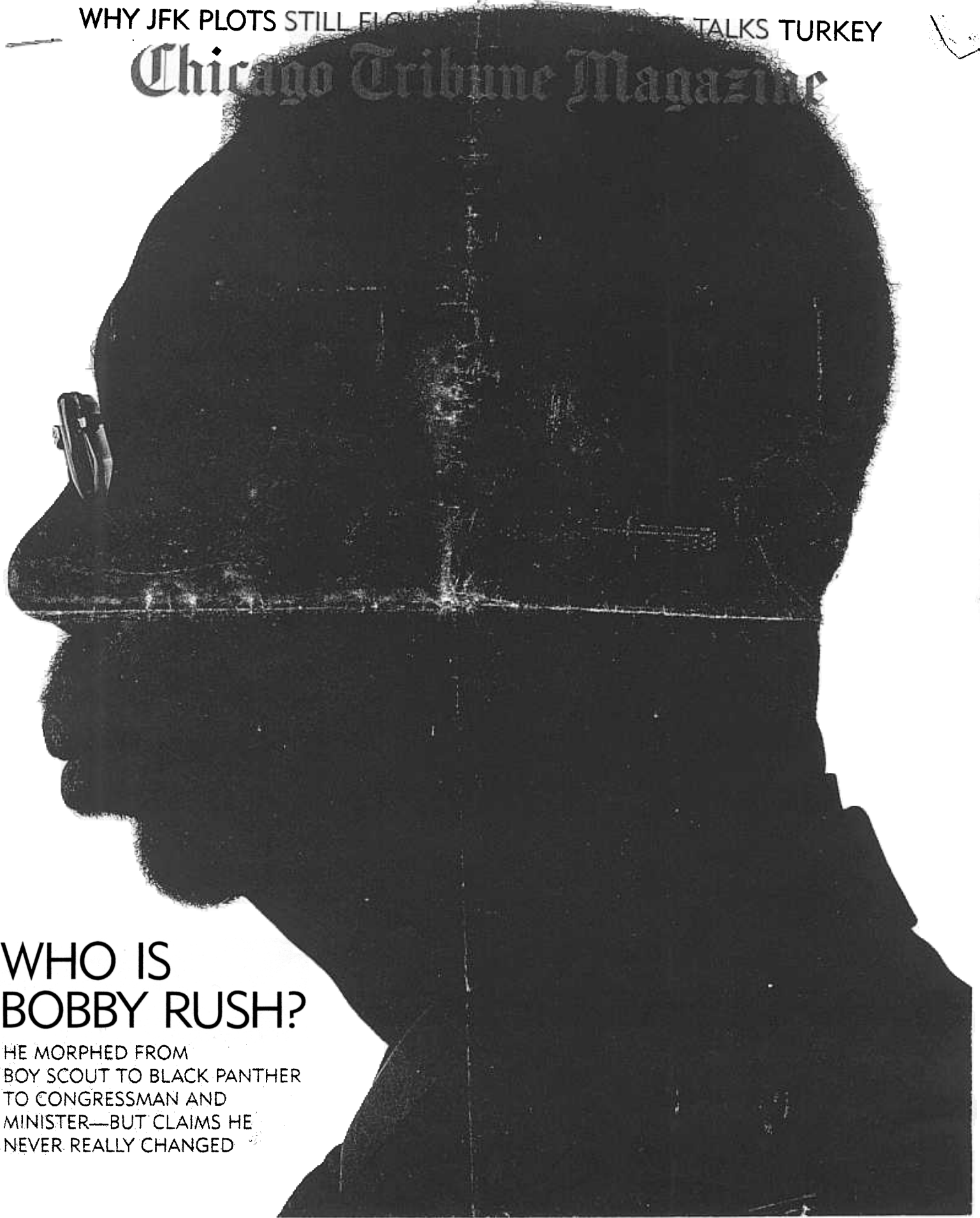


WHY JFK PLOTS STILL FLOURISH TALKS TURKEY

# Chicago Tribune Magazine



## WHO IS BOBBY RUSH?

HE MORPHED FROM BOY SCOUT TO BLACK PANTHER TO CONGRESSMAN AND MINISTER—BUT CLAIMS HE NEVER REALLY CHANGED



BY DON WYCLIFF  
PHOTO BY CHRIS WALKER

BOBBY RUSH NARROWLY ESCAPED A DEADLY POLICE RAID AND LATER WON A LONG-SHOT BID FOR CONGRESS. RECENTLY ORDAINED AS A MINISTER, HE SAYS HIS NEXT MOVE IS UP TO GOD.

