

Barack Obama: A Radical Leftist's Journey from Community Organizing to Politics

By Elias Crim and Matthew Vadum

Summary: *The remarkable ascent of Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama begins with his career as a “community organizer” for far-left causes in Chicago, an experience that served as a launching pad for his political career. Along with way, Obama acquired some unsavory friends including sleazy political fundraiser Tony Rezko and unrepentant Pentagon bomber William Ayers. Obama promises to carry his activist spirit into national politics, but does he also carry the smell of Chicago politics into the national arena?*

“What Obama is proposing goes far beyond the boundaries of traditional community service volunteers. Obama wants to bring the spirit and tactics of community organizing into the political system, and there is no road map out there for how to do it.” —John K. Wilson, *Barack Obama, The Improbable Quest* (2008)

The Chicago winter of 1996-1997 was a bad one, especially for residents of the Englewood apartment building at 7000-10 South Sangamon. The 31-unit building had been rehabilitated with a \$653,500 loan from the city of Chicago’s low-income housing fund, another \$654,000 in bank financing, and \$1.9 million in tax credits. The general partner on the project was Rezmar Corporation, run by Antoin (“Tony”) Rezko and Daniel Mahru. But the tenants shivered for over five weeks without heat because Rezko and Mahru claimed they lacked the cash to turn the heat back on again.

Rezko was a successful real estate investor who owned fast-food restaurants in



When you’re running for president, it’s hard to outrun your past. Shown in old mugshots, unrepentant terrorist William Ayers (above center), and his wife, Bernadine Dohrn (right), helped launch Barack Obama’s political career by holding a 1995 fundraiser in their Hyde Park home. The event came years after the couple detonated bombs in the Pentagon, the U.S. Capitol, and New York City police headquarters.

Chicago’s inner-city neighborhoods. But he branched out into politics in the early 1980s when he met Jabir Herbert Muhammad, the former manager of retired heavyweight champion Muhammad Ali and son of Nation of Islam founder Elijah Muhammad. Jabir Muhammad asked Rezko to donate to mayoral candidate Harold Washington, an African-American challenging Chicago’s white establishment. After Washington was elected mayor, Rezko, an Arab Christian who emigrated from Syria to Chicago in 1971, became increasingly involved in causes linking his business interests to the political clout of Chicago’s black community. For several years he was even chairman of the Muhammad Ali

Foundation, an Islamic charity founded in 1975 that in 1985 changed its name from the Elijah Muhammad Foundation when the champ lent it his name. Rezko was also the actual owner of fast-food franchises that Jabir Mohammed told city officials were his.

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According to the Chicago Tribune (March 16, 2005), in the late 1990s Jabir Mohammed was the front man who allowed Rezko to secure city contracts using Chicago's minority set-aside program.

Harold Washington died in 1987 and in 1989, the year Richard M. Daley was elected to the first of six (so far) terms as mayor of Chicago, Rezko and Mahru formed Rezmar Corp., promising to build more low-income housing in Chicago. Rezmar became the Daley administration's favored low-income housing developer. Rezko's timing was good: During these years many neighborhoods on the South Side were undergoing gentrification, and the prospect of rising real estate values attracted a flock of developers with wallets open to make whatever campaign contributions might be necessary in order to get business done.

The South Sangamon building was one of 30 low-income projects—containing a total of 1,025 apartments—that Rezko took on between 1989 and 1998. In all, Rezmar Corp. collected more than \$100 million by arranging “public-private partnerships” with the city, the state and federal governments, and in bank loans to rehab South Side buildings intended as low-income housing. Neither Rezko nor his partner had any construction

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Barack Obama endorsed Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley (right) for a sixth term in January 2007. Daley later returned the favor, endorsing Obama for president.

experience when they created Rezmar, but they became experts at working Chicago's political system to acquire taxpayer subsidies for their redevelopment schemes.

Rezko and Mahru also managed the buildings. Not surprisingly, every one of the projects ran into financial difficulties within six years, according to a Chicago Sun-Times investigation, and more than half went into foreclosure. Chicago sued Rezmar on at least a dozen occasions. “Their buildings were falling apart,” a former city official told the Sun-Times. “They just didn't pay attention to the condition of these buildings.”

To arrange project financing Rezko frequently relied on a small Chicago law firm, Davis Miner Branch & Galland, whose top partner, Allison S. Davis, was a Rezko associate and Daley administration insider.

Davis's name recently surfaced in Rezko's trial for money-laundering, fraud, bribery, and extortion. Witnesses say he was the go-between in one of the alleged crimes: an attempted pay-to-play shakedown of Chicago businessman Tom Rosenberg whose firm managed \$1 billion for the Illinois Teachers Retirement Association, a \$40 billion pension fund. In early 2004 Davis allegedly approached Rezko about how to secure an additional \$220 million pension allocation

for Rosenberg's asset management firm and was told that Rosenberg needed to pay Rezko a \$2 million kick-back or raise \$1.5 million for the re-election campaign of Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich, a Democrat. At press time, the trial, which ended on May 5, had gone to the jury for deliberation. Rezko did not testify and made no defense, his lawyers arguing that the prosecution failed to meet its burden of proof.

Ensnared in Chicago Politics

The sleazy tale of Tony Rezko—corrupt businessman and political fundraiser—is hardly unique in Chicago. What makes the story noteworthy is that it touches Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama who has promised to move America away from politics as usual. Obama now admits that becoming involved with Rezko when he purchased a new home in January 2005 following his election to the U.S. Senate the previous November was a “bone-headed mistake.” The terms of that involvement have received widespread publicity: Senator-elect Obama and Rezko toured the property together when it was already known that Rezko was under criminal investigation. Obama and his wife Michelle subsequently paid the seller \$1.65 million for their new home, \$300,000 below the asking price. On the same day Mrs. Rita Rezko paid the same seller the asking price of \$625,000 for the

adjoining 9,000-square-foot lot. In January 2006, Mrs. Rezko sold a 10 foot-by-150 foot strip of the lot to the Obamas for \$104,500, and in December she sold the remainder of the property to her husband's lawyer for \$575,000.

