

SAUL ALINSKY

- Identified a set of very specific rules that ordinary citizens could follow, and tactics that ordinary citizens could employ, as a means of gaining public power
- Created a blueprint for revolution under the banner of "social change"
- Two of his most notable modern-day disciples are Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama.

See also: [Cloward-Piven Strategy](#) [Industrial Areas Foundation](#)

[Hillary Clinton](#) [Barack Obama](#)

Born to Russian-Jewish parents in Chicago in 1909, Saul Alinsky was a [Communist/Marxist fellow-traveler](#) who helped establish the tactics of infiltration -- coupled with a measure of confrontation -- that have been central to revolutionary political movements in the United States in recent decades. He never joined the Communist Party but instead, as David Horowitz puts it, [became an avatar of the post-modern left](#). Chicago alderman Leon Despres, a [Communist Party](#) member and a college classmate of Alinsky, once [said](#): "I don't think he [Alinsky] ever remotely thought of joining the Communist Party, [but] emotionally he aligned very strongly with it." And Alinsky biographer Sanford D. Horwitt [wrote](#) that Alinsky was "broadly sympathetic" with the politics of his friend Herb March, who worked as an organizer for the [Young Communist League](#).

Though Alinsky is rightfully understood to have been a leftist, his legacy is more [methodological](#) than ideological. He identified a set of very specific rules that ordinary citizens could follow, and tactics that ordinary citizens could employ, as a means of gaining public power. His motto was, "The most effective means are whatever will achieve the desired results."

Alinsky studied criminology as a graduate student at the University of Chicago, during which time he [became friendly with](#) Al Capone and his mobsters. [Ryan Lizza](#), senior editor of *The New Republic*, offers a glimpse into Alinsky's personality: "Charming and self-absorbed, Alinsky would entertain friends with stories -- some true, many embellished -- from his mob days for decades afterward. He was profane, outspoken, and narcissistic, always the center of attention despite his tweedy, academic look and thick, horn-rimmed glasses."

According to Lizza:

"Alinsky was [deeply influenced](#) by the great social science insight of his times, one developed by his professors at Chicago: that the pathologies of the urban poor were not hereditary but environmental. This idea, that people could change their lives by changing their surroundings, led him to take an obscure social science phrase—'the community organization'--and turn it into, in the words of Alinsky biographer Sanford Horwitt, 'something

controversial, important, even romantic.' His starting point was a near-fascination with John L. Lewis, the great labor leader and founder of the CIO. What if, Alinsky wondered, the same hardheaded tactics used by unions could be applied to the relationship between citizens and public officials?"

After completing his graduate work in criminology, Alinsky went on to develop what are known today as the Alinsky concepts of mass organization for power. In the late 1930s he earned a reputation as a master organizer of the poor when he organized the "Back of the Yards" area in Chicago, an industrial and residential ethnic neighborhood on the Southwest Side of the city, so named because it is near the site of the former Union Stockyards; this area had been made famous in Upton Sinclair's 1906 novel *The Jungle*. In 1940 Alinsky established the [Industrial Areas Foundation](#) (IAF), through which he and his staff helped "organize" communities not only in Chicago but throughout the United States. IAF remains an active entity to this day. Its national headquarters are located in Chicago, and it has [affiliates](#) in the District of Columbia, twenty-one separate states, and three foreign countries (Canada, Germany, and the United Kingdom).

By the late 1960s, the Black Power movement would drive Alinsky and his organizing crusades out of the projects in African-American neighborhoods, leaving him no choice but to shift his focus to white communities. For this purpose, he established the Citizens Action Program (CAP), in 1970. As Stanley Kurtz writes in his 2010 book *Radical in Chief*: "Alinsky was ... convinced that large-scale socialist transformation would require an alliance between the struggling middle class and the poor. The key to radical social change, Alinsky thought, was to turn the wrath of America's middle class against large corporations."

In the Alinsky model, "organizing" is a euphemism for "revolution" -- a wholesale revolution whose ultimate objective is the systematic acquisition of power by a purportedly oppressed segment of the population, and the radical transformation of America's social and economic structure. The goal is to foment enough public discontent, moral confusion, and outright chaos to spark the social upheaval that Marx, Engels, and Lenin predicted -- a revolution whose foot soldiers view the status quo as fatally flawed and wholly unworthy of salvation. Thus, the theory goes, the people will settle for nothing less than that status quo's complete collapse -- to be followed by the erection of an entirely new system upon its ruins. Toward that end, they will be apt to follow the lead of charismatic radical organizers who project an aura of confidence and vision, and who profess to clearly understand what types of societal "changes" are needed.