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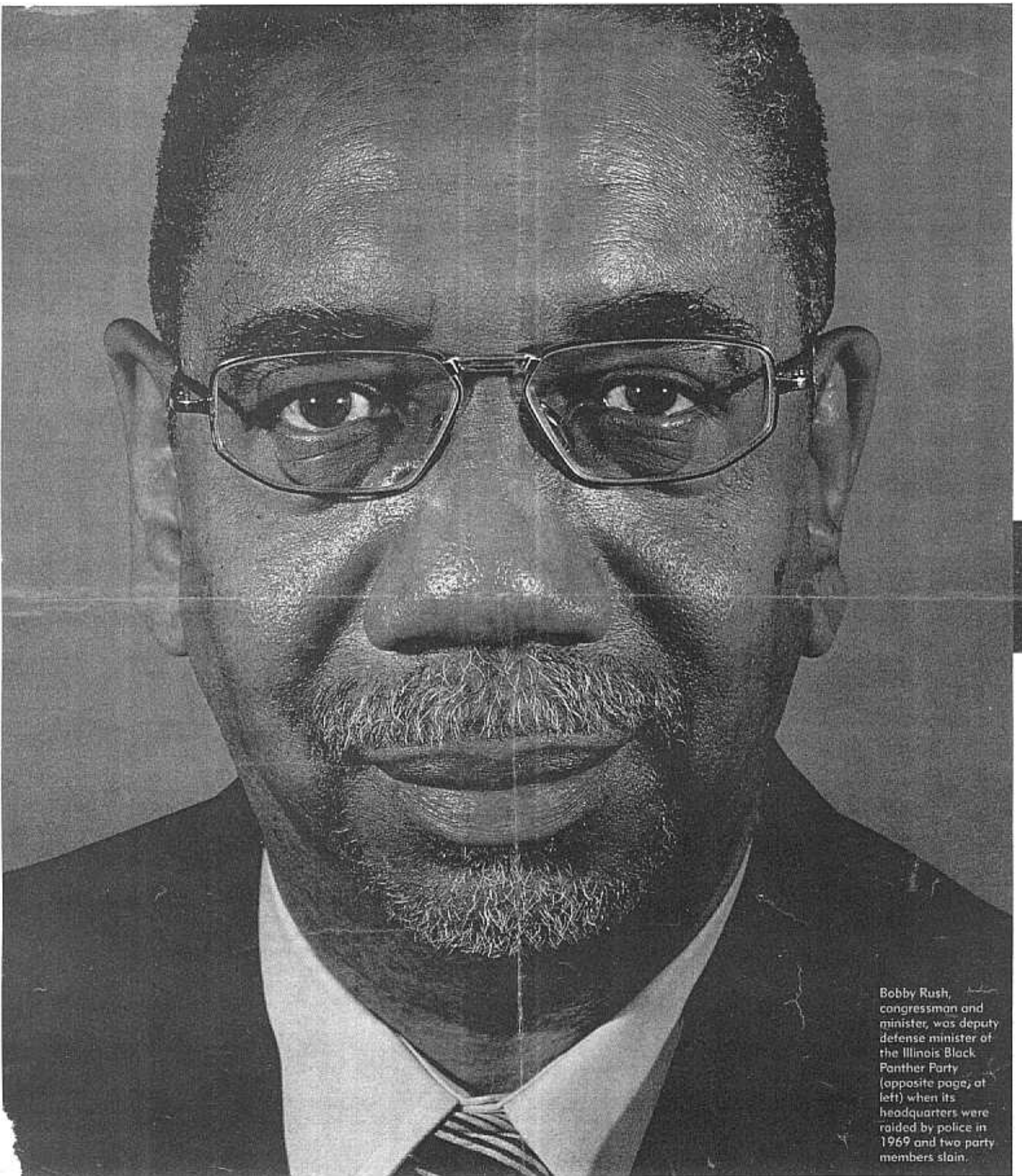
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*survivor*

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 Fanon 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. "Matter of fact, I started focusing on my life from season to season in Chicago. When it was winter and started getting cold, I would feel a sense of relief because I knew that things kind of shut down in Chicago in wintertime. In summertime, I would get this tension, 'cause that's the time a lot more things would be happening on the street."