Obama's previous connections with Rezko have received less attention, but they will invite further scrutiny during the election season and as Rezko's legal troubles play out. During that bad winter 11 years ago when Rezmar couldn't afford to turn on its tenants' heat, Obama was a third-year associate at Allison Davis's law firm, which represented Rezmar. A standard Rezmar practice was to team up with nonprofit groups that were clients of the Davis firm to secure government and private funding for low-income housing projects. The groups included the Chicago Urban League, the Woodlawn Preservation and Investment Corp. (WPIC), and the Fund for Community Redevelopment and Revitalization.

According to the firm and the Obama campaign, Obama had little association with Rezmar, generating only five billable hours of work related to Rezko's business. (The Sun-Times says none of the billing records have been supplied to the media.)

However, Obama's acquaintance with Rezko goes back even further. He has said that in the early 1990s, while he was a top student at Harvard Law School, Rezko offered him a job—that he did not accept. He admits that the two men stayed in touch following his work for Davis, that the Obamas and Rezkos have had dinners together, and that Rezko hosted a big 2003 fundraiser at his home when Obama ran for the Democratic nomination for the U.S. Senate seat of retiring Republican Senator Peter Fitzgerald. According to the Sun-Times (June 18, 2007), Rezko and his

associates have donated at least \$168,000 to Obama's campaigns, three times more than what Obama has acknowledged.

Sun-Times research also found that 11 Rezko buildings were located in Obama's district during the years when he was an Illinois state senator (1997-2004). Would the residents of these apartment buildings have voted to elect the idealistic young Obama to the state senate had they known of his ties



Real estate developer Tony Rezko and Obama embrace in this undated photograph.

to their negligent landlord?

As a young activist in the mid-1980s, Obama worked with community and church groups to clean up public housing on Chicago's South Side. Protests and demonstrations could accomplish only so much, so he switched careers from community organizing to elective politics. Obama explained his vision of the agitator-politician to a reporter this way:

“What if a politician were to see his job as that of an organizer, as part teacher and part advocate, one

who does not sell voters short but who educates them about the real choices before them? As an elected public official, for instance, I could bring church and community leaders together easier than I could as a community organizer or lawyer... We must form grass-roots structures that would hold me and other elected officials more accountable for their actions.”

Those words must ring hollow to the Rezko tenants. Obama's staff says he was unaware of Rezmar Corp.'s failings, which they say would more appropriately be handled by a local alderman. The irony here is that Obama understood that grassroots organizers could not succeed unless they had political allies in power. And it's apparently why he sought the fundraising help of a man identified as a “slumlord” by his rival for the Democratic presidential nomination, Senator Hillary Clinton.

The South Sangamon building finally had its heat turned on in February 1997 after the city of Chicago sued, eventually collecting a \$100 fine from Rezmar. At about the same time—January 14, 1997, according to public records—state senator-elect Obama received a \$1,000 campaign donation from Rezmar.

Community Organizing: From Saul Alinsky to Martin Luther King

Between his graduation from Columbia University in 1983 and his admission to Harvard Law School in 1988, Obama moved to Chicago where he became a community organizer. He returned to Chicago with his law degree in 1991 and resumed advocacy

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work as a civil rights lawyer and constitutional law teacher. A look at those few short years prior to his election to the Illinois state senate in 1997 and to the U.S. Senate in 2004 reveals the seeds of his thinking on grassroots activism and political advocacy.

In 1985 veteran Chicago organizer Jerry Kellman hired Obama to run the Developing Communities Project. He paid his earnest new pupil a salary of \$13,000 and assigned him to the Roseland and West Pullman areas on the South Side. Here's how a reporter from U.S. News & World Report—with unconscious irony, it seems—described Kellman's idea of “self-help”:

“Obama's assignment was to teach the poor to rely on themselves in a very aggressive way—to get what they wanted from city hall, their landlords and others in power by clarifying their needs and banding together to take action. It's the kind of self-help that he preaches today as a presidential candidate.”

The better term is probably “agitation,” which in the community organizer's sense means making someone angry enough about the condition of his life that he agrees to take action to change it.

Mike Kruglik, formerly one of Obama's fellow organizers, hailed Obama for his persuasive powers:

“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... With probing, sometimes personal questions, 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.” (New Republic, March 19, 2007).

Agitation is what Chicago-born Saul Alinsky (1909-1972), the father of community organizing, called “rubbing raw the sores of discontent.” In his classic book *Rules for Radicals*, Alinsky prescribed the tactics and defined the goals of community organizing.

Among his “rules”: “Keep the pressure on. Never let up” and “Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it.”

“I attended one of Saul Alinsky's schools,” Kellman told *Foundation Watch* recently, “and most of his principles are still being used in those schools today.”



Obama absorbed the teachings of Chicago's Saul Alinsky (1909-1972), the father of community organizing.

Obama's Radical Roots

But for someone who urges Americans to transcend their ideological, racial, and cultural differences, Obama certainly carries a lot of baggage. National Journal concluded in 2007 that Obama was the most liberal member of the U.S. Senate with a voting record to the left of Hillary Clinton, John Kerry, Barbara Boxer, and self-described socialist Bernie Sanders of Vermont. For many years, Obama has surrounded himself with extreme, polarizing figures. Obama's is “as openly radical a background as any significant American political figure has ever emerged from, as much Malcolm X as Martin Luther King Jr.,” Ben Wallace-Wells wrote in a Rolling Stone magazine profile of Obama last year.