As Alinsky put it: "A reformation means that the masses of our people have reached the point of disillusionment with past ways and values. They don't know what will work but they do know that the prevailing system is self-defeating, frustrating, and hopeless. They won't act for change but won't strongly oppose those who do. The time is then ripe for revolution."^[1]

"[W]e are concerned," Alinsky elaborated, "with how to create mass organizations to seize power and give it to the people; to realize the democratic dream of equality, justice, peace, cooperation, equal and full opportunities for education, full and useful employment, health, and the

creation of those circumstances in which men have the chance to live by the values that give meaning to life. We are talking about a mass power organization which will change the world ... This means revolution.”[\[2\]](#)

But Alinsky’s brand of revolution was not characterized by dramatic, sweeping, overnight transformations of social institutions. [As Richard Poe puts it](#), “Alinsky viewed revolution as a slow, patient process. The trick was to penetrate existing institutions such as churches, unions and political parties.” He advised organizers and their disciples to quietly, subtly gain influence within the decision-making ranks of these institutions, and to introduce changes from that platform. This was precisely the tactic of “infiltration” advocated by Lenin and [Stalin](#).[\[3\]](#) As Communist International General Secretary Georgi Dimitroff told the Seventh World Congress of the Comintern in 1935:

"Comrades, you remember the ancient tale of the capture of Troy. Troy was inaccessible to the armies attacking her, thanks to her impregnable walls. And the attacking army, after suffering many sacrifices, was unable to achieve victory until, with the aid of the famous Trojan horse, it managed to penetrate to the very heart of the enemy’s camp.”[\[4\]](#)

Alinsky’s revolution promised that by changing the structure of society’s institutions, it would rid the world of such vices as socio-pathology and criminality. Arguing that these vices were caused not by personal character flaws but rather by external societal influences, Alinsky’s worldview was thoroughly steeped in the socialist left’s collectivist, class-based doctrine of economic determinism. “The radical’s affection for people is not lessened,” said Alinsky, “... when masses of them demonstrate a capacity for brutality, selfishness, hate, greed, avarice, and disloyalty. It is not the people who must be judged but the circumstances that made them that way.”[\[5\]](#) Chief among these circumstances, he said, were “the larcenous pressures of a materialistic society.”[\[6\]](#)

To counter that materialism, Alinsky favored a socialist alternative. He characterized his noble radical (read: “revolutionary”) as a social reformer who “places human rights far above property rights”; who favors “universal, free public education”; who “insists on full employment for economic security” but stipulates also that people’s tasks should “be such as to satisfy the creative desires within all men”; who “will fight conservatives” everywhere; and who “will fight privilege and power, whether it be inherited or acquired,” and “whether it be political or financial or organized creed.”[\[7\]](#) Alinsky maintained that radicals, finding themselves “adrift in the stormy sea of capitalism,”[\[8\]](#) sought “to advance from the jungle of laissez-faire capitalism to a world worthy of the name of human civilization.”[\[9\]](#) “They hope for a future,” he said, “where the means of production will be owned by all of the people instead of just a comparative handful.”[\[10\]](#) In short, they wanted socialism.

In 1946 Alinsky wrote *Reveille for Radicals*, his first major book about the principles and tactics of “community organizing,” otherwise known as agitating for revolution. Twenty-five years later he authored *Rules for Radicals*, which expanded upon his earlier work. His writings, and the tactics outlined therein, have had a profound influence on all “social change” and

“social justice” movements of recent decades.

Alinsky’s objective, which he clearly stated in *Rules for Radicals*, was to “present an arrangement of certain facts and general concepts of change, a step toward a science of revolution.”^[11] *The Prince*, he elaborated, “was written by Macchiavelli for the Haves on how to hold onto power. *Rules for Radicals* is written for the Have-Nots on how to take it away.”^[12]

If radicals were to be in the vanguard of the movement to transfer power from the Haves to the Have-Nots, Alinsky’s first order of business was to define precisely what a radical was. He approached this task by first distinguishing between liberals and radicals. Alinsky had no patience for those he called the liberals of his day -- people who were content to talk about the changes they wanted, but were unwilling to actively work for those changes. Rather, he favored “radicals” who were prepared to take bold, decisive action designed to transform society, even if that transformation could be achieved only slowly and incrementally. Wrote Alinsky:

"Liberals fear power or its application.... They talk glibly of people lifting themselves by their own bootstraps but fail to realize that nothing can be lifted except through power.... Radicals precipitate the social crisis by action -- by using power.... Liberals protest; radicals rebel. Liberals become indignant; radicals become fighting mad and go into action. Liberals do not modify their personal lives[,] and what they give to a cause is a small part of their lives; radicals give themselves to the cause. Liberals give and take oral arguments; radicals give and take the hard, dirty, bitter way of life."^[13]

