

**BARACK OBAMA AND SAUL ALINSKY
– SOUL MATES? ... OR NOT?**

Stephen L. Bakke – June 14, 2010

After Barack Obama's successful election as President of the United States, movie star and activist Susan Sarandan stated: "*He (Obama) is a community organizer like Jesus was, and now we're a community, and he can organize us.*" (To which I can only give a full **RANTING GOOD GRIEF!**)

For a focused look at the most important points in this report read the sections highlighted in **BLUE**. Then go from there to the other items which interest you.

Contents	Page
Nothing Happens in a Vacuum	1
Saul Alinsky? ... Whozat?	2
What Is Obama's Connection to Alinsky?	2
The Book	3
Alinsky on Ethics – Might Obama Have Picked Up On This?	4
Alinsky on Power – Have We Seen Any of This From Obama?	4
Some Comparisons	5
<i>Slick and Slippery</i>	5
<i>It's Really a War</i>	6
<i>Style and Personality</i>	7
<i>Part of the Elite</i>	8
<i>A Different Political Approach</i>	8
<i>Yup! That's Alinsky</i>	8
Alinsky is All About Understanding and Predicting Human Nature	9
Alinsky on the Accuracy of Words and Phrases	9
Is This "Alinsky-like"?	10
A Limerick for the Road	10

Nothing Happens in a Vacuum

Whether one supports or opposes President Barack Obama and his administration, there is no argument that he brings to the Oval Office a very different perspective than we have seen in the past. Even many of his supporters are struggling to understand the political language he speaks and the subtle implications of his beliefs, intentions and policies.

We are all the sum total of every moment of our experiences. We are a combination of where we have been, who we have been with, what we have been taught, what we have thought, our reactions to others, others' reactions to us, what we have done successfully, and at what we have failed. Superimposed on those direct experiences are our emotional reactions to each event such as joy, pain, disappointment, surprise, embarrassment, pride, and even humiliation. Whatever each of us does in the present is somehow influenced by all of those earlier events and emotions.

Nothing happens in a vacuum, and there is very little in politics and governance that is purely and innocently spontaneous. That certainly applies to Barack Obama. Here I attempt to take a look at one of the possible influences in his life to better understand his political rhetoric, goals, and objectives. That one possible influence is a genius (my evaluation) radical leftist community organizer named Saul Alinsky.

Saul Alinsky? ... Whozat?

Saul Alinsky was born in Chicago in 1909 and educated at the University of Chicago majoring in criminology. He was ultimately became a professional community organizer. The following is from his 1971 book "Rules for Radicals": "He founded what is known today as the Alinsky ideology and Alinsky concept of mass organization for power. His work in organizing the poor ... has been internationally recognized ... Today ... [his] attention has turned to the middle class ... [he now has] a training institute for organizers."

In 1969 Hillary Clinton wrote her Wellesley College honor thesis about Alinsky and his methods. While he had not yet written his last book on "Rules" she reportedly captured much of his philosophy. It was titled "There is Only the Fight – An Analysis of the Alinsky Model." Apparently they knew each other as it is reported Alinsky considered Hillary a terrific organizer and wanted her to become his protégé. If that is true, she obviously declined.

The American Federation of State, Country and Municipal Employees lists Alinsky's "Rules for Radicals" on its web page under training for shop stewards.

If you want to get an introductory flavor of Alinsky's philosophy, personality approach and humor, go to the very strange acknowledgement in front of the book of "Rules." It reads in part: "...[we should acknowledge that one who] from all our legends, mythology, and history ... [is] 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."

What Is Obama's Connection to Alinsky?

Many critics suggest President Obama reflects more than just a coincidental similarity to Alinsky's philosophies, organizational style, and tactics. This entire exercise would have no value if Obama had never heard of, paid attention to, or shown allegiance to Saul Alinsky. While it is clear they never met, what is Obama's relationship to Alinsky and his theories?

After graduating from Columbia and in need of a job Obama went to work, in 1985, for the "Developing Communities Project," an activist group built on the Alinsky model and using Alinsky tactics. He spent years teaching the Alinsky method in workshops. Numerous internet sources and publications confirm this association.

One of Obama's apparent early mentors in the "Alinsky Method" was Mike Kruglik who had this to say in an interview with "The New Republic": "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 ... he could be aggressive and confrontational ... 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.”

Obama is reported to have helped fund “Alinsky Academy.” The Woods fund, a nonprofit on which Obama served as paid director (along with Bill Ayers, founder of the 1960’s violent group, Weather Underground) from 1999 to December 2002, provided startup funding and later capital to the Midwest Academy. Midwest describes itself as “one of the nation’s oldest and best-known schools for community organizations, citizen organizations and individuals committed to progressive social change.” Midwest teaches Alinsky tactics to community organizers.

