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Seeking the End to Racial Profiling

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Abstract. This article describes implications of the United States (US) Attorney General's efforts to end racial profiling.

The new US Attorney General has been urging the US Congress to develop and pass legislation that would end racial profiling. Furthermore, he has stated that if such legislation is not produced in the next six months, then he will initiate a racial profiling study intended to correct any abuse--i.e., to end racial profiling.

The Attorney General's efforts should be analyzed on at least two different levels. One is political in nature. In US political discourse, racial profiling is equated with racist activity. Coming out against racial profiling is a vehicle to come out against racism, to signify one is not racist, or to secure political support from individuals, groups, and organizations that seem to bear the brunt of racist attack or that seek to empathize and resonate with those who do. More specifically, the case is made that the very use of a characteristic perceived to be racial as a discriminator of those who engage or may engage in crime from those who don't is both racist and to be abhorred among the body politic. (Permeating this political level is the use of racial profiling as political issue as a stalking horse for all sorts of other political concerns.)

The other pertinent level of analysis is scientific in nature. In other words, does racial profiling work? Can one identify racial characteristics--often connoting ethnic characteristics--that reliably and validly differentiate those who engage or might engage in crime from those who don't? The political level of analysis often subverts the scientific one. For example, as the political unacceptability of racial profiling grows, it becomes more difficult to obtain funding to ascertain the reliability and validity of racial profiling, more difficult to obtain acceptance of relevant articles in refereed journals, and more difficult to receive academic tenure and promotion for such work. Moreover, the scientific acceptability of the magnitude of false positive and false negative rates constituting the overall error rate of predicting crime through racial profiling decreases as political unacceptability of racial profiling increases.

Contaminating both political and scientific levels of analysis are a number of social cognition and social perception phenomena common to all humans that are, in essence, discriminatory. Regardless of political diktat or scientific method, these phenomena suggest that racial profiling is and will be alive and well in everyday life.

Back to the efforts of the US Attorney General: Legislation will end racial profiling as Prohibition legislation in the US ended the imbibing of alcohol. (See Attorney General seeks end to racial profiling. (March 2, 2001). *The New York Times*. <http://www.nytimes.com>; Blasovich, J., Mendes, W.B., Hunter, S.B., Lickel, B., & Kowai-Bell, N. (2001). Perceiver threat in social interactions with stigmatized others. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 80, 253-267; Brownfield, D., Sorenson, A.M., & Thompson, K.M. (2001). Gang membership, race, and social class: A test of the group hazard and master status hypothesis. *Deviant Behavior*, 22, 73-89; Hopton, J. (1998). Risk assessment using psychological profiling techniques: An evaluation of possibilities. *British Journal of Social Work*, 28, 247-261; Kao, G. (2000). Group images and possible selves among adolescents: Linking stereotypes to expectations by race and

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

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