If the purpose of radicalism is to bring about social transmutation, the radical must be prepared to make a persuasive case for why such change is urgently necessary. Alinsky’s conviction that American society needed a dramatic overhaul was founded on his belief that the status quo was intolerably miserable for most people. For one thing, Alinsky saw the United States as a nation rife with economic injustice. “The people of America live as they can,” he wrote. “Many of them are pent up in one-room crumbling shacks and a few live in penthouses.... The Haves smell toilet water, the Have-Nots smell just plain toilet.”^[14] Lamenting the “wide disparity of wealth, privilege, and opportunity” he saw in America, Alinsky impugned the country’s “materialistic values and standards.”^[15] “We know that man must cease worshipping the god of gold and the monster of materialism,” he said.^[16]

Profound economic injustice was by no means America’s only shortcoming, as Alinsky saw things. Lamenting the nation’s “rather confused and demoralized ideology,”^[17] he further identified “unemployment,” “decay,” “disease,” “crime,” “distrust,” “bigotry,” “disorganization,” and “demoralization” as inevitable by-products of life in capitalist America.^[18] Such a state of affairs, he said, made life for a majority of Americans nothing more than an exercise in drudgery. “At the end of the week,” said Alinsky of the average American, “he comes out of the hell of monotony with a paycheck and goes home to a second round of monotony.... Monday morning he is back on the assembly line.... That, on the whole, is his life. A routine in which he rots. The dreariest, drabbest, grayest outlook that one can have. Simply a future of utter despair.”^[19] “People hunger for drama and adventure, for a breath of life in a

dreary, drab existence,” he expanded.[\[20\]](#)

According to Alinsky, this unhappy existence exerted a profoundly negative influence on the American character. Alinsky perceived most Americans as people who were governed by their prejudices, and who thus felt great antipathy toward a majority of their fellow countrymen -- particularly those of different racial, ethnic, or religious backgrounds. “[M]ost people,” he said, “like just a few people, and either do not actively care for or actively dislike most of the ‘other’ people.”[\[21\]](#)

Having painted a verbal portrait of a thoroughly corrupt and melancholy American society, Alinsky was now prepared to argue that wholesale change of great magnitude was in order. What was needed, he said, was a revolution in whose vanguard would be radicals committed to eliminating the “fundamental causes” of the nation’s problems,[\[22\]](#) and not content to merely deal with those problems’ “current manifestations”[\[23\]](#) or “end products.”[\[24\]](#) The goal of the radical, he explained, must be to bring about “the destruction of the roots of all fears, frustrations, and insecurity of man, whether they be material or spiritual”;[\[25\]](#) to purge the land of “the vast destructive forces which pervade the entire social scene”;[\[26\]](#) and to eliminate “those destructive forces from which issue wars,” forces such as “economic injustice, insecurity, unequal opportunities, prejudice, bigotry, imperialism, ... and other nationalistic neuroses.”[\[27\]](#)

The objective of ridding the nation of the aforementioned vices dovetailed perfectly with Alinsky’s belief that all societal problems were interrelated. According to Alinsky, if segments of the population were beset by crime, unemployment, inadequate housing, malnourishment, disease, demoralization, racism, discrimination, or religious intolerance, it was impossible to address, to any great effect, any particular one of those concerns in isolation. They “are simply parts of the whole picture,” he said. “They are not separate problems.”[\[28\]](#)

“[A]ll problems are related and they are all the progeny of certain fundamental causes,” Alinsky elaborated.[\[29\]](#) “Many apparently local problems are in reality malignant microcosms of vast conflicts, pressures, stresses, and strains of the entire social order.”[\[30\]](#) Thus “ultimate success in conquering these evils can be achieved only by victory over all evils.”[\[31\]](#) In other words, what was needed was a revolution, led by radicals, to literally turn society upside-down and inside-out.

Alinsky then proceeded to lay out the method by which radicals could achieve this goal by forming a host of “People’s Organizations” -- each with its own distinct name and mission, and each of which “thinks and acts in terms of social surgery and not cosmetic cover-ups.”[\[32\]](#)

These People’s Organizations were to be composed largely of discontented individuals who believed that society was replete with injustices that prevented them from being able to live satisfying lives. Such organizations, Alinsky advised, ought not be imported from the outside into a community, but rather should be staffed by locals who, with some guidance from trained radical organizers, could set their own agendas.[\[33\]](#)

The installment of local leaders as the top-level officers of People’s

Organizations helped give the organizations credibility and authenticity in the eyes of the community. This tactic closely paralleled the longtime Communist Party strategy of creating front organizations that ostensibly were led by non-communist fellow-travelers, but which were in fact controlled by Party members behind the scenes. As J. Edgar Hoover explained in his 1958 book *Masters of Deceit*: “To make a known Party member president of a front would immediately label it as ‘communist.’ But if a sympathizer can be installed, especially a man of prominence, such as an educator, minister, or scientist, the group can operate as an ‘independent’ organization.”[\[34\]](#)