Left-wing funders are drawn to the campaign. Philanthropist George Soros is praying for an Obama victory in November.

“I think Obama has the charisma and the vision to radically reorient America in the world...I think that he has shown himself to be a really unusual person,” Soros said. (New York Review of Books, May 15, 2008) The political action committee of the abortion rights group NARAL endorsed Obama over his female opponent in the race for the

Democratic presidential nomination, and is sure to spend several million dollars on his behalf.

Jodie Evans, a co-founder of Code Pink, a far-left anti-war women's group, is a so-called bundler who has collected at least \$50,000 for the Obama campaign. (Human Events, April 14, 2008) Evans has visited Venezuela and met with Hugo Chavez to show her support for his socialist regime. Code Pink has been in the news for harassing wounded U.S. soldiers at Walter Reed Army Medical Center and military recruiters as part of what it calls its “counter-recruitment” program. (For more on Evans's group, see “Code Pink: The Women's Anti-War Movement,” by John J. Tierney, *Organization Trends*, December 2006.)

Obama's most prominent emissary to the public, his wife Michelle, is refreshingly

honest about the couple's political beliefs. On the campaign trail, Mrs. Obama spoke of the virtues of the coercive redistribution of wealth: "The truth is, in order to get things like universal health care and [a] revamped education system then someone is going to have to give up a piece of their pie so someone else can have more." (Charlotte Observer, April 8, 2008)

Mrs. Obama made headlines in February when during a speech in Wisconsin she put her ambivalence about America on public display, noting that as an adult she has never been proud of her country: "For the first time in my adult lifetime I'm really proud of my country and not just because Barack has done well but because I think people are hungry for change and I have been desperate to see our country moving in that direction and just not feeling so alone in my frustration and disappointment." (ABC News, February 18, 2008)

At times on the trail, Mrs. Obama's anger towards her own country has come through as she's lectured Americans on how they don't live up to her standards. She implied that if voters ultimately reject her husband's bid for the White House, there must be something wrong with them: "What Barack and I talked about when we decided [that he should run for the presidency] was that we were going to do this authentically and that this was as much a test for us about the country and the [political] process as it was the other way around." ("All Things Considered," NPR, July 9, 2007)

Here are a few other examples of Mrs. Obama's attitude toward the United States:

*America is "just downright mean" and "guided by fear." (The New Yorker, March 10, 2008)

*"Sometimes it's easier to hold on to your own stereotypes and misconceptions, it makes you feel justified in your ignorance. That's America. So the challenge for us is, are we ready for change?" (speech at University of South Carolina, January 2008, available at <http://www.breitbart.tv/?p=68384&comments=1>)

*"I don't think there is a person of

color in this country that doesn't struggle with what it means to be a part of your race versus what the majority thinks is right." (CNN, February 1, 2008)

*"We are living in a time when we are suffering from a deep empathy deficit." (speech to National Congress of Black Women, September 30, 2007)

*"Before we can work on the problems, we have to fix our souls. Our souls are broken in this nation." (New York Times, February 25, 2008)

States have so many lies about President Hugo Chavez and the Bolivarian Revolution." West said he visited in 2006 "to see the democratic awakening taking place." Chavez has allowed terrorist groups Hezbollah and Hamas to open offices in Caracas, and recent evidence suggests he has also been backing communist rebels trying to overthrow the democratically elected government of Colombia. (See "The American Friends of Hugo Chavez: Dial 1-800-4-TYRANT," by Ana Maria Ortiz and Matthew Vadum, *Organization Trends*, March 2008.)

Another campaign advisor is Charles Ogletree, a Harvard Law School professor



Would-be First Lady Michelle Obama has difficulty saying good things about America.

National Journal identified prominent radicals on the Obama presidential campaign's black advisory council. ("Obama's Inner Circle," March 31, 2008).

One is Cornel West, an African-American studies professor at Princeton University who denounces his native land as racist and patriarchal. He has described himself as a "progressive socialist," and has written that "Marxist thought is an indispensable tradition for freedom fighters." He visited Venezuela in 2006 and praised the government of leftist strongman Hugo Chavez. "We in the United

who taught Obama and his wife when they were law students. Ogletree argues the U.S. government should pay reparations to the living descendants of slaves.

Obama's presidential campaign was embarrassed recently when a foreign policy advisor, Robert Malley, had to resign after it was revealed that he had been meeting with the terrorist group Hamas, which has called for attacks on the United States. The resignation came after Hamas political adviser Ahmed Yousef said in April that his group supports Obama's foreign policy ideas and

hopes he wins the presidency. Obama's position on Hamas mirrors U.S. policy. He has said that Hamas is a terrorist group and that the U.S. should not enter into talks with it unless it renounces violence and recognizes Israel's right to exist.

Another advisor is Cass Sunstein, a professor at University of Chicago Law School who will join the faculty of Harvard Law School this fall. In his 2004 book *The Second Bill of Rights: FDR's Unfinished Revolution and Why We Need It More than Ever*, Sunstein argues that rights are discretionary grants from the government to the citizen. Not quite as far to the left is Harvard Law School professor Laurence Tribe, who also serves as a campaign policy and legal

struggle. Wake up, black man!"

And what were those ideals? Marxist and anti-Western ideals, according to an academic paper written by his father. In the article credited to "Barak H. Obama" the economist argued for collective land ownership and confiscation of private land, along with Mugabe-style nationalization of "European" and "Asian" owned businesses in order to be handed over to "indigenous" blacks. The senior Obama wrote: "The question is how are we going to remove the disparities in our country, such as the concentration of economic power in Asian and European hands, while not destroying what has already been achieved and at the same time assimilating these groups to

notoriety once" who visited his family in Hawaii and who was "a contemporary of Richard Wright and Langston Hughes during his years in Chicago."