Ironically, when the hammer finally did drop on the Chicago Panthers, it was almost winter: Dec. 4, 1969. Using information supplied by an informant in the Panthers' ranks, a squad of Chicago police officers detailed to then-State's Atty. Edward V. Hanrahan staged a pre-dawn raid on Panther headquarters on the West Side, firing dozens of shots into the building and killing Hampton and Clark.

As it turned out, they also killed Hanrahan's

ing with police brutality, which was the issue that we had here." No other issue—voting rights, housing—had the salience that police brutality did.

"But," he says, "the intellectual stuff had to be meaningful to me too. I didn't want to be just a thug. That's what separated the Panthers from the street gangs, to a great extent. We had a political philosophy, a political ideology. The 10-point platform and program was the heart and center of... our goal. That was our mission statement, so to speak."

The platform ranged from the specific and intensely practical—"We want all black men to be exempt from military service" and "We want decent housing, fit for shelter of human beings"—to the wildly idealistic—"... as our major political objective, a United Nations-supervised plebiscite to be held

through the black colony in which only black colonial subjects will be allowed to participate, [to determine] the will of black people as to their national destiny."

**T**he Panthers often carried guns—Rush carried six months served six months on a misdemeanor weapons charge—but he says he was not drawn to violence. There were members "who would go out and rob and that kind of thing, but that wasn't me. I was more like the intel-

lectual kind of guy. I was the kind of person who would love to read a book and think about, not just the practice, but the theory behind things, how things work."

He credits Huey Newton, the party's co-founder and chief theoretician, with attempting to cultivate an atmosphere that emphasized the intellectual underpinnings of the party platform. "Huey had us reading not only Marx and Lenin and Mao Tse-tung and Franz Fanon. He had us read Hegel. He had us read Nietzsche. He had us read Sartre. The Panther Party was stimulating to me, being in that environment."

"The one thing it didn't have in terms of what I have now," he says, "is spirituality. That's really what was missing."

Rush's career gives the lie to novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald's observation that there are no second acts in American life. He burst into public consciousness as a radical, spouting superheated rhetoric against the "pigs" and the American establishment. One of his lines, delivered at a Free Huey Newton rally in the Loop and reported in Chicago Today on May 1, 1969: "Policemen are pigs of a low-natured character, and FBI stands

for 'Foolish, Blind and Ignorant.'"

Today he is part and parcel of the establishment, a maker of the laws that police officers and the FBI enforce. How did it happen?

With the deaths of Hampton and Clark, the Illinois Black Panther Party began to come apart, and within a couple of years it ceased to function as a political force in Chicago. J. Edgar Hoover had his victory.

Less prominent members of the group were able to disappear back into society and build fairly normal lives. Rush, however,

was saddled with his reputation as a fire-

brand and a party leader. Speaking of his life in the early 1970s, he says: "I had gone back to school, I had gotten my degree, I had tried to get a job, I tried to get into law school, and I was telling me that I was more than convinced that

I was too controversial. So a lot of doors were shut to the post-Panther Bobby Rush. I couldn't, like, camouflage myself back into the overall society."

Rush says he pretty much had no occupational choice except to get into electoral politics. Not only did it give him instant recognition, but he also got it as a new means to the same goal he had been pursuing as a Panther: community empowerment.

His first campaign was in 1975, against incumbent 2nd Ward Ald. William Barnett, a stalwart of the Daley machine and the Dawson organization. Rush lost that contest but finished close enough to be encouraged. He tried several occupations over the next eight years, and eventually made a living as an insurance agent. Then in 1983, with Dawson and Daley both gone, Jane Byrne on the fifth floor of City Hall and Harold Washington leading an insurgency against her, Rush challenged Barnett again and won.

The next four years were the season of the Council Wars, and Rush was a loyal member of the Washington bloc. In 1987, Washington won outright control of the council, and Rush became chairman of the Committee on Energy, Environmental Protection and Public Utilities. He threw himself into the committee's work and, by the accounts of both supporters and critics, did a creditable job. Rush recalls holding a committee hearing in Bridgeport about a quarry and getting a standing ovation from the residents who attended. Musing on that event now, he chuckles and says in amazement, "They gave me a standing ovation. In Bridgeport!"