Alinsky taught that the organizer’s first task was to make people feel that they were wise enough to diagnose their own problems, find their own solutions, and determine their own destinies. The organizer, said Alinsky, must exploit the fact that “[m]illions of people feel deep down in their hearts that there is no place for them, that they do not ‘count.’”[\[35\]](#) To exploit this state of affairs effectively, Alinsky explained, the organizer must employ such techniques as the artful use of “loaded questions designed to elicit particular responses and to steer the organization’s decision-making process in the direction which the organizer prefers.”[\[36\]](#)

“Is this manipulation?” asked Alinsky. “Certainly,” he answered instantly.[\[37\]](#) But it was manipulation toward a desirable end: “If the common man had a chance to feel that he could direct his own efforts ... that to a certain extent there was a destiny that he could do something about, that there was a dream that he could keep fighting for, then life would be wonderful living.”[\[38\]](#) In Alinsky’s calculus, the common man could achieve this renewed vitality of spirit via his membership and active participation in the People’s Organization.

Alinsky viewed as supremely important the role of the organizer, or master manipulator, whose guidance was responsible for setting the agendas of the People’s Organization. “The organizer,” Alinsky wrote, “is in a true sense reaching for the highest level for which man can reach -- to create, to be a ‘great creator,’ to play God.”[\[39\]](#)

Alinsky laid out a set of basic principles to guide the actions and decisions of radical organizers and the People’s Organizations they established. The organizer, he said, “must first rub raw the resentments of the people; fan the latent hostilities to the point of overt expression. He must search out controversy and issues, rather than avoid them, for unless there is controversy people are not concerned enough to act.”[\[40\]](#) The organizer’s function, he added, was “to agitate to the point of conflict”[\[41\]](#) and “to maneuver and bait the establishment so that it will publicly attack him as a ‘dangerous enemy.’”[\[42\]](#) “The word ‘enemy,’” said Alinsky, “is sufficient to put the organizer on the side of the people”; i.e., to convince members of the community that he is so eager to advocate on their behalf, that he has willingly opened himself up to condemnation and derision. [\[43\]](#)

But it is not enough for the organizer to be in solidarity with the people. He must also, said Alinsky, cultivate unity against a clearly identifiable enemy; he must specifically name this foe, and “singl[e] out”[\[44\]](#) precisely who is to blame for the “particular evil” that is the source of the people’s angst.[\[45\]](#) In other words, there must be a face associated with the people’s discontent. That face, Alinsky taught, “must be a personification, not something general and abstract like a corporation or City Hall.”[\[46\]](#) Rather, it should be an individual

such as a CEO, a mayor, or a president.

Alinsky summarized it this way: “Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it.... [T]here is no point to tactics unless one has a target upon which to center the attacks.”^[47] He held that the organizer’s task was to cultivate in people’s hearts a negative, visceral emotional response to the face of the enemy. “The organizer who forgets the significance of personal identification,” said Alinsky, “will attempt to answer all objections on the basis of logic and merit. With few exceptions this is a futile procedure.”^[48]

Alinsky also advised organizers to focus their attention on a small number of selected, strategic targets. Spreading an organization’s passions too thinly was a recipe for certain failure, he warned.^[49]

Alinsky advised the radical activist to avoid the temptation to concede that his opponent was not “100 per cent devil,” or that he possessed certain admirable qualities such as being “a good churchgoing man, generous to charity, and a good husband.” Such qualifying remarks, Alinsky said, “dilut[e] the impact of the attack” and amount to sheer “political idiocy.”^[50]

Alinsky stressed the need for organizers to convince their followers that the chasm between the enemy and the members of the People’s Organization was vast and unbridgeable. “Before men can act,” he said, “an issue must be polarized. Men will act when they are convinced their cause is 100 percent on the side of the angels, and that the opposition are 100 percent on the side of the devil.”^[51] Alinsky advised this course of action even though he well understood that the organizer “knows that when the time comes for negotiations it is really only a 10 percent difference.”^[52] But in Alinsky’s brand of social warfare, the ends (in this case, the transfer of power) justify virtually whatever means are required (in this case, lying).^[53]

Winning was all that mattered in Alinsky’s strategic calculus: “The morality of a means depends on whether the means is being employed at a time of imminent defeat or imminent victory.”^[54] “The man of action ... thinks only of his actual resources and the possibilities of various choices of action,” Alinsky added. “He asks only whether they are achievable and worth the cost; of means, only whether they will work.”^[55] For Alinsky, all morality was relative: “The judgment of the ethics of means is dependent on the political position of those sitting in judgment.”^[56]

