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How a Community Organizer Became President

On August 31, 2008, right after the Democratic National Convention in Colorado, the *Boston Globe* published a letter from L. David Alinsky boasting about how Barack Obama had made enormously effective use of his training in the methods of David's late father, the famous Chicago radical, Saul D. Alinsky.

David Alinsky gloated: "I am proud to see that my father's model for organizing is being applied successfully beyond local community organizing to affect the Democratic campaign in 2008. It is a fine tribute to Saul Alinsky as we approach his 100th birthday."

Confirming that Obama was trained in Chicago by the Alinsky apparatus, David Alinsky wrote: "It is an amazingly powerful format, and the method of my late father always works to get the message out and get the supporters on board. When executed meticulously and thoughtfully, it is a powerful strategy for initiating change and making it really happen. Obama learned his lesson well."

Describing how the Democratic National Convention was a "perfectly organized event, Saul Alinsky style," David Alinsky wrote: "All the elements were present: the individual stories told by real people of their situations and hardships, the packed-to-the rafters crowd, the crowd's chanting of key phrases and names, the action on the spot of texting and phoning to show instant support and commitment to jump into the political battle, the rallying selections of music, the setting of the agenda by the power people." http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/letters/articles/2008/08/31/son_sees_fathers_handiwork_in_convention/

Indeed, the son has reason to boast that his father's organizing techniques were so effectively used by a longshot candidate to climb the path to America's highest office. The most significant part of Barack Obama's education was not at Columbia University or Harvard Law School, but the years he spent being trained in the Saul Alinsky system for community organizing and then practicing what he learned.

Obama was trained by the Alinsky organization called Industrial Areas Foundation (founded by Alinsky in 1940), after which Obama taught workshops on the Alinsky method. Obama learned how to put together a new style presidential campaign

that decisively defeated the Clinton machine plus the Republican Party in a dramatic one-two punch never before seen in politics.

Alinsky's organization was based in Chicago, nestled under the protective wing of the Democratic political machine, but his reach extended all over the country from New York to California. Hillary Clinton wrote her Wellesley thesis on Alinsky, who then offered her a job (which she turned down to enroll in Yale Law School).

Americans who care about our nation and its future should study Saul Alinsky and what is known today as "the Alinsky ideology and Alinsky concepts of mass organization for power." These were the lessons he taught his eager students. He died in 1972, but he left behind a cadre of community organizers who had been trained how to carry out the political strategies described in Alinsky's frank and elegantly written book called **Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals** (originally published by Random House in 1971).

The tone of this book and its obvious determination to change America are made clear by this dedication printed at the very beginning:

"Lest we forget at least an over-the-shoulder acknowledgment to the very first radical: from all our legends, mythology, and history (and who is to know where mythology leaves off and history begins — or which is which), the first radical known to man who rebelled against the establishment and did it so effectively that he at least won his own kingdom — Lucifer."

Saul Alinsky's worldview was that the United States is an oppressive and racist society where most people (the Have-Nots) are the victims of economic injustice with a future of despair. He wanted a radical change of America's social and economic structure, and he planned to achieve that through creating public discontent and moral confusion. His goal was not to arrive at compromise or peaceful solution; his goal was to crush the Haves and transform society.

Alinsky developed concepts to achieve power through mass organization. Organizing was his word for revolution. His 1946 book, *Reville for Radicals*, had already made clear

that he wanted to move the United States from capitalism to socialism, where the means of production would be owned by all the people (*i.e.*, the government). A believer in economic determinism, he viewed unemployment, disease, crime and bigotry as byproducts of capitalism. So he called for massive change.

To achieve this, he sought local community organizers who projected confidence, vision and change. Barack Obama fit the profile. Alinsky didn't want just talkers; he wanted radicals who were prepared to take bold action to organize the discontented, precipitate crises, grab power, and thereby transform society. He taught these radicals how to infiltrate existing institutions such as churches, unions and political parties, gain influence in them, and then introduce change.

