

# The Progress Report

## *Empowering People, Not Elites*

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### Interview with Saul Alinsky

Saul Alinsky is, along with [Thomas Paine](#), [Henry George](#), and [Dorothy Day](#), one of the great American leaders of the nonsocialist left.

Response to [our earlier article dealing with Alinsky](#) has been so great that we worked to obtain this extensive interview with him, conducted by Playboy magazine in 1972. It is, by far, the most detailed conversation with Alinsky that we know of. The interview will be appearing in weekly installments here at The Progress Report.

#### Introduction

For the past 35 years, the American establishment has come under relentless attack from a bespectacled, conservatively dressed community organizer who looks like an accountant and talks like a stevedore. According to *The New York Times*, Saul Alinsky "is hated and feared in high places from coast to coast" for being "a major force in the revolution of powerless people -- indeed, he is emerging as a movement unto himself." And a *Time* magazine essay concluded that "it is not too much to argue that [American democracy is being altered by Alinsky's ideas](#)."

In the course of nearly four decades of organizing the poor for radical social action, Alinsky has made many enemies, but he has also won the respect, however grudging, of a disparate array of public figures: French philosopher Jacques Maritain has called him "one of the few really great men of this century," and even William Buckley, Jr., a bitter ideological foe, has admitted that "Alinsky is twice formidable, and very close to being an organizational genius." He was preceded by his reputation on a recent tour of Asia, where he was hailed by political and student leaders from Tokyo to Singapore as the one American with concrete revolutionary lessons for the impoverished Third World.

Not bad for a slum kid from the South Side of Chicago, where he was born on January 30, 1909. After working his way through the University of Chicago, Alinsky attended graduate school for two years, then dropped out to work as an Illinois state criminologist. In the mid-Thirties, as a side line, he began to work as an organizer with the then-radical C.I.O., in which he soon became a close friend and aide to John L. Lewis. Then, in 1939, he phased himself out of active participation in the labor movement and into the role of community organizer, starting in his own back yard -- the Chicago slums. His efforts to turn scattered, voiceless discontent into a united protest aroused the admiration of Illinois governor Adlai E. Stevenson, who said Alinsky's aims "most faithfully reflect our ideals of brotherhood, tolerance, charity and the dignity of the

individual." In 1940, Alinsky elicited a generous grant from liberal millionaire Marshall Field III, who provided funds to establish the Industrial Areas Foundation, which has remained Alinsky's primary base of operation. Throughout the next decade, with Field's financial backing, Alinsky repeated his initial success in a score of slum communities across the nation, from Kansas City and Detroit to the barrios of Southern California.

In the Fifties, he turned his attention to the black ghetto, and again began in Chicago. His actions quickly earned the enmity of Mayor Richard J. Daley (who, while remaining firmly opposed to Alinsky's methods over the years, recently conceded that "Alinsky loves Chicago the same as I do"). He also redoubled his travel schedule as an "outside agitator." After long but successful struggles in New York State and a dozen different trouble spots around the country, he flew to the West Coast, at the request of the Bay Area Presbyterian Churches, to organize the black ghetto in Oakland, California. Hearing of his plans, the panic-stricken Oakland City Council promptly introduced a resolution banning him from the city, and an amendment by one councilman to send him a 50-foot length of rope with which to hang himself was carried overwhelmingly. (Alinsky responded by mailing the council a box of diapers.)

When Oakland police threatened to arrest him if he entered the city limits, he crossed the Bay Bridge with a small band of reporters and TV cameramen, armed only with a birth certificate and a U.S. passport. "The welcoming committee of Oakland police looked and felt pretty silly," Alinsky fondly recalls. Oakland was forced to back down, and Alinsky established a local all-black organization to fight the establishment.

By the late Sixties, Alinsky was leaving most of the field work to his aides and concentrating on training community organizers through the Industrial Areas Foundation Training Institute, which he calls a "school for professional radicals." Funded principally by a foundation grant from Midas Muffler, the school aims at turning out 25 skilled organizers annually to work in black and white communities across the nation. "Just think of all the hell we've kicked up around the country with only four or five full-time organizers," Alinsky told newsmen at the school's opening session. "Things will really move now."

He was right -- if his subsequent success as a radical organizer can be measured by the degree of opposition and exasperation he aroused among the guardians of the status quo. A conservative church journal wrote that "it is impossible to follow both Jesus Christ and Saul Alinsky." Barron's, the business weekly, took that odd logic a step further and charged that Alinsky "has a record of affiliation with Communist fronts and causes." And a top Office of Economic Opportunity official, Hyman Bookbinder, characterized Alinsky's attacks on the antipoverty program (for "welfare colonialism") as "outrageously false, ignorant, intemperate headline-seeking."

Perhaps the one achievement of his life that has drawn almost universally favorable response was the publication of his new book, "Rules for Radicals," which has received glowing reviews in practically every newspaper and magazine in the country. To show his staff exactly how he felt about all this unaccustomed approbation, he called them in to say, "Don't worry, boys, we'll weather this storm of approval and come out as hated as ever." It provided Alinsky with some consolation that the book provoked a hostile reaction in at least one major city -- his own. The Chicago Tribune greeted the publication of "Rules for Radicals" with a lead editorial headlined "ALINSKY'S AT IT AGAIN" and concluded:

"Rubbing raw the sores of discontent may be jolly good fun for him, but we are unable to regard it as a contribution to social betterment. The country has enough problems of the insoluble sort as things are without working up new ones for no discernible purpose except Alinsky's amusement."

To which Alinsky responded: "The establishment can accept being screwed, but not being laughed at. What bugs them most about me is that unlike humorless radicals, I have a hell of a good time doing what I'm doing."

*[Next Week -- Alinsky Barges In](#)*

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Alinsky's biography is available [here](#)

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