How do we know "Frank" refers to Frank Marshall Davis? In a 2007 speech at the dedication of a Communist Party (CP) archive, fellow traveler and historian Gerald Horne, a professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, clarified the relationship between Obama and Davis:

In any case, deploring these convictions in Hawaii was an African-American poet and journalist by the name of Frank Marshall Davis, who was certainly in the orbit of the CP—if not a member—and who was born in Kansas and spent a good deal of his adult life in Chicago, before decamping to Honolulu in 1948 at the suggestion of his good friend Paul Robeson. Eventually, he befriended another family—a Euro-American family—that had migrated to Honolulu from Kansas and a young woman from this family eventually had a child with a young student from Kenya East Africa who goes by the name of Barack Obama, who retracing the steps of Davis eventually decamped to Chicago. In his best selling memoir 'Dreams of my Father', the author speaks warmly of an older black poet, he identifies simply as "Frank" as being a decisive influence in helping him to find his present identity as an African-American...



Obama, aged 10, is shown with his father in this photo released by his campaign.

advisor. The liberal constitutional law expert argued before the U.S. Supreme Court in 2000 on behalf of Al Gore in *Bush v. Gore*, the Florida vote-counting lawsuit.

Obama's fondness for radical ideas seems to begin during his childhood. In *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance*, he wrote about the admiration he felt for the ideals of his Kenyan father, a Harvard-educated economics professor: "My father's voice had nevertheless remained untainted, inspiring, rebuking, granting or withholding approval. You do not work hard enough, Barry. You must help in your people's

build one country." ("Problems Facing Our Socialism," *East Africa Journal*, July 1965, is available at http://www.politico.com/static/PPM41_eastafrica.html) Aides to Obama refused to comment on the article, *The Politico* reported April 15.

Obama also appears to have been influenced by his boyhood mentor, poet-activist Frank Marshall Davis, an apologist for the Soviet Union and member of the Communist Party USA. Obama refers to him simply as "Frank" in *Dreams From My Father*. In *Dreams*, Obama describes "Frank" as "pushing eighty" and as a poet of "some modest

Horne predicted that:

At some point in the future, a teacher will add to her syllabus Barack's memoir and instruct her students to read it alongside Frank Marshall Davis' equally affecting memoir, *Living the Blues*, and when that day comes, I'm sure a future student will not only examine critically the Frankenstein monsters that US imperialism created in order to subdue Communist parties but will also be moved to come to this historic and wonderful archive in order to gain insight on what has befallen this complex and intriguing planet on which we reside. (Political

Affairs magazine, a Marxist journal, republished the speech as “Rethinking the History and Future of the Communist Party.” It is available at <http://www.politicalaffairs.net/article/articleview/5047/1/32/>.

Radical Chicago Friends

Obama’s radicalism seems to have manifested itself in his Chicago connections as well.

The Los Angeles Times has reported (April 10, 2008) that Obama has been a “friend and frequent dinner companion” of Rashid Khalidi, a Palestinian-American and former Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) spokesman. Khalidi is the Edward Said Professor of Arab Studies at Columbia University. Said, who died in 2003, was a fierce critic of Israel and a close associate of the late PLO leader Yasser Arafat. Khalidi held a fundraiser for Obama’s ill-fated congressional bid in 2000, and is a co-founder of the Arab American Action Network, a group that provides social services to Arab-Americans in the Chicago area.

At one point Obama served on the board of the liberal Chicago-based Joyce Foundation, a charity that makes grants to a variety of groups, including environmentalists and gun control advocates. But the funding for young Obama’s organizing job came from the Woods Fund of Chicago, a relatively small (2006 assets: \$72 million), little-known foundation. Its founder, Frank Woods, was a prominent telecommunications executive who donated money to civil rights groups in the 1950s. The charity began moving to the left politically in the 1990s, and today focuses on community organizing, arts and culture, and public policy.

The Woods Fund was thrust into the national spotlight in April when during a live televised candidates’ debate moderator George Stephanopoulos asked Obama about his association with a current board member, education professor William Ayers. Ayers is an unrepentant homegrown terrorist who used to belong to the Weathermen, a violent 1960s radical group. Ayers once summed up the group’s philosophy: “Kill all the rich people. Break up their cars and apartments. Bring the revolution home. Kill your parents.”

Although Obama’s chief strategist, David Axelrod, told The Politico’s Ben Smith in February that Obama and Ayers are “certainly friendly, they know each other,” the candidate tried to distance himself from Ayers during the debate. (Axelrod and Obama met on one of Obama’s voter-registration drives on Chicago’s South Side.) Obama said he was just a child when Ayers, a self-described revolutionary communist, bombed U.S. landmarks and that he had little contact with “a guy that lives in my neighborhood... who I know and who I have not received some official endorsement from. He’s not



Frank Marshall Davis (1905-1987), Obama’s boyhood mentor, was a poet, an activist, and a Communist.

somebody I exchange ideas from [sic] on a regular basis. And the notion that somehow as a consequence of me knowing somebody who engaged in detestable acts 40 years ago when I was eight years old, somehow reflects on me and my values, doesn’t make much sense...”

But evidence suggests Obama’s connection to Ayers goes back to at least 1995, and that he must have known what Ayers, who has said claims that America is “a just and fair and decent place” make him “want to puke,” stood for.