A letter attributed to Saul Alinsky’s son David reads in part: “Obama learned his lesson well. 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.”

In her 2008 National Democratic Convention speech Michelle Obama recalled a speech by Obama in a Chicago neighborhood many years before: “Barack stood up that day and spoke words that have stayed with me ever since. He talked about ‘the world as it is’ and ‘the world as it should be ...’” Those words are right out of Saul Alinsky’s last book on “Rules.”

There is certainly a significant, not just coincidental, connection between Barack Obama and Saul Alinsky. It is therefore relevant and important to discover the extent of similarity in their organizational and political philosophies. From the following, you be the judge if it is important and makes any difference.

The Book

Alinsky’s last book “Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals” was published in 1971. His own words describe the purpose of this book: “*Rules for Radicals* is written for the Have-Nots on how to take it away ... there are rules for radicals who want to change their world; there are certain central concepts of action in human politics that operate regardless of the scene or the time. To know these is basic to a pragmatic attack on the system ... As an organizer I start from where the world is, as it is, not as I would like it to be ... My aim here is to suggest how to organize for power: how to get it and use it ...”

Although the book has been out of print for years, I found a copy on the internet and completed reading it in one day. My attention was thoroughly captured by the book – my appreciation for it is more akin to how one is attracted to “gallows humor,” not like enjoying a great novel. I think, at a very basic level, “Alinsky nails it!” The book was very good, simple, straightforward – and pragmatic beyond measure! I would be very surprised if his prescribed methods were not extremely successful in the right hands. He was obviously at the top of his “profession” and an incredibly intuitive, bright, and dedicated left wing radical.

In addition to that one book I found many excerpts, reviews, criticisms and other commentary about Alinsky and his books, as well as the Obama/Alinsky connection, on the internet.

Alinsky on Ethics – Might Obama Have Picked Up On This?

If one can comfortably make a connection between Obama and Alinsky in other philosophical areas, I believe it is then meaningful and predictive to examine Alinsky's comments about "Ethics." This section gives a fairly complete summary of those philosophies. Here are some comments from his chapter "Of Means and Ends" (all are direct quotes):

- That perennial question "Does the end justify the means?" is meaningless as it stands; the real and only question regarding the ethics of means and ends is, and always has been, "Does this *particular* end justify this *particular* means."
- The end is what you want, and the means is how you get it.
- [The organizer] asks of ends only whether they are achievable and worth the cost; of means only whether they will work.
- [Quoting Goethe] "Conscience is the virtue of observers and not of agents of actions."
- One's concern with the ethics of means and ends varies inversely with one's personal interest in the issue.
- One's concern with the ethics of means and ends varies inversely with one's distance from the scene of conflict.
- In war the end justifies almost any means.
- Judgment must be made in the context of the times in which the action occurred and not from any other chronological vantage point.
- Concern with ethics increases with the number of means available and vice versa.
- Ethics is doing what is best for the most.
- The less important the end to be desired, the more one can afford to engage in ethical evaluation of means.
- Success or failure is a mighty determinate of ethics.
- The morality of a means depends upon whether the means is being employed at a time of imminent defeat or imminent victory.
- Any effective means is automatically judged by the opposition as being unethical.
- You do what you can with what you have and clothe it with moral garments.
- Goals must be phrased in general terms like "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity," "Of the Common Welfare," "Pursuit of Happiness," or "Bread and Peace."

Saul Alinsky is nothing if not immensely cynical.

Alinsky on Power – Have We Seen Any of This From Obama?

Here I will summarize some of Alinsky's rules of "power tactics." This represents only a portion of his advice on this topic:

- Power is not only what you have but what the enemy thinks you have.
- Make the enemy live up to their own book of rules.
- Ridicule is man's most potent weapon.
- Keep the pressure on, with different tactics and actions.

- If you push a negative hard enough and deep enough it will break through into its counterside.
- Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it.

Here are some “almost rules”. Alinsky doesn’t describe them as such but they appear in his clarifications and explanations of other aspects of his theories (some paraphrasing was done for brevity and simplicity):

- Invent reality; make it up as you go along. Here’s what Alinsky actually wrote: “... a major job of the organizer is to instantly develop the rationale for actions which have taken place by accident or impulsive anger ... Possessing a rationale gives action a meaning and purpose.”
- Convert close calls to absolutes – e.g. if some issue is “52-48” in terms of desirability, the organizer must convince the community that they are 100% right and the opposition is 100% wrong.
- The opposition is the enemy and they are 100% evil, without any redeeming features. To recognize any good points of/from the opposition is a sign of weakness.
- Club the “Haves” to death using their own book of rules and regulations.
- Manipulate otherwise “partners” into adversarial positions. Use the “Haves” against other “Haves” on some issues – e.g. environment.
- Advancements are never made individually, only collectively.
- There is an inherent presumption that everyone has a reason to rebel and take from the “Haves”. There will be no cessation of efforts until there is universal equality.