Chapter 1 of *Rules for Radicals* called *The Purpose* makes Alinsky's goal very clear. His worldview is that mankind is divided into three parts: "the Haves, the Have-Nots, and the Have-a-Little, Want Mores." His purpose is to teach the Have-Nots how to take power and money away from the Haves. "We are concerned," he said, "with how to create mass organizations to seize power. . . . We are talking about a mass power organization which will change the world. . . . This means revolution."

"Change" is Alinsky's favorite word, used on page after page. "I will argue," he writes, "that man's hopes lie in the acceptance of the great law of change." Alinsky uses what he calls "general concepts of change" to move us toward "a science of revolution." What he calls "change" means massive change in our socio-economic structure. What he calls "organizing" means pursuing confrontational political tactics.

Alinsky teaches the Have-Nots to "hate the establishment of the Haves" because they have "power, money, food, security, and luxury. They suffocate in their surpluses while the Have-Nots starve." He claims that "justice, morality, law, and order, are mere words used by the Haves to justify and secure their status quo." He proclaims that his aim is to teach the Have-Nots "how to organize for power: how to get it and to use it."

Alinsky's second chapter, called *Of Means and Ends*, craftily poses many difficult moral dilemmas, and his "tenth rule of the ethics of means and ends" is: "you do what you can with what you have and clothe it with moral arguments."

He doesn't ignore traditional moral standards or dismiss them as unnecessary. He is much more devious; he teaches his followers that "Moral rationalization is indispensable at all times of action whether to justify the selection or the use of ends or means." He reminds his trainees that "All effective actions require the passport of morality."

Alinsky certainly doesn't mean that all actions must be moral. He means that you decide what you want or need to do and then cloak your actions with the language of moral-

ity. Phrase your goals in "general terms like 'Liberty, Equality, Fraternity,' 'Of the Common Welfare,' 'Pursuit of Happiness,' or 'Bread and Peace.'" He reminds us that the Communists used words like "democracy" and "equality," but they had no relation whatsoever to what Americans understand by those terms.

At the same time, Alinsky admonishes his organizers that they are conducting war, so there are no rules of fair play and there can be no compromise.

Recognizing the importance of words, Alinsky demands that his organizers use the word "power," which he calls a word of force, vigor and simplicity. Power is what he wants — and he doesn't want to be bothered with those who shrink from using this powerful word. He advises his followers not "to pander to those who have no stomach for straight language."

In the chapter called *The Education of an Organizer*, Alinsky explains that he conducted "a special training school for organizers with a full-time, fifteen-month program." It wasn't an easy regimen, Alinsky warned; it "requires frequent long conferences on organizational problems, analysis of power patterns, communication, conflict tactics, the education and development of community leaders, and the methods of introduction of new issues."

The qualities Alinsky looked for in a good organizer were ego ("reaching for the highest level for which man can reach — to create, to be a 'great creator,' to play God"), curiosity (raising "questions that agitate, that break through the accepted pattern"), irreverence ("nothing is sacred"; the organizer "detests dogma, defies any finite definition of morality"), imagination ("the fuel for the force that keeps an organizer organizing"), a sense of humor ("the most potent weapons known to mankind are satire and ridicule"), and an organized personality with confidence in presenting the right reason for his actions only "as a moral rationalization after the right end has been achieved."

In the chapter on *Communication*, Alinsky teaches his organizers how to direct the thinking of his people while letting them think they are making their own decisions. The organizer should develop skills in the manipulative technique of asking "loaded questions designed to elicit particular responses and to steer the organization's decision-making process in the direction which the organizer prefers."

The chapter called *In the Beginning* describes how to train the community organizer in how to make himself acceptable to the Have-Nots in the local community. "From the moment the organizer enters a community he lives, dreams, eats, breathes, sleeps only one thing and that is to build the mass power base of what he calls the army. Until he has developed that mass power base, he confronts no major issues."

The organizer's "biggest job is to give the people the feeling that they can do something." The organizer's job is "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." The organizer will learn that "Change comes from power, and power comes from organization."