It was 1995 when Ayers and his wife Bernardine Dohrn, a law professor and fellow former Weathermen member, held a fundraising event for state senate candidate Obama in their home. Dohrn gained some notoriety when, upon learning of the

murder of actress Sharon Tate in 1969, she commented: “Dig it! First they killed those pigs, then they ate dinner in the same room with them. They even shoved a fork into the victim’s stomach! Wild!” One attendee at the Ayers-Dohrn soiree that helped launch Obama’s career in electoral politics said the couple was “introducing [Obama] to the Hyde Park community as the best thing since sliced bread.” Ayers himself donated \$200 to Obama’s state senate reelection campaign in 2001. (The Politico, February 22, 2008)

Obama served with Ayers on the Woods board between 1999 and 2002. During that time, the Fund approved two grants totaling \$75,000 to Khalidi’s Arab American Action Network (\$40,000 in 2001 and \$35,000 in 2002, according to its tax returns). The Fund’s website states that its philanthropy is based on the axiom that there are “structural barriers to job opportunities, job retention and job advancement” that harm the working poor. In 2005 it made \$3.4 million in grants to such groups as the Midwest Academy (training for community organizers), Tides Foundation (community organizing), Center for Community Change (organizing), American Friends Service Committee, and the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (or ACORN, discussed below), and the Proteus Fund (organizing for world peace), among others. These groups engage in left-wing policy advocacy and social activism.

It is hard to believe that the two activists exchanged no ideas about political goals and tactics during their board tenure. (Ayers still serves on the board.) The two also appeared on academic panels together. One panel dealt with juvenile justice issues, and at that time Obama said Ayers’s book on the topic was “a searing and timely account.” Both also worked to reform Chicago’s education system. (New York Times, May 11, 2008)

In his online curriculum vitae, Ayers describes himself as “Co-Founder and Co-Chair” of the 1995-2000 project known as the Chicago School Reform Collaborative (the Annenberg Challenge). Obama was the Annenberg Challenge’s first chairman, and he served on the “Leadership Council” of the Chicago Public Schools Education Fund, the Challenge’s successor organization. Obama served on this council alongside Ayers’s fa-

ther, Thomas, and his brother, John, in 2001 and 2002, according to the Fund's annual reports. Obama and John Ayers also served on the council in 2003 and 2004, according to the Fund's annual reports. (Thomas Ayers, who died in 2007, had been CEO of Commonwealth Edison.)

In a 2001 memoir, *Fugitive Days*, and in subsequent press interviews, William Ayers said he had no regrets about bombing New York City police headquarters, the Capitol, and the Pentagon in the 1970s. "I don't regret setting bombs," Ayers said of his terrorism in a New York Times interview that happened to be published September 11, 2001. "I feel we didn't do enough." When asked if he would do it all again, he said, "I don't want to discount the possibility."

Decades after Ayers bombed the Pentagon in May 1972, he giggled about the experience in his memoir. In a 2001 Wall Street Journal column about a book signing event for Ayers's memoir, John Tabin noted: "In his book, he writes: 'It turns out that we blew up a bathroom and, quite by accident, water plunged below and knocked out their computers for a time, disrupting the air war [in Vietnam] and sending me into deepening shades of delight.'" Added Tabin: "In those four little words, 'disrupting the air war,' there is the dark prospect of American soldiers in jeopardy."

And who might one of those soldiers in jeopardy at the time have been? While Ayers interfered with America's war effort and cheered for a North Vietnamese victory over the United States, John McCain, whose A-4 Skyhawk attack aircraft was shot down over Hanoi in October 1967, was held in captivity by the North Vietnamese and tortured regularly. Now the Republican Party's presumptive presidential candidate in 2008, he was released by the Communist government in March 1973.

As McCain languished in the Hanoi Hilton, Obama's friends Ayers and Dohrn spent the 1970s waging war against the United States and fleeing justice. They surrendered in 1980 but a legal technicality led to all charges against them being dropped. Ayers gloated: "Guilty as sin, free as a bird, America is a great country."



Obama's associate William Ayers says claims that America is "a just and fair and decent place" make him "want to puke." He posed for this 2001 photograph for Chicago magazine while standing on the American flag.

And what a forgiving country it is! After they retired from their distinguished careers in terrorism, the couple was welcomed with open arms by the academy. Ayers is now Distinguished Professor of Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), and Dohrn is professor at Northwestern University School of Law and director of that school's Children and Family Justice Center.

Organizing Strategies

The Woods Fund, with its focus on community organizing and local activism, was an ideal fit for Obama. The group posts on its website guidelines that describe its "Integrated Approach to Community Organizing and Public Policy." The idea is to show professional organizers how to direct local grassroots people to understand that their goal must be "system change," not solving parochial neighborhood problems. Organizers must learn to steer neighborhood groups toward more politicized and ideological ends and away from merely local controversies and personal disputes. Successful organizing, the guidelines state, "builds power for effective

action in the public arena."

Kellman argues that the Woods strategy of linking community organizing to public policy is perhaps better described as "Naderite" rather than following the Alinsky model. It's the strategy used by the New York Public Interest Research Group, Obama's second employer out of college.

Here's what Kellman told *Foundation Watch* about models of community organizing in a recent interview:

"Obama and I have come to disagree with the Alinsky model, in its key emphasis on self-interest. 'See the world as it is,' Alinsky used to say, 'not as you would like it to be.' Obama, I think, turns that on its head. He's saying, 'We can make the world as it is into the world as we would like it to be.'"

Kellman points out that Alinsky, an atheist, disagreed with the views of Martin Luther King, Jr. and found his approach to organizing undisciplined because it ignored self-interest for the sake of (what was for King, at least) a higher, religious vision of a better world for us all.