Draw your own conclusions and make your own predictions.

Some Comparisons

Slick and Slippery

- ***Some contend:*** Obama’s sincerity and motives are masked by rhetoric. More and more people are asking “what does he mean by those generous but unspecific proclamations” (many coming from the campaign rallies). ***Alinsky taught:*** “We repeatedly get caught in this conflict between our professed moral principles and the real reasons why we do things – to wit, our self interest. We are always able to mask those real reasons in words of beneficent goodness – freedom, justice, and so on.”
- ***Some contend:*** that the Obama administration takes a “damn the torpedoes, full speed ahead” approach to introducing and ramming through legislation and policy changes. And they have been accused of deception and “bait and switch” tactics by changing certain goals and justification for those goals – almost a diversion. Witness how often the details of health care reform changed from the campaign through the introduction of legislation through the final result, and finally to the rationalization of negative facts as they become known. ***Alinsky taught:*** “The organizer should know and accept that the right reason is only introduced as a moral rationalization after the right end has been achieved, although it may have been achieved for the wrong reason – therefore he should search for and use the wrong reasons to achieve the right goals.”

- **Some contend:** that Obama’s progressive philosophy has accelerated a relentless move toward political and moral relativism. **Alinsky taught:** It is an advantage if an organizer has “a free and open mind and [is comfortable with] political relativity ... He knows that all values are relative in a world of political relativity.”
- **Some contend:** that Obama has not been strong enough in his insistence on progressive solutions to everything from the war in Afghanistan to indicating his flexibility on nuclear power expansion to opening up our coasts to some new drilling (at least until the Gulf tragedy occurred) etc. Conservatives may take some exception to this because he has not extended a hand across the aisle to them. He has, however, been pragmatic in not holding fast to some of his campaign promises. **Alinsky taught:** “Compromise is a word that carries shades of weakness, vacillation, betrayals of ideals, betrayal of ideals, surrender of moral principles ... But to the organizer, compromise is a key and beautiful word ... it is making the deal ... If you start with nothing, demand 100 percent, then compromise for 30 percent, you’re 30 percent ahead.”
- **Some contend:** that Obama’s verbal skills and quick/slick rhetoric are extraordinary and soothed many voters into voting for him. **Alinsky taught:** “... failure of many of our younger activists to understand the art of communication has been disastrous ...”
- **Some contend:** that Obama spent much effort in recent years attempting to join the community as a regular member not just as an elite, privileged, highly educated law professor. Examples include joining the Rev. Wright church (didn’t work out so well), and moving into an exclusive inner-city Chicago neighborhood. **Alinsky taught:** “... reformation requires that the organizer work inside the system ... We must work with [the world] on its terms if we are to change it ... They [and their followers] cannot be dismissed by labeling them blue collar or hard hat.” True radicals do not flaunt their radicalism. Alinsky taught them to cut their hair, put on suits and infiltrate the system. He believed it to be a slow process and emphasized patience.

It’s Really a War

- **Some contend:** that Obama and his “disciples” believe in creating chaos or making sure that no crisis is ever wasted. He has been accused of using false hyperbole and misinformation to stir up the emotion about an issue. **Alinsky taught:** “The first step in community organization is community disorganization ... No politician can sit on a hot issue if you make it hot enough ... In the beginning the organizer’s first job is to create the issues or problems ... What the organizer does is convert the plight into a problem.”
- **Some contend:** Obama’s own words imploring his supporters argue and “get in the face” of critics, might just indicate an unsavory characteristic or tactic favored by him. **Alinsky taught:** “Change means movement. Movement means friction ... abrasive friction of conflict ... The organizer’s job ... [is] to agitate, introduce ideas, get people pregnant with hope and a desire for change ... The organizer dedicated to organizing the life of a particular community must first rub raw the resentments of the people ... fan the latent hostilities ... stir up dissatisfaction ...”
- **Some contend:** that the Obama presidency has met more polarized reactions than any other president and that this is wrong. The Republicans are definitely taking it on the chin for this conflict. But some feel that is Obama’s strategy. **Alinsky taught:** “Before men can act an issue must be polarized. Men will act when they are convinced that their cause

is 100 per cent on the side of the angels and that the opposition are 100 per cent on the side of the devil ... [The organizer] knows that all ideas arise from conflict.”