Rush has ruffled feathers and made enemies too—most of them, oddly, in the black community. And when he talks politics, it quickly becomes apparent that this old panther still has claws and isn't reluctant to bare them.

Rush's election to the 1st Congressional District seat in 1992 is considered by more than a few blacks as having been at the expense of a decent, well-regarded man, the late Charles Hayes, who at the time needed only one more term in the House to qualify for a comfortable and, many feel, well-

"DURING... MY INVOLVEMENT WITH THE PANTHER PARTY, I JUST DID NOT BELIEVE THAT I WOULD LIVE TO BE 30 YEARS OLD."

Bernard Carey for state's attorney, and Hanrahan, previously seen as the heir-apparent to Mayor Richard J. Daley, was cast out of office.

Bobby Rush wasn't at Panther headquarters on the morning of the raid, and that has given rise to dark suspicions and rumors that persist in some quarters to this day. He acknowledges that there are other ex-Panthers who have suggested he was somehow in collusion with the police. But others, such as Rev. George Clements, former pastor of Holy Angels Catholic Church, who gave Rush "sanctuary" in the days just after the raid, and Democratic political consultant Don Rose, who has known Rush for decades, say they are convinced such charges are baseless.

Rush says the explanation of his whereabouts is quite simple: He was at home with his family in their apartment at the Stateway Gardens housing development. With Panthers from all over the state in town for a retreat and political education workshops, he says, the headquarters apartment, where Hampton lived, was full. So he went home to sleep.

The day after the headquarters raid, the police came to Stateway Gardens "and shot down my door," he says. "And if my family and I had been there, we'd have been dead." His wife and children had fled to her mother's home, and Rush took sanctuary at Holy Angels. Eventually, he says, his lawyer, Kermit Coleman, and Renault Robinson and Howard Saffold, of the Afro-American Patrolmen's League, arranged for him to surrender to a black police commander at a Saturday meeting of Rev. Jesse Jackson's Operation Breadbasket.

"They kept me for less than an hour and then they released me," he says.

For Rush and most others, the initial appeal of the Panthers was in their appearance. "The Panthers were very dramatic. They appealed to the urban youth with the leather jackets, dark glasses, black berets..." Their rhetoric was a second source of appeal. "They were identified with deal-

Don Wycliff is the Tribune's public editor.

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 tearing its political base apart" after Washington's death. The occupant of the 1st District seat had a special obligation to exert leadership and influence by bringing feuding 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 check-cashing problem, he might still be in there"—a reference to the 1992 controversy over House members, including Hayes, who repeatedly overdrew their accounts at the House bank.

What his critics really are angry about, says Rush, is that "strategically, I upped 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 1999, State Sen. Barack Obama mounted a long-shot challenge to Rush and lost, overwhelmingly, in the 2000 primary election. Even though Rush says he is "not vindictive 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 dalliance 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 impetuous in taking Rush on in 2000, but delicately avoids commenting substantively on his current relationship with him. He says only, "I am looking forward to receiving Congressman Rush's sup-

port 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 feels 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, nurtured."

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 an 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, Marlon Rush, works as a deputy campaign manager for Hull. But he noted that Marlon was hired before the endorsement of Hull and was not a quid pro quo arrangement.

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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 party headquarters; Rush announces his candidacy for alderman in 1974, saying he would finance his campaign with deposits from pop bottles; outside the Capitol in September, he encounters former UN Ambassador and Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young.





## Rush

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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 introduce them to a celebrity colleague, Rep. Katharine Harris (R-Fla), who had a high-profile role in the disputed 2000 presidential balloting in her 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 57th 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 is a spiritual void that exists there, a spiritual brokenness 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 office as being a cure-all for our problems. It's something that we have to use adroitly, strategically, aggressively. At the

end of the day it can help deliver the 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



Rush's Washington office includes a poster-sized stamp honoring Black Muslim leader Malcolm X.

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.

"I look back on my life, I find situations [where] I really should have been dead and in my grave . . . I was supposed to have been in that apartment 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 gotta think I'm on his agenda. I'm not on my agenda, I'm on *his* agenda."