"What really inspired me was the civil rights movement," Obama has said. "And if you asked me who my role model was at that time, it would probably be Bob Moses, the famous [SNCC-Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] organizer..." (New Republic, March 19, 2007). During "Freedom Summer" in 1964, Moses famously led groups of civil rights activists to travel to Mississippi where they organized blacks to brave white hostility by registering to vote. It's notable that Obama does not cite the example of King here, possibly because he knew the comparison might smack of arrogance.

By contrast, here is his friend Kellman's comment on Obama's true vision for community organizing—and for himself. Kellman told Obama biographer David Mendell that he believes Obama is indeed the most likely heir to King's legacy, both as an advocate and moral voice for black Americans. Kellman thinks Obama saw this role for himself years ago but has necessarily been

circumspect about it: “If you look at the King analogy and you look at Barack, Barack has become the expectation of his people, and in that sense he is similar to King...And obviously, that can cause someone to kind of lose perspective.”

Especially if he’s politically ambitious and in a hurry. The Sun-Times notes that every three years since 1995 Obama has aspired to a more powerful political position. He built his entire state legislative record (26 bills passed in a single year) in 2002, the last of his seven years in the Illinois state legislature. Not coincidentally, it was the first year since 1976 that both houses in the legislature had a Democratic majority.

From Little ACORNs...

Let’s look at ACORN, another non-profit organization important throughout Obama’s career. The radical activist group was founded in 1970. Unlike most of the New Left groups that have fallen away as their members age and acquire children and tenure, ACORN activists have kept the spirit of leftism alive.

ACORN is the nation’s largest community organization of low- and moderate-income persons, with 350,000 “member families,” organized into 800 neighborhood chapters and 104 cities, according to its website. Founder Wade Rathke also heads the New Orleans-based Local 100 of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), which donates over \$2 million to ACORN annually, a significant part of the ACORN network’s \$37 million budget. ACORN is actually several organizations, including the ACORN Institute (training), the Living Wage Resource Center, the Wal-Mart Alliance for Reform Now (WARN), and the ACORN Housing Corp.

In 1992, Obama took time off from his new job at Davis Miner to direct ACORN’s voter mobilization arm, Project Vote, a hugely successful voter registration campaign that helped propel Democrat Carol Moseley Braun into the U.S. Senate by adding an estimated 125,000 voters to the rolls. Project Vote is an ostensibly independent 501(c)(3) that claims to conduct “non-partisan” voter registration drives, counsels potential voters on their rights, and litigates on behalf of the poor and “disenfranchised.”



An advisor to the Obama campaign, Princeton professor Cornel West gestures while wearing an Obama '08 pin on his lapel.

Its greatest legislative accomplishment is the National Voter Registration Act of 1993, commonly known as Motor Voter. But in his book *Stealing Elections* (2004), Wall Street Journal columnist John Fund argues that the law leads to voter fraud:

“Perhaps no piece of legislation in the last generation better captures the ‘incentivizing’ of fraud... than the 1993 National Voter Registration Act...Examiners were under orders not to ask anyone for identification or proof of citizenship. States also had to permit mail-in voter registrations, which allowed anyone to register without any personal contact with a registrar or election official. Finally, states were limited in pruning ‘dead wood’ – people who had died, moved or been convicted of crimes – from their rolls. ... Since its implementation, Motor Voter has worked in one sense: it has fueled an explosion of phantom voters.”

In 1995, Obama sued on behalf of ACORN for the implementation of Motor Voter laws in Illinois and won. That secured Obama an invitation to train ACORN staff. Obama later returned the favor when, as a member of the Woods Fund board, he approved frequent grants to ACORN. In a 2007 address to its leaders (who subsequently endorsed his presidential bid), Obama praised

ACORN’s mission:

“I come out of a grassroots organizing background. That’s what I did for three and a half years before I went to law school. That’s the reason I moved to Chicago—to organize. So this is something that I know personally, the work you do, the importance of it. I’ve been fighting alongside of ACORN on issues you care about my entire career. Even before I was an elected official, when I ran Project Vote in Illinois, ACORN was smack dab in the middle of it, and we appreciate your work.”

ACORN’s practical effectiveness may be partly due to its PAL programs. PALs are Precinct Action Leaders who are recruited from local neighborhoods and trained to build neighborhood networks. Each volunteer participant in PAL creates and services a list of about 100 family, friends, and others in the local community. The PALs make sure everyone is registered, informed, and ready to vote.

Despite Obama’s work for Project Vote, polls show that clear majorities of black and Hispanics back voter ID laws. And so does the U.S. Supreme Court, which on April 28 ruled 6-3 that states can require voters to show identity cards.

Send a Kid to Camp (Obama)

Foundation Watch asked Jerry Kellman if ACORN has assisted the Obama presidential campaign in any way. He replied that its 501(c)(3) status prevents ACORN from helping as an organization but that “lots of grassroots members” are assisting. Hmm. Indeed, it is illegal for a tax-exempt charitable organization to assist a political campaign. But given Obama’s friendly relations with ACORN, one can only speculate about its role.

Two new programs sponsored by the Obama campaign are also mobilizing the grassroots. There is no indication that these programs have or seek tax-exempt status. However, they will give young adults and college students supporting Obama an unpaid opportunity to learn firsthand the fundamentals of community organizing, Obama-style.

According to the sketchy information available on one project, “Camp Obama” offers activism training for campaign volunteers, teaching them methods Obama himself used as a community organizer. “We want you to stop thinking about Barack Obama and *be* Barack Obama,” says Jocelyn Woodards about the intensive two-day training course.

A second program, the Obama Organizing Fellows, will train participants in “field organizing, messaging and other activities” and teach them to “organize in a community, working in conjunction with grassroots leaders and campaign staff.” Fellows must devote 30 hours per week to the program which runs from June to the end of the summer. Kellman has said that the Obama campaign uses elements of both types of organizing—the practical and aggressive Alinsky method and the visionary “movement” style. However, he compares the Obama campaign—in its “positive energy”—to the civil rights movement.