Given that the enemy was to be portrayed as the very personification of evil, against whom any and all methods were fair game, Alinsky taught that an effective organizer should never give the appearance of being fully satisfied as a result of having resolved any particular conflict via compromise. Any compromise with the “devil” is, after all, by definition morally tainted and thus inadequate. Consequently, while the organizer may acknowledge that he is pleased by the compromise as a small step in the right direction, he must make it absolutely clear that there is still a long way to go, and that many grievances still remain unaddressed. The ultimate goal, said Alinsky, is not to arrive at compromise or peaceful coexistence, but rather to “crush the opposition,” bit by bit.^[57] “A People’s Organization is dedicated to eternal war,” said Alinsky. “... A war is not an intellectual debate, and in the war against social evils there are no rules of fair play.... When you have war, it means that neither side can agree on anything.... In our war against the social menaces of mankind there

can be no compromise. It is life or death.”[\[58\]](#)

Alinsky warned the organizer to be on guard against the possibility that the enemy might offer him “a constructive alternative” aimed at resolving the conflict. Said Alinsky, “You cannot risk being trapped by the enemy in his sudden agreement with your demand and saying, ‘You’re right -- we don’t know what to do about this issue. Now you tell us.’”[\[59\]](#) Such capitulation by the enemy would have the effect of diffusing the righteous indignation of the People’s Organization, whose very identity is inextricably woven into the fight for long-denied justice; i.e., whose struggle and identity are synonymous. If the perceived oppressor surrenders or extends a hand of friendship in an effort to end the conflict, the crusade of the People’s Organization is jeopardized. This cannot be permitted. Eternal war, by definition, must never end.

While Alinsky endorsed ruthlessness in waging war against the enemy, he was nonetheless mindful that certain approaches were more likely to win the hearts and minds of the people whose support would be crucial to the organizers’ ultimate victory. Above all, he taught that in order to succeed, the organizer and his People’s Organization needed to target their message toward the middle class. “Mankind,” said Alinsky, “has been and is divided into three parts: the Haves, the Have-Nots, and the Have-a-Little, Want Mores.”[\[60\]](#) He explained that in America, the Have-a-Little, Want-Mores (i.e., members of the middle class) were the most numerous and therefore of the utmost importance.[\[61\]](#) Said Alinsky: “Torn between upholding the status quo to protect the little they have, yet wanting change so they can get more, they [the middle class] become split personalities... Thermopolitically they are tepid and rooted in inertia. Today in Western society and particularly in the United States they comprise the majority of our population.”[\[62\]](#)

Alinsky stressed that organizers and their followers needed to take care, when first unveiling their particular crusade for “change,” not to alienate the middle class with any type of crude language, defiant demeanor, or menacing appearance that suggested radicalism or a disrespect for middle class mores and traditions. For this very reason, he disliked the hippies and counterculture activists of the 1960s. [As Richard Poe puts it:](#) “Alinsky scolded the Sixties Left for scaring off potential converts in Middle America. True revolutionaries do not flaunt their radicalism, Alinsky taught. They cut their hair, put on suits and infiltrate the system from within.”

In his book *Radical in Chief*, Stanley Kurtz describes Alinsky as "a cross between a democratic socialist and a communist fellow traveler." But Alinsky carefully avoiding drawing any attention to that fact. Writes Kurtz: "He was smart enough to avoid Marxist language in public.... Instead of calling for the overthrow of the bourgeoisie, Alinsky and his followers talk about 'confronting power.' Instead of advocating socialist revolution, they demand 'radical social change.' Instead of demanding attacks on capitalists, they go after 'targets' or 'enemies.'"

While Alinsky's ultimate goal was nothing less than the “radicalization of the middle class,” he stressed the importance of “learning to talk the language of those with whom one is trying to converse.”[\[63\]](#) “Tactics must begin with the experience of the middle class,” he said, “accepting their aversion to rudeness, vulgarity, and conflict. Start them easy, don’t scare them off.”[\[64\]](#)

To appeal to the middle class, Alinsky continued, “goals must be phrased in general terms like ‘Liberty, Equality, Fraternity’; ‘Of the Common Welfare’; ‘Pursuit of happiness’; or ‘Bread and Peace.’”[\[65\]](#) He suggested, for instance, that an effective organizer “discovers what their [the middle class] definition of the police is, and their language -- [and] he discards the rhetoric that always says ‘pig’ [in reference to police]. Instead of hostile rejection he is seeking bridges of communication and unity over the gaps.... He will view with strategic sensitivity the nature of middle-class behavior with its hang-ups over rudeness or aggressive, insulting, profane actions. All this and more must be grasped and used to radicalize parts of the middle class.”[\[66\]](#)

