



**ONE NATION?
BY JULIANNE MALVEAUX**

Last week members of the Congressional Black Caucus took President Obama to task for his inattention to the high rate of black unemployment – a rate much higher than the overall rate. By Friday, some progress on the unemployment front had been reported – the rate was down to 10 percent in November, from the October high of 10.2 percent. African American unemployment, though, was at the astounding level of 15.6 percent. Why don't the high levels of African American unemployment deserve special attention?

President Obama says he is working for our entire nation, and that when unemployment rates drop, they will drop for everyone. Perhaps that is what he has to say. But even Ray Charles can see the disproportionate unemployment burden that the African American community is carrying. Targeted public policy is the only way to close the unemployment rate gap.

Our nation has a history of targeting public policy. When it appeared that banks were especially imperiled, we bailed banks, but not other industries out. Indeed, there was much debate about why bankers should get \$700 billion when others also faced challenges. The faulty logic that applied was that banks had special challenges at the beginning of the recession, and that the money spent bailing out banks would have ripple effects throughout our economy. Next, there were special provisions made for the housing industry, with bailouts and concessions made to those who had mortgages they could not pay. Again, the logic was that these citizens have special roles in our society and economy. Renters were left out of these special financial provisions. We targeted homeowners.

Why, then, is it such an anathema to target African Americans? Believe me, if it were Wall Street brokers with an unemployment rate of 15.6 percent, one and a half times the overall rate, there would be some special program developed for those brokers! Someone would take to the floor of Congress to speak of the special plight of those brokers and to wax eloquent about why they deserve a break. The logic that when the overall rate drops, the broker rate will also drop, would be scoffed at! Can't you envision the special pleading that would go to save the brokers?

The African American unemployment rate is a national disgrace. The reported rate, 15.6 percent, is an extreme underestimate. Last month, for the first time, economists began to note that the actual overall unemployment rate was 17.5 percent, including discouraged workers and others. This month, the rate dropped slightly to 17.2 percent. If there are the same numbers of discouraged workers in the African American community as in the overall community, the African American unemployment rate is more like 27 percent. And it can be argued that there are proportionately more African Americans who are discouraged and out of the labor force than whites.

The congressional black caucus is right to raise the issue of high black unemployment rates, and the President is wrong to assume that his "one nation" strategy is adequate. To be sure, Brother President has plenty on his plate – a war on at least two fronts, climate change, a staggering economy, health care, and so on. And, to be clear, President Barack Obama is the president of all of American, not just black American. Still, because we have seen targeting before, it is unclear why we can't see it now. The president of our entire nation must ensure that every sector in our nation has an opportunity to benefit from economic recovery.

If we are really pursuing a "one nation" strategy, why single any group out, ever. Why provide bailouts for bankers and for few others, why target home mortgages and not small business loans? We are seduced by the logic that some sectors are more important than others, that some sectors have an impact greater than others. The Congressional Black Caucus deserves high props for breaking its silence and raising the issue of high black unemployment rates. President Obama ought to pay attention to the fact that in our "one nation" some groups of people are feeling more than their fair share of this recession's impact.

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