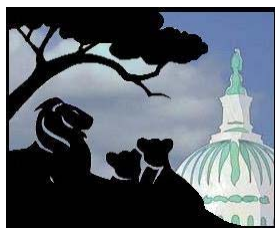


—EDITED TRANSCRIPT—



HUDSON INSTITUTE'S
BRADLEY CENTER
FOR PHILANTHROPY AND CIVIC RENEWAL
presents

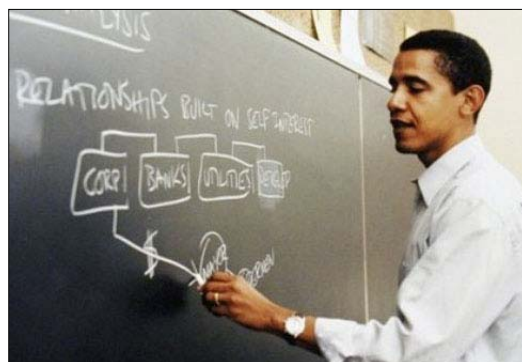
Mr. Obama's Neighborhood

Wednesday, October 1, 2008 ▪ 12:00 to 2:00 p.m.

Hudson Institute ▪ Betsy and Walter Stern Conference Center ▪ 1015 15th Street, NW ▪ Suite 600

One of the surprise political issues of the 2008 presidential campaign has been a debate about “community organizers” – who they are, what they really do, what kinds of responsibilities they may or may not bear. This reminds us that Senator Barack Obama is really our first presidential candidate to have come up within and to have been shaped by the world of community organization, nonprofits, and foundations (he has served on the boards of two major nationally-known philanthropies). Unhappily, the discussion so far reminds us how little most Americans know about that world.

On October 1, 2008, Hudson Institute's Bradley Center hosted a panel of experts to help address this issue, with particular attention to this question: What can we look for from a President whose resume includes a period as a community organizer? Panelists included **HARRY BOYTE** of the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute and long-time Chicago South Side community organizer **JAMES CAPRARO**, both of whom have provided advice to the Obama campaign, as well as *National Review*'s **BYRON YORK** and **STANLEY KURTZ** of the Ethics and Public Policy Center. The Bradley Center's own **WILLIAM SCHAMBRA** served as the discussion's moderator.



PROGRAM AND PANEL

- 11:45 a.m. Registration, lunch buffet
12:00 p.m. Welcome by Hudson Institute's **WILLIAM SCHAMBRA**
12:10 Panel discussion
HARRY BOYTE, University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute
BYRON YORK, *National Review*
JAMES CAPRARO, Greater Southwest Development Corporation
STANLEY KURTZ, Ethics and Public Policy Center
1:10 Question-and-answer session
2:00 Adjournment

FURTHER INFORMATION

THIS TRANSCRIPT WAS PREPARED FROM AN AUDIO RECORDING and edited by Krista Shaffer and Niki Nagy. To request further information on this event or the Bradley Center, please contact Hudson Institute at (202) 974-2424 or send an e-mail to Krista Shaffer at Krista@hudson.org.

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Biographies

Harry C. Boyte is a senior fellow at the Humphrey Institute, founder and co-director of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, and a member of the graduate school faculty at the University of Minnesota. From 1993 to 1995 Harry Boyte was national coordinator for the New Citizenship, a nonpartisan alliance of higher education, philanthropic, and civic groups that worked with the White House Domestic Policy Council to analyze the gap between citizens and government and to propose solutions. Boyte also served as senior advisor to the National Commission on Civic Renewal, and serves on several other national advisory boards. He has authored nine books on democracy, citizenship, community organizing, and citizen action, the most recent of which is *The Citizen Solution: How You Can Make a Difference* (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2008). He has published in more than seventy publications including *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Change*, *Dissent*, *The Nation*, *Perspectives on Politics*, *democracy*, *Public Administration Review*, *The Journal of African Political Science* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. His political commentary has appeared on CBS Evening News and National Public Radio. He served as a field secretary of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference during the civil rights movement., and was a community organizer for several years.

