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# Psychology in the Public Service

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Philip G. Zimbardo  
*American Psychological Association*

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*Philip G. Zimbardo outlines the challenges and opportunities he faces as the American Psychological Association's (APA's) 110th president. This article expands on remarks made in his introduction to Patrick H. DeLeon's presidential address at the APA's 2001 annual convention in San Francisco, California. Appearing now, mid-term in his presidency, that vision is a working blueprint of his activities and what he hopes to accomplish in his remaining tenure: enhancing psychologists' pride in psychology; developing more productive relationships with all media as gatekeepers to the public; publishing the standard high school psychology textbook; developing a compendium of all psychological research that illustrates how psychologists have made a significant difference in improving various aspects of the quality of life of individuals, groups, communities, and the United States; and encouraging greater unity of purpose and respect among psychologists across their many diverse domains and specialties.*

**A**s one of Patrick H. DeLeon's successors and the American Psychological Association's (APA's) 110th president, I have learned a great deal from him about how existing organizational structures may be used to contribute psychological knowledge where it is most needed. Pat's customary generosity extended first to having me share the podium with him during the recollections of his 2000 presidential year at the APA's annual convention in San Francisco, California. Because he has been willing to serve as my mentor in introducing me to the ways and means of APA governance, I could hardly refuse his request to outline some views on how I plan to spend my term. But I will be brief and, I hope, let constructive actions and meaningful outcomes be the guideline for what I will later be able to write about the accomplishments of 2002.

However, since that glorious August convention week in my adopted hometown of San Francisco, time and terrorism have taken their toll to change the political and psychological landscape in ways unimaginable in the United States' seemingly long-gone days of innocence. September 11th instantly trivialized most Americans' millennium resolutions while rendering once urgent to-do lists rather inconsequential. The tragic attack on America by members of a radical fundamentalist Islam terrorist network is without historical precedence for the enormity of its negatively spiraling impact at national, global, commu-

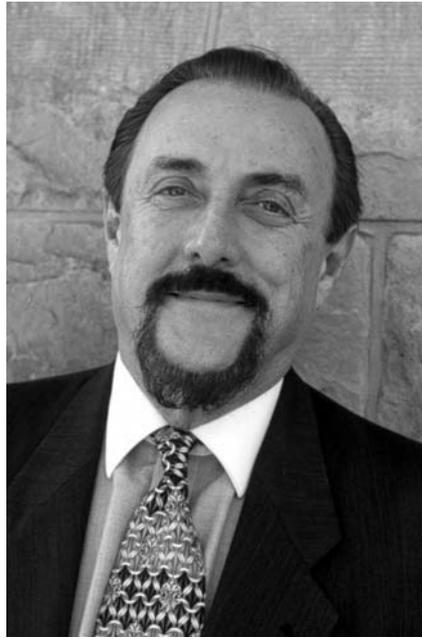
nity, and individual levels of functioning. As U.S. citizens were preparing to heed national leaders' call to return to business as usual and resume normal lives, bioterrorism struck, making evident that *normal* and *usual* might not be part of the operational lexicon for some time to come. Americans have been forced to cross a threshold into a strange new world alien for most of them and for psychology.

I anticipate that this year, and likely many more, will represent a major challenge to the APA and to psychologists everywhere. That challenge will provide the opportunity to demonstrate the value of psychological knowledge and psychological practice in the public service. For more than 30 years, we psychologists have given much lip service to the 1969 admonition of former APA president George Miller to give psychology away to the public. In truth, we have not given much away because we were too modest about what we could offer, we did not know how or to whom to give our gift, and the public was not prepared to accept it. One of my major goals is to change that transaction so that there is a synergistic flow of what we do know to those who need it and can use it. At the same time, we also need to change some of what we do in constructive response to the needs of our nation and communities. Doing so will have the desired side effect of helping to unify psychologists across many disciplines in a common cause and will be a new basis for taking pride in being psychologists.