It’s worthwhile to note that the Obama campaign has stolen a page from Howard Dean’s 2004 presidential campaign by taking Internet strategy to the next level. The campaign not only raises large sums online from many individual donors but it is collecting contact information on Obama website visitors, which could be used in November

for a veritable “children’s crusade” of young Obama supporters.

ACORN’s active involvement in the Obama campaign is likely to be significant. ACORN’s “non-partisan” Project Vote has announced its plans to register hundreds of thousands of voters before the November election. That should concern all Americans



Former PLO spokesman and Yasser Arafat confidante Rashid Khalidi is a friend of Obama.

given the record of highly-publicized voter fraud allegations lodged against ACORN in Ohio (2004), Wisconsin (2004), Florida (2004), New Mexico (2004), Colorado (2005), Missouri (2006), and Washington state (2007).

ACORN is currently involved in the fight in Congress over how to deal with the increasing number of home foreclosures. In recent weeks Republicans have balked at Democratic plans to include activist groups in government programs to provide mortgage counseling. Senator Bob Casey (D-Pennsylvania) denounced Republicans attacks on a Democratic bill to provide \$200 million to counsel homeowners threatened by foreclosure, noting that the bill would help fund ACORN and the Hispanic advocacy group La Raza. Casey may want ACORN’s help in bringing foreclosure relief, but its critics have looked at the group’s record and decided ACORN is a bad risk. (For more on ACORN, see “Voter Turnout or Voter Fraud? Interest Groups Push for Election Reform,” by Jonathan Bechtle, *Organization Trends*, April 2006.)

Reverend Jeremiah Wright

Obama biographer David Mendell believes community organizer Jerry Kellman

was the first significant influence on Obama’s thinking about the connection between politics and community. But he says the second key influence was Rev. Jeremiah Wright, the founder of Trinity United Church of Christ. Until their recent public break, Wright and Obama were close. Wright, whose words inspired the title of Obama’s book, *The Audacity of Hope*, officiated at Obama’s wedding and baptized his children.

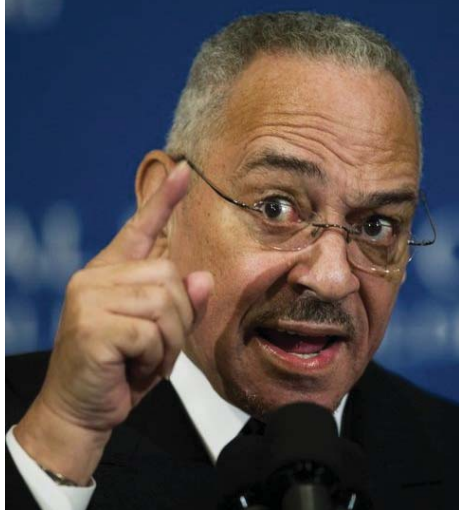
In the spring, Wright became a household name throughout the nation as the media began to draw attention to the preacher’s fiery sermons and speeches blaming America for the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and accusing the U.S. government of inventing the HIV virus “as a means of genocide against people of color.” In one well-publicized 2003 sermon, Wright urged his parishioners to condemn the United States. “No, no, no, God damn America, that’s in the Bible for killing innocent people. God damn America for treating our citizens as less than human. God damn America for as long as she acts like she is God and she is supreme,” he said. And under Wright’s leadership, on July 22, 2007, the church newsletter reprinted a terrorist political manifesto by Hamas official Mousa Abu Marzook.

The church’s website puts Wright’s thinking in context: “The vision statement of Trinity United Church of Christ is based upon the systematized liberation theology that started in 1969 with the publication of Dr. James Cone’s book, *Black Power and Black Theology*.”

Black liberation theologians like Cone explicitly state a preference for Marxism as a way for the black church to understand the problems and needs of its members. Marxism argues that modern society is based on class distinctions and that an oppressor class creates economic and social structures that suppress its victims. Black liberation theology identifies the oppressor with whites and the victims as black. Here’s a clarifying quote from Cone: “The Christian faith does not possess in its nature the means for analyzing the structure of capitalism. Marxism as a tool of social analysis can disclose the gap between appearance and reality, and thereby help Christians to see how things really are.”

But social analysis is not enough. The mission of liberation theology is social change.

A critic of liberation theology, the black intellectual Anthony Bradley of the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty, has written, "Black Liberation Theology, originally intended to help the black com-



Obama's spiritual mentor, Rev. Jeremiah Wright, speaks at the National Press Club on April 28.

munity, may have actually hurt many blacks by promoting racial tension, victimology, and Marxism which ultimately leads to more oppression. As the failed 'War on Poverty' has exposed, the best way to keep the blacks perpetually enslaved to government as 'daddy' is to preach victimology, Marxism, and seduce blacks into thinking that upward mobility is someone else's responsibility in a free society."

Obama now says he disagrees with his former pastor, did not hear his most inflammatory sermons, and is surprised by his most recent remarks at the National Press Club on April 28. Whatever the extent of that disagreement, the record shows that in 2002, Obama's last year on the board of the Woods Fund, it made \$6,000 in grants to Trinity United Church of Christ.

A Tragedy in the Making

In *The Promised Land* (1995), his remarkable study of the great black migration to Chicago, writer Nicholas Lemann noted the important roles urban renewal and the interstate highway system played in reshaping the physical landscape of the city. But he wrote that it was the University of Chicago,

especially its school of sociology, that transformed the expectations of Chicago's citizens. As an undergraduate sociology student at the University, Saul Alinsky absorbed the teachings of the "Chicago school" of sociology. It taught that individual pathologies like delinquency and crime are the result of "root causes" solvable by progressive community-based social action.