A related principle taught by Alinsky was that radical organizers must not only speak the language of the middle class, but that they also must dress their crusades in the vestments of morality. “Moral rationalization,” he said, “is indispensable to all kinds of action, whether to justify the selection or the use of ends or means.”[\[67\]](#) “All great leaders,” he added, “invoked ‘moral principles’ to cover naked self-interest in the clothing of ‘freedom,’ ‘equality of mankind,’ ‘a law higher than man-made law,’ and so on.” In short: “All effective actions require the passport of morality.”[\[68\]](#)

But Alinsky understood that there was a flip side to his strategy of speaking the palatable language of the middle class and the reassuring parlance of morality. Specifically, he said that organizers must be entirely unpredictable and unmistakably willing -- for the sake of the moral principles in whose name they claim to act -- to watch society descend into utter chaos and anarchy. He stated that they must be prepared, if necessary, to “go into a state of complete confusion and draw [their] opponent into the vortex of the same confusion.”[\[69\]](#)

One way in which organizers and their disciples can broadcast their preparedness for this possibility is by staging loud, defiant, massive protest rallies expressing deep rage and discontent over one particular injustice or another. Such demonstrations can give onlookers the impression that a mass movement is preparing to shift into high gear, and that its present (already formidable) size is but a fraction of what it eventually will become. A “mass impression,” said Alinsky, can be lasting and intimidating: “Power is not only what you have but what the enemy thinks you have.”[\[70\]](#) “The threat,” he added, “is usually more terrifying than the thing itself.”[\[71\]](#) “If your organization is small in numbers,” said Alinsky, “... conceal the members in the dark but raise a din and clamor that will make the listener believe that your organization numbers many more than it does.”[\[72\]](#)

“Wherever possible,” Alinsky counseled, “go outside the experience of the enemy. Here you want to cause confusion, fear, and retreat.”[\[73\]](#) Marching mobs of chanting demonstrators accomplishes this objective. The average observer’s reaction to such a display is of a dual nature: First he is afraid. But he also recalls the organizer’s initial articulation of middle-class ideals and morals. Thus he convinces himself that the People’s Organization is surely composed of reasonable people who actually hold values similar to his own, and who seek resolutions that will be beneficial to both sides. This thought process causes him to proffer -- in hopes of appeasing the angry mobs -- concessions and admissions of guilt, which the organizer in turn exploits to gain still greater moral leverage and to extort further concessions.

In Alinsky's view, action was more often the catalyst for revolutionary fervor than vice versa. He deemed it essential for the organizer to get people to act first (e.g., participate in a demonstration) and rationalize their actions later. "Get them to move in the right direction first," said Alinsky. "They'll explain to themselves later why they moved in that direction."[\[74\]](#)

Among the most vital tenets of Alinsky's method were the following:

- "Make the enemy live up to their own book of rules. You can kill them with this, for they can no more live up to their own rules than the Christian Church can live up to Christianity."[\[75\]](#)
- "No organization, including organized religion, can live up to the letter of its own book. You can club them to death with their 'book' of rules and regulations."[\[76\]](#)
- "Practically all people live in a world of contradictions. They espouse a morality which they do not practice.... This dilemma can and should be fully utilized by the organizer in getting individuals and groups involved in a People's Organization. It is a very definite Achilles' heel even in the most materialistic person. Caught in the trap of his own contradictions, that person will find it difficult to show satisfactory cause to both the organizer and himself as to why he should not join and participate in the organization. He will be driven either to participation or else to a public and private admission of his own lack of faith in democracy and man."[\[77\]](#)

Alinsky taught that in order to most effectively cast themselves as defenders of moral principles and human decency, organizers must react with "shock, horror, and moral outrage" whenever their targeted enemy in any way misspeaks or fails to live up to his "book of rules."[\[78\]](#)

Moreover, said Alinsky, whenever possible the organizer must deride his enemy and dismiss him as someone unworthy of being taken seriously because he is either intellectually deficient or morally bankrupt. "The enemy properly goaded and guided in his reaction will be your major strength," said Alinsky.[\[79\]](#) He advised organizers to "laugh at the enemy" in an effort to provoke "an irrational anger."[\[80\]](#) "Ridicule," said Alinsky, "is man's most potent weapon. It is almost impossible to counterattack ridicule. Also it infuriates the opposition, who then react to your advantage."[\[81\]](#)

According to Alinsky, it was vital that organizers focus on multiple crusades and multiple approaches. "A tactic that drags on too long becomes a drag," he wrote. "Man can sustain militant interest in any issue for only a limited time ... New issues and crises are always developing..."[\[82\]](#) "Keep the pressure on," he continued, "with different tactics and actions, and utilize all events of the period for your purpose."[\[83\]](#)