Jim Capraro's community organizing and development work began in the early 1970s, when he worked as a community organizer pursuing the passage of the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act (HMDA) and the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA). Currently, as principal at Capraro Consulting, his work involves "comprehensive" community development, strategic planning, community organizing, collaboration/partnership, and non-profit management. For one, he has been deployed by National LISC and several local LISC sites to assist in the roll out of its signature "Sustainable Communities" comprehensive community development approach. Capraro is also CEO of Chicago's Greater Southwest Development Corporation, which he founded in 1976. GSDC has been designated by the National Neighborhood Reinvestment Corporation as a national "model" for commercial revitalization, and was selected by the Chicago Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC) as the recipient of the "Outstanding Community Development Organization" award. GSDC has achieved over \$500 million in community development projects and created or retained over 6,000 jobs in its Southwest Chicago neighborhood over the past thirty years. GSDC's development projects range from small business to the \$300 million expansion of the worlds largest bakery, Nabisco.

Stanley Kurtz is a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center. On a wide range of issues, from marriage and family, to higher education reform, to the place of religion in public life, to the challenges of democratization abroad, Kurtz is a key contributor to American public debates. Kurtz has written frequently on these and other issues for various journals, including *National Review Online* (where he is a contributing editor), the *Weekly Standard*, *Policy Review*, *City Journal*, and *Commentary*. Kurtz has provided a critical public voice in defense of traditional marriage as well as insightful commentary on the tensions between religion and secularism in modern society. He also has led the campaign to reform federal subsidies to academic programs of "area studies" under Title VI of the Higher Education Act. Kurtz has taught at Harvard University, winning several teaching awards for his work in a Great Books program. He was also Dewey Prize Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Chicago.

Byron York is the White House correspondent for *National Review* magazine and *National Review Online*. The author of *The Vast Left Wing Conspiracy*, the first book to trace the new political movement created by activists like MoveOn.org, George Soros, and the liberal blogosphere, York has also written extensively about the Bush administration, the war on terrorism, the battle over Supreme Court nominations, and the 2008 presidential campaign. A weekly columnist for *The Hill* newspaper, his work has been published in the *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *New Republic*, and *Weekly Standard*. A contributor to Fox News, he has appeared on *Special Report with Brit Hume*, *Meet the Press*, *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, *The Daily Show*, and other television programs, and has contributed occasional commentaries to National Public Radio.

Proceedings

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Good afternoon! I'm Bill Schambra, and on behalf of Hudson Institute's Bradley Center for Philanthropy and Civic Renewal, Krista Shaffer and I welcome you to today's panel, entitled "Mr. Obama's Neighborhood." A special welcome as well to our national C-SPAN audience.

When we first planned this panel several months ago, it seemed unlikely that the topic we are addressing today, Senator Barack Obama's engagement with community organizing, could have been a major feature of the Republican National Convention, but so it was. And yet I'm not sure that the convention left us with full clarity about the topic. If I recall correctly, we learned that the difference between a small-town mayor and a community organizer is lipstick. (Laughter.)

So we forge ahead with today's panel, which takes its bearings from the fact that in Senator Barack Obama we do indeed have our first presidential candidate whose résumé includes a stint as community organizer – a stint that developed into a chapter in his eloquent autobiography *Dreams from My Father*, and that obviously shaped his rhetoric and thinking about American politics. As his wife Michelle put it, "Barack is not a politician first and foremost, he's a community activist exploring the viability of politics to make change."

Given the importance of community organizing in the life of the man who may well be our next president, it is surprising how little is truly known about it even among the political pros in the nation's capital. Who are community organizers? What do they do? How do they think about American political life and the reforms that might be necessary to make it better? What can we learn or assume about presidential candidate Obama's from his immersion in that world?