- **Some contend:** that Obama and followers use fear and demagoguery in their rhetoric describing American institutions and their opponents. While this certainly wouldn't be unusual for politicians from either party, but does Obama have a theoretical basis for employing this tactic. **Alinsky taught:** “[An organizer] must have a reason for being there – a reason acceptable to the people ... If the organizer begins with an affirmation of his love for people, he promptly turns everyone off. If, on the other hand, he begins with a denunciation of exploiting employers, slum landlords, police shakedowns, gouging merchants, he is inside their experience and they accept him ... Love and faith are not common companions. More commonly power and fear consort with faith.”

Style and Personality

- **Some contend:** that Obama's campaign and governing style is to use his immense charisma in front of a live audience to whip the crowd into feverish and vocal support for whatever the issue is. Did this talent come naturally for him or was his penchant for the dramatic and romantic approach carefully developed as part of his training and philosophy. **Alinsky taught:** “They must believe in [the organizer's] capacity not just to provide the opportunity for action, power, change, adventure, a piece of drama in life, but to give a very definite promise, almost an assurance of victory.”
- **Some contend:** that Obama exhibits an uncanny cool, calm, and patient demeanor – certainly aloof. **Alinsky taught:** “A great organizer, like Moses, never loses his cool as a lesser man might ... These rules make the difference between being a realistic radical and being a rhetorical one who uses the tired old words and slogans ... As an organizer I start from where the world is, as it is, not as I would like it to be ... We must work with it on its terms ... Effective organization is thwarted by the desire for instant and dramatic change ... revolution must be preceded by reformation ...”
- **Some contend:** that Obama's administration wants to micromanage all aspect of the country and the lives of citizens. **Alinsky taught:** “... radicals must have a degree of control over the flow of events ...”
- **Some contend:** that there has never been an ego stronger than Obama's. His supporters revel in his self assuredness while detractors use words such as narcissism. **Alinsky taught:** “Ego must be so all-pervading that the personality of the organizer is contagious, that it converts the people from despair to defiance, creating a mass ego ... An organizer must accept, without fear or worry, that the odds are always against him. Having this kind of ego, he is a doer and does.”
- **Some contend:** that Obama is thin skinned and defensive in the face of criticism. One would expect such a reaction, however. But is his reaction sincere? Might his style prefer that his opponents vocalize their impression of him and his ideas as dangerous? **Alinsky taught:** “The job of an organizer is to maneuver and bait the establishment so that it will publicly attack him as a ‘dangerous enemy.’ The word ‘enemy’ is sufficient to put the organizer on the side of the people, to identify him with the ‘Have-Nots’ ...”

Part of the Elite

- ***Some contend:*** that Obama is dismissive of the general citizenry and generally believes that elite public servants know, better than citizens, what is best for them. Time and again he and his administration have shown that they have a low regard for the intelligence of the average American citizen, and little faith in their abilities for discernment. Their legislation and proposals clearly send the message that the general public needs help in deciding what is best for them and in providing what they need. ***Alinsky taught:*** “The ‘Have-Nots’ have little faith in the worth of their own judgments. They still look to the judgments of the ‘Haves’ ... It is essential that issues be simple enough to be communicated ... One of the great problems in the beginning of an organization is, often, that the people do not know what they want.”
- ***Some contend:*** that Obama introduces “silly”, simplistic examples in his speeches. For example, he often refers to “the plumber from Chicago” or “the single mother of three from Cincinnati who can’t afford health care” or “the young mother who died because of physician neglect.” Some say this is just pure demagoguery. ***Alinsky taught:*** “When you are trying to communicate and can’t find the point in the experience of the other party at which he can receive and understand, then you must create the experience for him.”

A Different Political Approach

- ***Some contend:*** that Obama brought to the table a far leftist theme of finding radical leftist solutions for social justice, government run institutions, socialism and even Marxism or communism. ***Alinsky taught:*** “... we are concerned 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, [and] health ... Today revolution has become synonymous with communism while capitalism is synonymous with status quo.”
- ***Some contend:*** that Obama’s theory of equality is consistent with progressives’ oft’ stated attack on lack of equal outcomes in all things economic and otherwise. Specifically equality of outcome is a litmus test for morality. In contrast conservative critics prefer to define equality in terms of opportunity. ***Alinsky taught:*** “[Mankind] is beginning to learn that [they] will either share part of his material wealth or lose all of it ... if he does not share his bread, he dare not sleep, for his neighbor will kill him” [i.e. morality = sharing].
- ***Some contend:*** that Obama is too willing to meet with, apologize to, defer to, and bow to, etc. traditional adversaries of the United States. ***Alinsky taught:*** “[Mankind] will respect and learn to live with other political ideologies if [mankind] wants civilization to go on.”

