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### The Alinsky Administration

Today, reading *Rules for Radicals* is illuminating and worrisome.

By Jim Geraghty

**B**arack Obama never met Saul Alinsky, but the radical organizer's thought helps explain a great deal about how the president operates.

Alinsky died in 1972, when Obama was 11 years old. But three of Obama's mentors from his Chicago days studied at a school Alinsky founded, and they taught their students the philosophy and methods of one of the first "community organizers." Ryan Lizza wrote a [6,500-word piece](#) on Alinsky's influence on Obama for *The New Republic*, noting, "On his campaign website, one can find a photo of Obama in a classroom teaching students Alinskian methods. He stands in front of a blackboard on which he has written 'Relationships Built on Self Interest,' an idea illustrated by a diagram of the flow of money from corporations to the mayor."

In a [letter to the \*Boston Globe\*](#), Alinsky's son wrote that "the Democratic National Convention had all the elements of the perfectly organized event, Saul Alinsky style. . . . Barack Obama's training in Chicago by the great community organizers is showing its effectiveness. 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."

As a tool for understanding the thinking of Obama, Alinsky's most famous book, *Rules for Radicals*, is simultaneously edifying and worrisome. Some passages make Machiavelli's *Prince* read like a Sesame Street picture book on manners.

After Obama took office, the pundit class found itself debating the ideology and sensibility of the new president — an indication of how scarcely the media had bothered to examine him beforehand. But after 100 days, few observers can say that Obama hasn't surprised them with at least one call. Gays wonder why Obama won't take a stand on gay marriage when state legislatures will. Union bosses wonder what happened to the man who sounded more protectionist than Hillary Clinton in the primary. Some liberals have been stunned by the serial about-faces on extraordinary rendition, indefinite detention without trial, military-tribunal trials, the state-secrets doctrine, and other policies they associate with the Bush administration. Former supporters of Obama, including [David Brooks](#), [Christopher Buckley](#), [Jim Cramer](#), and [Warren Buffett](#), have expressed varying degrees of criticism of his early moves, surprised that he is more hostile to the free market than they had thought.

Obama's defenders would no doubt insist this is a reflection of his pragmatism, his willingness to eschew ideology to focus on what solutions work best. This view assumes that nominating Bill Richardson as commerce secretary, running up a \$1.8 trillion deficit, approving the AIG bonuses, signing 9,000 earmarks into law, adopting Senator McCain's idea of taxing health benefits, and giving U.K. Prime Minister Gordon Brown 25 DVDs that don't work in Britain constitute "what works best." Obama is a pragmatist, but a pragmatist as understood by Alinsky: One who applies pragmatism to achieving and keeping power.

One of Alinsky's first lessons is: "Radicals must have a degree of control over the flow of events." Setting aside

the Right's habitual complaint about the pliant liberal media, Obama has dominated the news by unveiling a new initiative or giving a major speech on almost every weekday of his presidency. There has been a steady stream of lighter stories as well — the puppy, Michelle Obama's fashion sense, the White House swing set, the president and vice president's burger lunch.

The constant parade of events large and small ensures that whenever unpleasant news arises and overtakes the desired message — think of Tom Daschle's withdrawal, the Air Force One photo op, or North Korea's missile launch — it leads the news for only a day. For contrast, consider what happened when the photos of the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse appeared: *As American Journalism Review* reports, they “dominated the headlines for a month. Day after day, top national newspapers brought to light new aspects of the debacle on their front pages.”

When Obama announced a paltry \$100 million in budget cuts, and insisted this was part of a budget-trimming process that would add up to “real money,” he clearly understood that the public processes these numbers very differently from the way budget wonks do. Alinsky wrote: “The moment one gets into the area of \$25 million and above, let alone a billion, the listener is completely out of touch, no longer really interested, because the figures have gone above his experience and almost are meaningless. Millions of Americans do not know how many million dollars make up a billion.”

Obama insists that he doesn't want the government to run car companies, but he has fired CEOs, demonized bondholders, ensured the UAW gets the sweetest deal, and guaranteed warrantees. He insists that he doesn't want to run banks, but his Treasury Department hesitates to take back some of the TARP funds that give them influence over bank policies. He's critical of Wall Street, but he signed off on Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner's remarkably generous plan to give hedge funds and private investors a low-risk, high-reward option on toxic assets.

Much of this is explained — by Alinsky's epigram, “In the politics of human life, consistency is not a virtue.”

During the campaign, Obama's critics laughed and marveled at how quickly the candidate threw inconvenient friends, allies, and supporters under the bus once they became political liabilities. Over on the Campaign Spot, it's been easy to compile a list of quickly forgotten promises. But it is unlikely that Obama would consider any of this a character flaw; instead, it is evidence of his adaptability and gift for seeing the big picture.

Alinsky sneered at those who would accept defeat rather than break their principles: “It's true I might have trouble getting to sleep because it takes time to tuck those big, angelic, moral wings under the covers.” He assured his students that no one would remember their flip-flops, scoffing, “The judgment of history leans heavily on the outcome of success or failure; it spells the difference between the traitor and the patriotic hero. There can be no such thing as a successful traitor, for if one succeeds he becomes a founding father.” If you win, no one really cares how you did it.

Lizza's profile offered an example of how Obama isn't quite as cynical as Alinsky's power-at-all-costs mentality would suggest:

Moreover, when Obama's ideals clash with reality, he has been able to find compromises that don't put him at a political disadvantage. For instance, no Democrat can win the general election while adhering to the public financing system if the Republican nominee doesn't do the same. Clinton and John Edwards have simply conceded that the public financing system is dead and are ignoring fund-raising restrictions that would be triggered if either ends up playing within the public financing scheme. Facing the same situation, Obama — a longtime champion of campaign finance reform in general and public financing in particular — asked the Federal Election Commission if he could raise the potentially restricted money now (the world as it is) but then give it back if he wins the nomination and convinces his Republican opponent to stick with public financing (the world as we would like it to be).

But Obama quickly ignored that pledge when Senator McCain indicated he was willing to restrict himself to the public-financing system. Obama audaciously claimed that his donors had created a “parallel public-financing

system” and announced his changed position at a fundraising dinner.

Moderates thought they were electing a moderate; liberals thought they were electing a liberal. Both camps were wrong. Ideology does not have the final say in Obama’s decision-making; an Alinskyite’s core principle is to take any action that expands his power and to avoid any action that risks his power.

As conservatives size up their new foe, they ought to remember: It’s not about liberalism. It’s about power. Obama will jettison anything that costs him power, and do anything that enhances it — including invite Rick Warren to give the benediction at his inauguration, dine with conservative columnists, and dismiss an appointee at the White House Military Office to ensure the perception of accountability.

Alinsky’s influence goes well beyond Obama, obviously. There are many wonderful Democrats in this world, but evidence suggests that rising in that party’s political hierarchy requires some adoption of a variation of the Alinsky philosophy: Power comes first. Few Democrats are expressing outrage over Nancy Pelosi’s ever-shifting explanation of what she knew about waterboarding. Those who screamed bloody murder about Jack Abramoff’s crimes avert their eyes from John Murtha. The anti-war movement that opposed the surge in Iraq remains silent about sending additional troops to Afghanistan. Obama will never get as much grief for his gay-marriage views as Miss California.

It’s not about the policies or the politics, and it’s certainly not about the principles. It’s about power, and it has been for a long time.

— *Jim Geraghty writes the Campaign Spot for NRO.*

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