Toward this end, Alinsky advised organizers to be sure that they always kept more than one "fight in the bank." In other words, organizers should keep a stockpile of comparatively small crusades which they are already prepared to conduct, and to which they can instantly turn their attention after having won a major victory of some type. These "fights in the bank" serve the dual purpose of keeping the organization's momentum going, while not allowing its major crusade to get "stale" from excessive public exposure.[\[84\]](#)

A People's Organization, said Alinsky, can build a wide-based membership only if it focuses on multiple issues (e.g., civil rights, civil liberties, welfare, rent, urban renewal, the environment, etc.) "Multiple issues mean constant action and life," Alinsky wrote.[\[85\]](#)

Alinsky cautioned organizers to judiciously choose to initiate only those battles which they stood a very good chance of winning. "The organizer's job," he said, "is to begin to build confidence and hope in the idea of organization and thus in the people themselves: to win limited victories, each of which will build confidence and the feeling that 'if we can do so much with what we have now, just think what we will be able to do when we get big and strong.' It is almost like taking a prize-fighter up the road to the championship -- you have to very carefully and selectively pick his opponents, knowing full well that certain defeats would be demoralizing and end his career."[\[86\]](#)

Alinsky also taught that in some cases the mission of the People's Organization could be aided if the organizer was able to get himself arrested and thereafter exploit the publicity he derived from the arrest. "Jailing the revolutionary leaders and their followers," Alinsky said, "... strengthens immeasurably the position of the leaders with their people by surrounding the jailed leadership with an aura of martyrdom; it deepens the identification of the leadership with their people." It shows, he said, "that their leadership cares so much for them, and is so sincerely committed to the issue, that it is willing to suffer imprisonment for the cause."[\[87\]](#) But Alinsky stipulated that organizers should seek to be jailed only for a short duration (from one day to two months); longer terms of incarceration, he said, have a tendency to fall from public consciousness and to be forgotten.[\[88\]](#)

During the 1960s Alinsky was an enormously influential force in American life. As Richard Poe [reports](#): "When President Johnson launched his War on Poverty in 1964, Alinsky allies infiltrated the program, steering federal money into Alinsky projects. In 1966, Senator Robert Kennedy allied himself with union leader Cesar Chavez, an Alinsky disciple. Chavez had worked ten years for Alinsky, beginning in 1952. Kennedy soon drifted into Alinsky's circle. After race riots shook Rochester, New York, Alinsky descended on the city and began pressuring Eastman-Kodak to hire more blacks. Kennedy supported Alinsky's shakedown."

Alinsky died in 1972, but his legacy lives on as a staple of leftist method, a veritable blueprint for revolution (which he and his disciples euphemistically refer to as "change"). Two of his most notable modern-day disciples are [Hillary Clinton](#) and [Barack Obama](#).

In 1969 Hillary Clinton wrote her 92-page [senior thesis](#) on Alinsky's theories. A great admirer of Alinsky's blend of ruthless and stealth activist tactics, Hillary personally interviewed the famed author for her project. She concluded her thesis by [stating](#):

"Alinsky is regarded by many as the proponent of a dangerous socio/political philosophy. As such, he has been feared -- just as Eugene Debs [the five-time Socialist Party candidate for U.S. President] or Walt Whitman or Martin Luther King has been feared, because each embraced the most radical of political faiths -- democracy."

Hillary would maintain her allegiance to Alinsky's teachings throughout her adult life. [According to a March 2007 Washington Post report](#):

"As first lady, Clinton occasionally lent her name to projects endorsed by the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), the Alinsky group that had offered her a job in 1968. She raised money and attended two events organized by the Washington Interfaith Network, an IAF affiliate."

Ultimately, Hillary's investigation of Alinsky's methods and ideals led her to conclude that the Lyndon Johnson-era federal antipoverty programs did not go far enough in redistributing wealth among the American people, and did not give sufficient power to the poor.

When Hillary graduated from Wellesley in 1969, she was offered a job with Alinsky's new training institute in Chicago. She opted instead to enroll at Yale Law School.

Unlike Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama never personally met Saul Alinsky. By the time Alinsky died in 1972, Obama was only 11 years old. But as a young man, he became a master practitioner of Alinsky's methods. In 1985 a small group of 20-odd churches in Chicago offered Obama a job helping residents of poor, predominantly black, Far South Side neighborhoods. Accepting that opportunity, Obama became Director of the Developing Communities Project, where he worked for the next three years on initiatives that ranged from job training to school reform to hazardous waste cleanup. David Freddoso, author of the 2008 book *The Case Against Barack Obama*, summarizes Obama's community-organizing efforts as follows:

"He pursued manifestly worthy goals; protecting people from asbestos in government housing projects is obviously a good thing and a responsibility of the government that built them. But [in every case except one] the proposed solution to every problem on the South Side was a distribution of government funds ..."