"The organizer's first job is to create the issues or problems," and "organizations must be based on many issues." The organizer "must first rub raw the resentments of the people of the community; fan the latent hostilities of many of the people 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. . . . An organizer must stir up dissatisfaction and discontent." He can provoke class resentment by painting Wall Street as villains.

The organizer "begins his 'trouble making' by stirring up these angers, frustrations, and resentments, and highlighting specific issues or grievances that heighten controversy." The organizer must remember that "Organizations need action as an individual needs oxygen. The cessation of action brings death to the organization."

At the same time, "The job of the organizer is to maneuver and bait the establishment so that it will publicly attack him as a 'dangerous enemy.'" Alinsky reminds his organizers that "To attempt to operate on a good-will rather than on a power basis would be to attempt something that the world has not yet experienced."

Alinsky's book is full of examples of issues and organizational victories from the decade of the 1960s (such as the Vietnam War, civil rights litigation, urban renewal, and campus riots) which are not meaningful to younger Americans today. However they emphasize his strategy that organizers must use current issues and "must be aware of the tremendous importance of understanding the part played by rationalization on a mass basis."

In the chapter called *Tactics*, Alinsky reminds his trainees that power is not only what you have but what the enemy thinks you have: "The threat is usually more terrifying than the thing itself." He lists some of his recommended tactics:

"Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it."

"Keep the pressure on, with different tactics and actions." "The major premise for tactics is the development of operations that will maintain a constant pressure upon the opposition." "Multiple issues mean constant action and life" for the cause. (Obama never harps on one issue as Hillary did with health care. His platform is packed with grievances from "economic justice" to "reproductive justice" to "environmental justice.")

"Ridicule is man's most potent weapon." Alinsky's advice was to "laugh at the enemy" to provoke "irrational anger." (Obama used the ridicule tactic on John McCain at a

rally in Las Vegas. Attacking McCain's chairmanship of the Senate Commerce Committee, Obama sarcastically said, "Well, all I can say to Senator McCain is 'Nice job. Nice job.'")

"A mass impression can be lasting and intimidating." (Obama moved his acceptance speech at the Democratic Convention to a football stadium and bused in 55,000 supporters.)

"Make the enemy live up to their own book of rules." "You can club them to death with their 'book' of rules and regulations." That means, taunt them every time they appear to violate their own principles, which Alinsky believes everybody does frequently.

A leader may struggle toward a decision and weigh the merits and demerits of a situation, but he must convince the people that "their cause is 100 percent on the side of the angels, and that the opposition are 100 percent on the side of the devil," even though that is a lie because there is "really only a 10 percent difference." Alinsky justifies this lie to achieve the transfer of power.

Alinsky describes some of his successful mass demonstrations:

- 1) Buying 100 tickets to a Rochester symphony concert for 100 blacks, feeding them lots of baked beans beforehand so that they had to get up and go to the restroom during the first musical selection. This created "a combination not only of noise but also of odor, what you might call natural stink bombs." He reminded his readers that there is nothing illegal about needing to rush to the restroom.
- 2) Tying up all the restrooms at O'Hare Airport by having his demonstrators lock themselves in the toilet booths equipped with a book to read, and then staying there all day.
- 3) Dropping wads of chewing gum all over the walks on a college campus.
- 4) Paralyzing a bank by having 100 people show up at once with \$5 or \$10 to open a savings account (which they would then come back to close the following day). There is nothing illegal about this, but it created chaos for the bank. Alinsky called this "a middle-class guerrilla attack."
- 5) Engaging in proxy fights with corporations.

Alinsky reveals his total contempt for the Haves and their devotion to self interest. He says, "I feel confident that I could persuade a millionaire on a Friday to subsidize a revolution for Saturday out of which he would make a huge profit on Sunday even though he was certain to be executed on Monday."

When Alinsky approached the end of his *Rules for Radicals* and projected future strategies in the chapter entitled *The Way Ahead*, he laid out his plan to go after "America's white middle class. That is where the power is." They are the "Have-a-Little, Want Mores."

