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# Saul Alinsky: A Radical Who Matters

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Saul Alinsky, who died 36 years ago and is only dimly known today, has had a major impact on the 2008 presidential election from the grave. He is a radical who matters, whose theories of political organizing are the lifeblood of the Obama campaign, as well as influencing the political career of the temporarily vanquished Hillary Clinton.

Saul Alinsky, it was said, looked like an accountant, but talked like a stevedore. William F. Buckley, Jr. grudgingly stated that he was "twice formidable, and very close to being an organizational genius."

Saul Alinsky was an avowed radical, yet his definition of "radical" was not what most people would expect. He dressed and acted "square" with his nerdy glasses and short hair. He mostly worked with traditional church groups, not wild-eyed hippies or radicals, whom he disdained as ineffective. ("They couldn't organize a luncheon," he said.) He criticized both conservatives and liberals, but liberals were the ones mostly drawn to him, although in his view, a liberal was a person "who puts his foot down firmly on thin air."

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Organizing for power was Alinsky's political end, not political party influence. When he asked his new students why they wanted to organize, they would invariably respond with "selfless bromides about wanting to help others," according to Ryan Lizza writing in *The New Republic*. Alinsky would then "scream back at them that there was a one-word answer: 'You want to organize for power!'"

In his seminal 1971 book, *Rules for Radicals*, Alinsky said: "*The Prince* was written by Machiavelli for the 'Haves' on how to hold power. *Rules for Radicals* is written for the 'Have-Nots' on how to take it away." In his other book, *Reveille for Radicals*, Alinsky described his philosophy as "a free man working for an open society."

At the core, his message was that a radical is a person who loves people with his head and heart, and who want to redress the inequities of power that the powerless endure. He has been characterized as part of a small group that comprises the "non-socialist left." He deeply criticized President Lyndon Johnson's socialistic Great Society programs, rejecting them in favor of community-based solutions. But though he envisioned a bottom-up as opposed to a top-down revolution, his idea of improving the lot of the "have nots" by taking from the "haves," using government compulsion when necessary, was still socialistic.

Also, like his fellow leftists, he believed that there were no fixed truths but that truth was relative and always changing, with "no final answers, no dogma, no formula, no panacea." Thus, the aims of his revolution to empower the "have nots" could also shift, depending on how "truth" was interpreted at any particular time. Those who learned from him directly were often much more willing than he was to use the federal government to take from the "haves" and give to the "have nots."

Ironically, Hillary Clinton, who at Wellesley College interviewed Alinsky and wrote her 80-page senior thesis on him, seemed somewhat skeptical of Alinsky's beliefs in her thesis. At that time, she was much more conservative in outlook than she is now. However, she later became much more socialistic, as revealed by her 2004 remark: "We're going to take things away from you on behalf of the common good." Jerome Corsi, in his book *The Obama Nation*, calls her one of "Alinsky's prize pupils" — and that prize pupil is attempting to impose a top-down revolution through the federal government.

Barack Obama, although assiduously avoiding any mention of Alinsky in his two books, *Dreams From My Father* and *The Audacity of Hope*, intensively trained in Alinsky methodology in several organizations started by him or closely allied with him. He showed his fealty to Alinsky political theory when he recently remarked to Samuel "Joe the Plumber" Wurzelbacher: "I think when you spread the wealth around, it's good for everybody." Like Hillary Clinton, he wants to accomplish this through the federal government.

#### How He Organized for Power

Saul Alinsky almost single-handedly invented the modern art of community organizing. His writing sparkles, and by all reports he had a winning manner with people, although he was intentionally profane and provocative with those in the power structure. Like all great communicators he told stories to make his points, even though he sometimes stretched things a bit. His books are interesting and

literate, the products of a fine mind. He was a master teacher of others, and left a legion of trained disciples and organizations, including Obama and Clinton.

Where many persons part company with Alinsky is in his amoral approach to getting power, where the ends justify the means. Alinsky said, "Moral rationalization is indispensable to all kinds of action, whether to justify the selection or the use of ends or means.... All great leaders invoked 'moral principles' to cover naked self-interest in the clothing of 'freedom.'... All effective actions require the passport of morality." To him, "An organizer ... does not have a fixed truth — truth to him is relative and changing."

Flippantly atheistic, he dedicated his *Rules for Radicals* to Lucifer, the first radical who won his own kingdom, and said that he would choose hell unreservedly over heaven, where he would immediately proceed to organize the "have nots" there.

Despite his atheism, Alinsky's most frequent allies in his community organizing were Christian churches. His first and most famous organizing project was in a notorious slum in Chicago called "Back of the Yards," in conjunction with the Catholic Church in 1939.