[Three of Obama's mentors in Chicago were trained](#) at the Alinsky-founded Industrial Areas Foundation. (The Developing Communities Project itself was an affiliate of the [Gamaliel Foundation](#), whose modus operandi for the creation of "a more just and democratic society" is rooted firmly in the Alinsky method.)

One of Obama's early mentors in the Alinsky method, Mike Kruglik, would later [say](#) the following about Obama:

"He was a natural, the undisputed master of agitation, who could engage a room full of recruiting targets in a rapid-fire Socratic dialogue, nudging them to admit that they were not living up to their own standards. As with the panhandler, he could be aggressive and confrontational. With probing, sometimes personal questions, he would pinpoint the source of pain in their lives, tearing down their egos just enough before dangling a carrot of hope that they could make things better."

For several years, Obama himself [taught workshops](#) on the Alinsky method. Also, beginning in the mid-1980s, Obama worked with [ACORN](#), the

Alinskyite grassroots political organization that grew out of [George Wiley's](#) National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO).

This profile was written by John Perazzo.

Notes:

[1] Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals* (New York: Vintage Books), March 1972 edition, p. xxii. (Original publication was in 1971.)

[2] *Ibid.*, p.3.

[3] J. Edgar Hoover, *Masters of Deceit* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1958), p. 213.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals* (New York: Vintage Books), 1989, p. 90. (Original publication was in 1946.)

[6] *Ibid.*, p.91.

[7] *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 26.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 25.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, p. 7.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 3.

[13] Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, pp. 21-22.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 4.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 92.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 40.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 92.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 45.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 43.

[20] Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, pp. 120-121.

[21] Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, pp. 6-7.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

[23] *Ibid.*

- [\[24\]](#) Ibid., p. 40.
- [\[25\]](#) Ibid., p. 16.
- [\[26\]](#) Ibid., p. 60.
- [\[27\]](#) Ibid., p. 25.
- [\[28\]](#) Ibid., p. 57.
- [\[29\]](#) Ibid., p. 59.
- [\[30\]](#) Ibid., p. 60.
- [\[31\]](#) Ibid., pp. 59-60.
- [\[32\]](#) Ibid., p. 133.
- [\[33\]](#) Ibid., pp. 48, 64.
- [\[34\]](#) J. Edgar Hoover, *Masters of Deceit*, p. 90.
- [\[35\]](#) Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, p. 44.
- [\[36\]](#) Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, p. 91. Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, p. 104.
- [\[37\]](#) Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, p. 92.
- [\[38\]](#) Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, p. 43.
- [\[39\]](#) Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, p. 61.
- [\[40\]](#) Ibid., pp. 116-117.
- [\[41\]](#) Ibid., p. 117.
- [\[42\]](#) Ibid., p. 100.
- [\[43\]](#) Ibid.
- [\[44\]](#) Ibid., p. 130.
- [\[45\]](#) Ibid.
- [\[46\]](#) Ibid., p. 133.
- [\[47\]](#) Ibid., pp. 130-131.
- [\[48\]](#) Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, p. 125.
- [\[49\]](#) Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, p. 151.
- [\[50\]](#) Ibid., p. 134.
- [\[51\]](#) Ibid., p. 78.

- [52] Ibid.
- [53] Ibid., p. 29.
- [54] Ibid., p. 34.
- [55] Ibid., p. 24.
- [56] Ibid., p. 26.
- [57] Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, p. 150.
- [58] Ibid., pp. 133-134.
- [59] Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, p. 130.
- [60] Ibid., p. 18.
- [61] Ibid., pp. 18-20.
- [62] Ibid., p. 19.
- [63] Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, p. 93.
- [64] Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, p. 195.
- [65] Ibid., p. 45.
- [66] Ibid., p. 186.
- [67] Ibid., p. 43.
- [68] Ibid., pp. 43-44.
- [69] Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, pp. 150-151.
- [70] Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, p. 161, p. 127.
- [71] Ibid., p. 129.
- [72] Ibid., p. 126.
- [73] Ibid., p. 127.
- [74] Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, pp. 169-170.
- [75] Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, p. 128.
- [76] Ibid., p. 152.
- [77] Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, pp. 93-94.
- [78] Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, p. 130.
- [79] Ibid., p. 136.
- [80] Ibid., p. 138.

[\[81\]](#) Ibid., p. 128.

[\[82\]](#) Ibid.

[\[83\]](#) Ibid.

[\[84\]](#) Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals*, pp. 151-152.

[\[85\]](#) Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals*, pp. 76-78, 120.

[\[86\]](#) Ibid., p. 114.

[\[87\]](#) Ibid., p. 155.

[\[88\]](#) Ibid., p. 156.