

Democrats and the Legacy of Activist Saul Alinsky

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ROBERT SIEGEL, host:

This is ALL THINGS CONSIDERED from NPR News. I'm Robert Siegel.

You may have heard or read the name Saul Alinsky in a few campaign stories lately. Alinsky was a community organizer from Chicago. He died in 1972. He is credited with developing a new approach to politics. He created tactics that allowed ordinary people - the poor and disenfranchised - to effectively fight city hall.

(Soundbite of documentary, "The Democratic Promise: Saul Alinsky and his Legacy")

Mr. SAUL ALINSKY (Community Organizer): First rule of change is controversy. You can't get away from it for the simple reason all issues are controversial. Change means movement and movement means friction, and friction means heat, and heat means controversy.

SIEGEL: That clip of Saul Alinsky is from the 1999 documentary film "The Democratic Promise: Saul Alinsky and his Legacy." Well, two leading Democratic candidates for president - Senators Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama - can trace at least some of their political character to teachings handed down indirectly from Saul Alinsky.

So we thought we might fill in our gaps of knowledge about the man and his ideas. And for that, we turn to author Sanford Horwitt. He wrote a biography of Saul Alinsky called "Let Them Call Me a Rebel." Alinsky's own books were called "Reveille for Radicals" and "Rules for Radicals." Horwitt's book traces Alinsky's early activism in Chicago's meatpacking district.

Mr. SANFORD HORWITT (Author, "Let Them Call Me a Rebel"): Alinsky found very innovative ways to rally the people who lived in that very divided community to come together and to work on a whole series of issues from juvenile delinquency to housing and health problems, and it was considered a grand success. No one had ever done anything like that before.

SIEGEL: He managed to forge a community alliance that included the CIO - this is before the merger with the AFL - the CIO, Congress of Industrial Organizations, was considered the more militant left-wing labor federation, and the local archdiocese of the Catholic Church.

Mr. HORWITT: Yes. One of Alinsky's great facilities was to build bridges and alliances among people and institutions that normally didn't really see eye to eye on a lot of other things and often seemingly had nothing in common. And he helped them to understand that in fact they often had important things in common.

SIEGEL: Alinsky, though, wasn't just organizing people for a labor union. He was organizing them, as I understand it, for their civic betterment, to get real benefits out of society, and to pool benefits and to help one another as well.

Mr. HORWITT: Alinsky's great genius was to inspire ordinary people so that they really understood that they could make a difference.

SIEGEL: People will sometimes say of Saul Alinsky that he was as much a tactical showman, getting in the

face of his adversary in some very, very public way, than he was a systemic thinker of what he was all about.

Mr. HORWITT: Well, Alinsky loved to pull the feathers off the turkey, so to speak, he really enjoyed stirring things up. In Chicago, on one occasion, when his new community organization on the northwest side was trying to get better garbage pick-up, something as simple as that in their neighborhood and the alderman was ignoring them. Finally, one day, Alinsky people loaded up a huge amount of garbage in a big truck and proceeded to dump it at the doorstep of where the alderman lived. A way of getting his attention that they had not quite gotten before and of course it was great press coverage and that was part of the tactic.

There's another famous story, and this one really did not happen, but over the years it's been passed along. In the mid-1960s, Rochester had a very serious riot, and soon there after, an interracial delegation mainly of church people came to Chicago and wanted to invite Alinsky to come to Rochester and begin to organize.

And the more they talked, the more Alinsky understood that this was really a smug city, that Eastman Kodak - which was very generous in certain respects, they funded the symphony and so forth - when it came to problems of poverty and unemployment, really ignored the serious nature of the problem. And so Alinsky, after listening to these clergy, these were good, you know, Christian people, Catholic and Protestant, he leaned back and he said there's a tactic I've always wanted to try, and that is we should get a big block of tickets for the Rochester Symphony. But before the two or three hundred of us all go to hear the performance, we'll have a big baked-bean dinner, and then we will go the symphony and I think they will not be able to ignore us after that.

(Soundbite of laughter)

SIEGEL: This, however, never actually happened?

Mr. HORWITT: It never actually happened. But to this day, I will encounter people on an airplane or somewhere and they'll start talking about Alinsky and they'll say boy, I remember that fart-in.

SIEGEL: But here's what I find interesting about both Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama, in some way and some place in their own personal ideological, political development taking some inspiration from Saul Alinsky. He was the guy who made a stink - to get in your face. If you were the person who was opposed to a more equitable distribution of power, he'll get right at you and make sure that everybody knows that. It seems like the most contrary approach to the world that anyone who is seeking elective office would ever take?

Mr. HORWITT: Well, I think that's true. Politicians tend not to want to position themselves so that they are confronting the most powerful. But there are some exceptions, we've had populist candidates in this country that have railed against the abuses of large corporations and other institutions in society.

And there's a big audience in this country to hear that kind of analysis. Whether Hillary Rodham Clinton or Barack Obama will turn out to be an Alinsky-like candidate this time around remains to be seen.

SIEGEL: So when a young Barack Obama left Columbia to go off to Chicago, was he working for a project inspired by or directly descended from Saul Alinsky, do you know?

Mr. HORWITT: The people who were leading the project Barack was part of on the south - far South Side of Chicago, had experience with Alinsky and some of Alinsky's organizers, and Barack got a strong dose of what the Alinsky method was for rousing ordinary citizens to do what they never imagined they otherwise

could do.

SIEGEL: And a few years earlier, a young Hillary Rodham at Wellesley writing Her, I guess it's her senior thesis - tackles the question of the efficacy of Saul Alinsky's message?

Mr. HORWITT: Yes, Hillary apparently was tempted to return to Chicago after she graduated from Wellesley, to go to Alinsky's training institute for young organizers. She turned down the invitation - Alinsky had actually written her a letter - and went to law school instead.

SIEGEL: You in your book, you marked a particular passage that you feel says something special about Saul Alinsky?

Mr. HORWITT: And that's this line from Alinsky: Machiavelli wrote "The Prince" as a handbook for the haves on how to hold on to their power. My book is for the have-nots on how to take it away.

SIEGEL: Well, Sanford Horwitt, thank you very much for talking with us.

Mr. HORWITT: Thank you.

SIEGEL: That's Sanford Horwitt talking about the late social activist Saul Alinsky. Both Democratic presidential candidates Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton have a philosophical connection to Alinsky. Horwitt's book, by the way, is called "Let Them Call Me Rebel."

(Soundbite of music)

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