Among the most debilitating notions conceived by the activists and academics in the University's Hyde Park neighborhood was the idea that poverty is a political condition. The solution they proposed was "empowerment," the idea that political activism can overcome poverty and bring about economic betterment. Alinsky's work in organizing community activists to "empower" poor people by protesting social conditions in their neighborhoods was the consequence of this theory. Lemann agreed that empowerment was a wonderful-sounding idea. Too bad it didn't work. He writes:

"The history of the Woodlawn Organization [an Alinsky protest project] proved otherwise: no matter how well organized, a community without employed people cannot stabilize... Both politically and in terms of reducing crime or poverty, community action was a failure."

Lemann judges the 1960s War on Poverty a failure, not least because it relied on unelected community organizers and made enemies of local elected officials. "It also failed because its main tool, community action, assumes a non-existent link between political power and individual economic improvement."

This non-existent link seems to pervade the policies and political outlook of Obama. Instead of proposing self-sustaining local programs to regenerate communities, Obama embraced the empowerment phantom of "community politics." The idea that community activists should mobilize neighborhoods and direct programs funded by federal tax dollars is implicit in his entire career.

Perhaps Obama came to believe that activist politics and federal programs can solve social problems because he saw how he was able to use his own natural skills and evident

charisma to political advantage. After all, when Obama says he is willing to negotiate directly with rogue nations like North Korea and Iran, it may be because he believes Kim Jong-il and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad will be as susceptible to his persuasive speech and stage presence, his radiant smile, as the American public has been. For a confident man who has experienced an amazing political career it's not hard to imagine that you can bring "unity" to the world as easily as to the Democrats.

This misdirection of energies is characteristic of Obama's career to this point. It is a tragic error that will doom his hopes should he be elected president.

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PhilanthropyNotes

The Wall Street Journal's **Mary Anastasia O'Grady** reported April 28 that **George Soros's Open Society Institute** (OSI) has been advancing the cause of terrorism. O'Grady noted that an OSI-funded Peruvian "human-rights" group called Aprodeh was recently successful in its effort to have the European Parliament remove **Tupac Amaru** from its list of terrorist groups. The Peruvian guerrilla group is known for kidnapping, torturing, and murdering civilians in order to push its political objectives. Aprodeh, which has ties to Venezuela's leftist strongman **Hugo Chavez**, also received funding from **Oxfam America**, the **John Merck Foundation**, and the **Inter-American Foundation**, which is a U.S. government agency.

As the Senate Finance Committee probes the endowment-hoarding practices of colleges and universities, dozens of schools are planning to revamp their aid programs, but they're not planning to dip into their precious endowments, the Wall Street Journal reports. For example, after the **University of Chicago** received an anonymous \$100 million donation last year, it is now trying to raise the additional \$300 million needed so it can substitute loans for scholarships for its poorest undergraduates. **Lynne Munson** of the **Center for College Affordability and Productivity** argued in a recent report that the nation's higher education institutions could be doing a lot more for their students. The combined worth of the top 25 college and university endowments is \$11 billion greater than the combined assets of the 25 largest private foundations including the **Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation**, **Ford**, and **Rockefeller**, she wrote. (Munson's paper is "Scrooge U: The Illusion of Generosity," *Foundation Watch*, April 2008.)

Meanwhile, Massachusetts lawmakers are considering taxing colleges and universities with \$1 billion-plus endowments, arguing that they don't do enough to improve nearby neighborhoods. And miraculously the staff of uber-liberal **Harvard University**, whose tax-exempt endowment exceeds \$34 billion, have suddenly embraced free market capitalism! Harvard spokesman **Kevin Casey** said the plan would hurt his tightwad university. "You'd be taxing success here...[and] this would put us at a real competitive disadvantage, which would drastically hurt the Commonwealth."

The Seattle-based Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation announced it has selected **Jeff Raikes** as the next CEO of the foundation, effective September 2. Raikes, former president of the **Microsoft Business Division**, will assume the role presently held by **Patty Stonesifer**, who announced in February that she planned to step down. Stonesifer earlier helped the couple launch the **Gates Library Foundation**, which merged with the **William H. Gates Foundation** in 2000, to become the foundation that bears the couple's names. The foundation said Raikes, who has a background in philanthropy, transformed his division's Information Worker business, nearly doubling revenues to more than \$16 billion annually.

Charity Navigator has assigned singer **Sting's** charity, **Rainforest Foundation Inc.**, a zero rating for four years running, the New York Post reported May 4. That's because the charity, which is supposed to help indigenous peoples and to preserve forests, habitually spends only a small portion of annual revenues on programs. Problems could also arise because of the way the foundation reported the value of tickets for a 2006 charity concert. It sold tickets at up to \$600 a piece but estimates each one had a fair market value of just \$45, allowing buyers to write off the bulk of the amount as a donation. "If the receipts are wrong, donors could face IRS audits," said **James Dellinger** of **Capital Research Center**, who was quoted in the article.

A **Foundation Center** study found that 54% of foundations expect their giving to rise this year despite the economic slowdown and its impact on foundation assets, while 28% expect their giving to fall off, the Chronicle of Philanthropy reports. Grant-making by America's 72,000 foundations rose by 10% in 2007 to almost \$43 billion, on the heels of a 7.1% increase in 2006. Community foundations boosted their grant-making by almost 14% in 2007, the largest jump across all categories of grant makers. Giving by independent foundations and corporate foundations rose by 13% and more than 6% respectively. Foundation assets rose 9% to come in at almost \$670 billion in total.