He never approached priests or ministers in religious or moral terms. He appealed to their self-interest, arguing that if the people organized and became more prosperous, their collection plates would be fuller. Although pro-abortion, he never expressed his opinions about that in Catholic areas.

When he organized the "Back of the Yards" slum in the Chicago meatpacking district, Alinsky first went to the area to study its problems and see who could be organized. He determined that he needed to unionize the meatpacking workers if they were ever to gain enough money and clout to fight the corporations and slumlords there. The dominant institution in the neighborhood was the Catholic Church, so after gathering a community-wide coalition of workers and others through the Catholic churches, he was ready to go.

He started with boycotts of stores, strikes against meatpackers, rent strikes against "slumlords," and picketing of local machine bosses, which the establishment resisted. He was even shot at by meat industry goons (who missed). Then he came up with the type of bright idea that distinguished his genius throughout his career. He was able to maneuver Chicago Mayor Ed Kelly, who was known for opposing organized labor, into forcing the meatpackers to sign a union deal. Kelly wanted political attention and financial spoils from his hero, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, but was shut out because of his anti-labor stance. Alinsky had contacts with powerful labor organizer John L. Lewis of the C.I.O., and was able to offer Mayor Kelly instant credibility with FDR, if he could get the meatpackers to sign a union agreement. Kelly did, the next day, and conditions in the Back of the Yards radically improved over the years, to the point where former Mayor Richard J. Daley moved there.

Thus Alinsky's reputation as an organizer began, to be followed by dozens more unique projects around the country over three decades. He constantly developed new, creative approaches which took his opponents off-guard. Most of these efforts improved the lives of thousands of persons caught in desperate poverty, at least in the short term, but always at a great price of social unrest and growth of government.

### **Contemporary Alinsky-ism**

After Alinsky's death in 1972, many large new community-organizing networks developed using his methods. These include Alinsky's own Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF), along with ACORN, Citizen Action, National People's Action, PICO, DART, and the Gamaliel Foundation. IAF and its progeny have produced radical organizing luminaries such as Cesar Chavez. Many of these groups have been instrumental in promoting Barack Obama's presidential candidacy.

One Alinsky offshoot that has received recent notoriety is the "Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now," or ACORN. Through scores of front organizations, ACORN organizes workers, conducts "living wage" campaigns, registers voters, and promotes an array of leftist social issues like public housing. Generally operating quietly, ACORN has been thrust into the limelight because of voter registration fraud allegations in over a dozen states and because of Barack Obama's current and former association with it. In addition to paying some \$800,000 to one of its scores of front organizations, Obama worked for ACORN in his community-organizing days in Chicago, before he started his political career. ACORN activism has also substantially benefited Obama's presidential campaign.

In a May 2008 *National Review Online* article, Stanley Kurtz reports on a July 31, 1997 Chicago City Council meeting where 200 ACORN protesters stormed in, pushed over the metal detector and table used to screen visitors, backed police against the doors to the council chamber, and blocked late-arriving aldermen and city staff from entering the session. The protest was orchestrated by ACORN's Madeleine Talbot, who was the woman who first drew Obama into an alliance with ACORN, and whose staff Obama helped train.

In an article in the Winter 2003-Spring 2004 issue of the journal *Social Policy*, author and ACORN activist Toni Foulkes chronicles close ties between ACORN and Obama, which Obama utterly bypasses in all of his written works. He represented ACORN in a

voting-rights lawsuit, which he won; benefited from direct ACORN politicking all over Chicago on his behalf; and ran ACORN leadership training sessions. According to Foulkes, "By the time he ran for U.S. Senate, we were old friends."

Barack Obama also worked for the Developing Communities Project during the mid-1980s, which was part of the Gamaliel network, a large group of "grassroots, interfaith, interracial, multi-issue organizations working together to create a more just and more democratic society," using Alinsky's methods. Jerome Corsi, in his recent book *The Obama Nation*, states that "in addition to receiving instruction from experienced Alinsky organizers in Chicago ... Obama went to school on Alinsky. Obama advanced to the point where he was able to teach in a classroom setting to new organizers associated with the Gamaliel foundation and the [Alinsky founded] Industrial Areas Foundation, both of which organize community groups, primarily religious groups, and trace their lineage to Saul Alinsky."

Gamaliel founder Greg Galluzzo taught Alinsky's tactics to Obama, who in turn trained community organizers for Gamaliel. Its employees later taught them to Obama campaign workers. Galluzzo said, "I regard myself as St. Paul who never met Jesus," referring to Alinsky, who died before Galluzzo could meet him in Chicago. "I'm his best disciple."

For all of Alinsky's brilliance, he unleashed a socialist virus of community organizing into the country that has blossomed into new centers of government power which he himself might have felt compelled to organize against.

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