The media are the gatekeepers between psychology and the public. Members of the public become aware of what psychologists do and what psychology has to offer them that might enhance the quality of their lives primarily through media presentations of psychology in print, television, radio, and film. More often than not, psychology has gotten a bad rap in the media, with negative, stereotypic, or silly portrayals of psychologists or psychological findings. Sometimes the media get it wrong because psychologists do not make clear what the good story is; sometimes the media are wrong because they are working out of biased perspectives or have false views about psychology. I am working hard to help the APA and psychology in general develop a more viable collaborative relationship with as many media gatekeepers as possible, to work with psychologists to help them be more media savvy, and to dedicate

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Photo by Nita Winter

myself to a revitalized mission of finding ways for psychology to have a valued place in American society. I encourage psychologists to write op-ed essays for their local papers and national media because they reach so many people in a timely fashion. I have recently been appointed psychological consultant to NBC to help develop new television programming based on basic aspects of human nature. That experience can help give psychology more visibility—if it proves valuable to the network and attractive to the public.

The current “fear war” created by terrorists abroad and home grown in the United States has made apparent to many that “it is all psychological”! The terrorists’ objectives are to manipulate mental and emotional states negatively. Collective American responses center on coping with stress, grief, loss, trauma, anxiety, and fear, while at the same time developing new sources of resilience, courage, and a more meaningful personal and national identity. In the long run, a military defeat of the current enemy centered in Afghanistan is but the first step in America’s response to terrorism. Changing the core emotions of hatred against the United States and the false beliefs about America among the youth of many Middle Eastern nations is essential to prevent the next generation from lining up as terrorists-in-waiting. That too involves a new kind of psychological warfare, as does advising U.S. leaders in how best to deliver some of their messages to the public in a way that takes into account their psychological impact.

Those events helped provide a foundation for my long-range goal of putting in motion a plan that will eventually in the formation of a psychological advisory council to the president of the United States, akin to that of econ-

omists. Even before the September 11th tragedy, most of the major problems facing the United States were psychological in cause, correlates, or consequence: for example, AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases; drug addiction, as well as addictions to smoking, gambling, alcohol, and food; prejudice and discrimination; delinquency; violent crimes; educational failures for too many minority youth; and the full range of physical illnesses that are influenced by lifestyle and behavioral functioning. Psychologists have much to say about more effective ways of dealing with these problems at both individual and community levels of action. Psychologists need to be heard and to be at the table of influential leaders and policymakers because psychologists have more to say about these issues than do members of any other discipline.

As president of the APA, there is much more I hope to do. As a lifelong educator, I have made enhancing education across the curriculum a major focus. For example, I am working with the Education Directorate and also with Publications and Communications to develop a new standardized APA high school psychology text. Continuing to promote the important presidential programs of past presidents—such as Norine G. Johnson’s positioning of psychology as a health discipline and Martin E. P. Seligman’s impressive positive psychology paradigm shift—is also a priority. But my major efforts are being directed toward the initiative “Psychology Makes a Significant Difference in Our Lives.” This is a call to accountability of all psychologists to demonstrate that what they do has really made a measurable outcome difference in health, longevity, saving money and lives, improving efficiency, and more. The goal is to develop a compendium, organized by relevant categories such as health, education, and organizational functioning, that summarizes the best of what psychologists have done that has value to the public and to the nation—or should if it were properly translated into policy and operations. That tabulation of vital psychological findings based on solid research could prove valuable to government officials, business leaders, the media, teachers, textbook authors, and the public. And, ideally, it will be another source of justified pride in psychology that I fervently hope will be the hallmark of my presidency in 2002.

Although it is impossible to predict with any sense of certainty exactly what the 21st century might bring, I am confident that the United States will see an exponential increase in psychology’s influence throughout the public policy and educational process. Collectively, we psychologists seem to have learned about the benefits gained by fostering proactive and visionary leadership, especially when it evolves from the grass roots. We have become acutely aware of the critical nature of persistence and personal involvement throughout the public policy process. Change is always unsettling and, to be truly meaningful, takes time. Finally, we have also come to appreciate the absolute necessity of ensuring that psychology’s futuristic agendas must above all else fit into the broader ongoing changes that are evolving within society at large.

The tragic events beginning with September 11th have provided psychology with an unprecedented obligation and opportunity to collectively serve society. For organized psychology to fulfill its potential as a bona fide participant in the United States' public policy and educational deliberations, it has always been necessary to be up front and actively address society's pressing needs. I sincerely believe that as psychology focuses on its most recent societal obligations, the nation's highest level of elected officials

will become more responsive to psychologists' unique needs and talents (DeLeon, 1986, 1988).

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