Yup! That’s Alinsky

- ***Some contend:*** that Obama is blind to some ramifications of his policies and legislation. I am guilty of having frustration over his apparent ignorance of “unintended consequences” and the damage they can do. But might that be his plan – that problems feed on themselves and gives him more to solve? ***Alinsky taught:*** “Something else that comes with experience is the knowledge that the resolution of a particular problem will bring on another problem. The organizer may know this, but he doesn’t mention it ...”

- ***Some contend:*** that Obama is trying to take everything on at one time. This opinion is held by supporters and critics. Some say it is because he may have only a small window of time to address his agenda items. Or is it because that's the way he was taught? ***Alinsky taught:*** "For a variety of reasons the organizer must develop multiple issues." The implication is that Alinsky recognized the many different priorities any community has – to say nothing about the priorities of the entire country. He wrote: "The organizer recognizes that each person or bloc has a hierarchy of values."

Alinsky is All About Understanding and Predicting Human Nature

Embedded in all of Alinsky's theories and strategies is using the nature of human reactions to his benefit. It is used to influence, motivate, and manipulate his "subjects" and it is used against his sworn enemies, the "Haves." I think that is one flaw of Barack. He is comfortable motivating and leading at "street level" where he sees many of his "subjects" right in front of him. The strength of his personality and smooth delivery convinces those he interacts with. I believe that's why he is so visible giving more public speeches than any president in history. It worked on the street in his experience as a community organizer, and it seems to work for those in front of him. But as a percentage of the total population, very few directly experience his allure.

I think Obama misjudges how the population will react. Witness his falling approval ratings and the lukewarm reception and sometimes overwhelming disapproval of his domestic policies such as health care reform, global warming proposals, and stimulus programs. In many cases his original followers ("Have-Nots") are hanging in there, but he now also needs some support from the "Haves" and the "Have-A-Littles" and they are not reacting like those in his former sphere of reality – the neighborhoods of Chicago. Picking up on Alinsky's assumption that the "subjects" are naïve, foolish, and easily impressionable, Obama treated them as such. But we're not as stupid as he thinks. Many of us overwhelmingly disapprove of his tactics and broad baseless predictions and declarations. I think Alinsky would have recommended that Obama relinquish some of his "neighborhood" management techniques. Alinsky would not approve.

Alinsky on the Accuracy of Words and Phrases

Alinsky was emphatic about not "mincing words." He addressed the fact that many of his "students" are inclined to use peaceful words that mean the same as other words but don't seem as pushy or violent. They were often afraid of generating negative emotional reactions. Alinsky rejected such substitutions: "... we begin to dilute the meaning; and as we use purifying synonyms, we dissolve the bitterness, the anguish, the hate and love, the agony and the triumph attached to these words, leaving an aseptic imitation of life." In this context [Alinsky quoted Mark Twain who wrote:](#) "The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug."

Nevertheless, once Obama took power he seems to have forsaken his mentor's emphatic advice. Obama and his administration have played fast and loose with the English language. They have taken certain words and phrases and substituted their own. Witness "man caused disaster" replacing "terrorism" and "overseas contingency operation" used in place of "war on terror."

Consider the reluctance to use terms like “radical Islamic terrorist.” There are many more. Also in this, Alinsky would not approve.

Is This “Alinsky-like”?

One of my frequent observations is that Obama often introduces a topic or redirects a question something like this: “First let me say this, many in the opposition claim that I am ...” or “Fox News says that my policies are ...” or “‘Talking heads’ have been saying for weeks that this administration” It’s fine to make those comments but only when objecting to that which was ACTUALLY said by the opposition or critics. I have found myself reacting out loud, “Nobody said that!”

If that tactic for deflecting questions or justifying actions isn’t in Alinsky’s “playbook” it absolutely should be! Here is a “Dilbert” cartoon which I have taken the liberty of copying Scott Adams’ Dilbert. I also abbreviated it. The original continued to twice this long but I think this works better and it demonstrates my point very well.

DILBERT by Scott Adams



A Limerick for the Road

Young Barack and Michelle, they was squeezin’.
When her Ma saw their ‘temps’ was a-rizin’.
Ma said, “Stop that right now,
Or you’ll soon wonder how,
You’ll recover to do more organizin’!”