Alinsky boasts that, "With rare exceptions, our activists and radicals are products of and rebels against our middle-class society. . . . Our rebels have contemptuously rejected the values and way of life of the middle class."

Here is where Alinsky's hypocrisy and duplicity become obvious. He had trained his community organizers to adopt a "middle-class identity" and familiarity with their "values and problems" in order to organize his "own people." Now, realizing "the priceless value of his middle-class experience," they will "begin to dissect and examine that way of life as he never has before." "Everything now has a different meaning and purpose."

Alinsky instructs his trainees to "return to the suburban scene of your middle class with its variety of organizations from PTAs to League of Women Voters, consumer groups, churches, and clubs. The job is to search out the leaders in these various activities, identify their major issues, find areas of common agreement, and excite their imagination with tactics that can introduce drama and adventure into the tedium of middle class life."

And a word of Alinsky caution: "Start them easy, don't scare them off." When Alinsky's community organizer moves from organizing the "poor" to organizing the "middle class," he "discards the rhetoric that always says 'pig.' . . . He will view with strategic sensitivity the nature of middle-class behavior with its hangups over rudeness or aggressive, insulting, profane actions. All this and more must be grasped and used to radicalize parts of the middle class." (Obama never talks like an angry radical. He usually wears a coat and tie, and he speaks in calm, measured tones.)

Community Organizing Continues

Will the Alinsky strategies that nominated and elected Barack Obama President of the United States be put on the back burner for four years, lying dormant until they are needed to reelect him in 2012? Not likely. Those strategies are available right now to push through the radical legislation and gigantic spending programs that he promised his followers.

The pro-Obama *New York Times* laid out the plan on its January 26 front page under the headline "Retooling a Grass-Roots Network To Serve a YouTube Presidency." Obama's staff has already started "transforming the YouTubing-Facebooking-Texting-Twittering grass-roots organization that put Mr. Obama in the White House into an instrument of government. That is something that Mr. Obama, who began his career as a community organizer, told aides was a top priority, even before he was elected."

President Obama's staff has created a group, headquartered in the offices of the Democratic National Committee, called "Organizing for America." Its mission is to "redirect the campaign machinery into the service of broad changes in health care, environmental and fiscal policy. They envision an

army of supporters talking, sending e-mail messages and texting to friends and neighbors as they try to mold public opinion." Three days after Obama was sworn in as President, an announcement video was sent to 13 million people.

The Obama team understands very well that traditional methods of communicating with voters are being replaced by new channels built around social networking. In the 2008 campaign, liberals dominated conservatives by more than 10-to-1 on the Internet, and the Obama campaign exploited that advantage fully and profitably. This massive Internet advantage enabled Obama and leftists to raise ten times more money than conservatives over the Internet, and to create a climate of extreme bias in the media against conservative candidates. Sarah Palin was savaged on liberal blogs with little resistance from conservatives.

This 21st Century use of Internet technology and new-media communication was reflected in Obama's truly incredible record of money-raising. He raised nearly \$750 million for his presidential campaign. By contrast, in 2004, George W. Bush and Senator John Kerry together collected less than \$650 million. For the general election, Obama had more than three times what John McCain had at his disposal, and Obama still had \$30 million in the bank after the election.

Obama's technology/Internet superiority continues. DailyKos.com, a liberal blog site, ranks 3,631 in daily traffic out of many millions of internet websites. This is far higher, often by a factor of 100, than conservative sites. Many other liberal websites also outrank conservative sites, such as Moveon.org, a website started a decade ago in defense of Clinton during his scandals.

Previous Presidents recorded and released a radio speech every Saturday morning, but Obama instead records a video speech, then posts it on the White House website and YouTube where it can be picked up and forwarded to millions of followers who weren't listening to radio on Saturday mornings. His first speech was a sales talk for his \$825 billion economic so-called stimulus package. By Sunday afternoon, more than 600,000 people had viewed it on YouTube.

It is virtually impossible for a candidate to win when he is outspent 10-to-1 by the other side. It is essential that conservatives assert themselves on the Internet in order to regain competitiveness in both ideas and in money.

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