These and other questions will be taken up today by our panel of distinguished experts, which includes Jim Capraro, community organizer in Chicago since the 1970s and the founder and CEO of Chicago's Greater Southwest Development Corporation; Harry Boyte, a senior fellow at the Humphrey Institute, founder and co-director of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, long-time scholar of the tradition of community organizing in America, and – I should add – a good and dear friend. I should also add that both Harry and Jim have provided advice and counsel to the Obama presidential campaign, and I believe at this very moment Jim is sporting a button that says, "Organizers for Obama."

Our panel also includes Stanley Kurtz, senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center (EPPC) here in Washington and adjunct fellow at Hudson Institute. He has spent some time over the past few months in Chicago looking into the question of Senator Obama's days as a community organizer. Finally, we have on our panel Byron York, White House correspondent for *National Review* magazine and a thoughtful student of the infrastructure of modern liberal politics.¹

¹ Byron York's 2006 book *The Vast Left Wing Conspiracy: The Untold Story of the Democrats' Desperate Fight to Reclaim Power* (Random House) was the subject of a November 30, 2006 Bradley Center panel discussion. York draws on his work in that book throughout the discussion here transcribed. A complete transcript of the November 30 discussion is available online at:

We'll go down our list of speakers in the order I just mentioned; then we'll have a brief exchange on the panel; and finally we will throw the session open for questions from the audience.

Jim?

JAMES CAPRARO: Thank you. Good afternoon! Thank you very much to Hudson Institute for inviting us to come here. It's a pleasure to meet my colleagues on the dias today. And I am wearing a ("Organizers for Obama") button with pride, but I'll also express a little humility, I think, at the beginning. I'm fifty-eight years old, and never in my lifetime did I think that we would end up here, in October, with very important events about to unfold. And the fact is that from the south side of Chicago and also from the north side of Chicago, we have two baseball teams that have won their division. It's been a hundred and two years since the Cubs and the White Sox –

(Cross talk, laughter.)

JIM CAPRARO: And I'm sorry, Harry – the White Sox did beat the Minnesota Twins. So it is a momentous occasion for us, on the south side of Chicago.

I was asked to come and talk about what a community organizer is and what they do. I was listening a little bit earlier to a conversation unfolding about people who have written about community organizing, and what struck me is they wrote about community organizing *schools*. So I ask you: If we understood lawyers by what we knew about law schools only, I think we might have a limited understanding of who lawyers are and what they do – or teachers, or any other profession.

So when people talk about organizing, they tend to speak about a Gamaliel affiliation or an Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF) Affiliation. When I was a young community organizer, I worked with NTIC, National Training and Information Center, where Gail Cincotta worked. When she died about five or six years ago, her obituary called her the mother of the Community Reinvestment Act. And so we kind of get tagged with that.

But in my comments, I want to move away from that. I don't want to talk about the schools. I want to talk about what it is somebody like me does every day. Because I think we understand what a small-town mayor does; I think that was a point at a convention.² But not everybody does understand what a community organizer is, and I think that's the point of this panel.

First, let me quickly tell you how I came to want to become one. Chicago author Studs Terkel wrote a book called *Race*, and in that book there's a chapter called "The Park."³ And if you read it, you'll read an interview that he did with me. It talks about a day in my life when I was sixteen

http://www.hudson.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=HUDSON_upcoming_events&id=324

² The point was made by vice-presidential candidate Sarah Palin in her September 2008 speech to the Republican National Convention.

³ Studs Terkel, *Race: How Blacks & Whites Think & Feel about the American Obsession* (Sinclair-Stevenson Ltd., 1996).

years old. In a block south of my house, in Marquette Park, in August 1966, there was a terrible, terrible incident in the neighborhood that I grew up in, the neighborhood that I work in now. That day there was a civil rights march led by Martin Luther King, and thousands of young white thugs showed up showing bricks and bottles and rocks. I won't tell you the story about myself; you can read that – it's only about twenty pages. But it was a day that changed my life. I was sixteen years old; I was about to enter my junior year in high school, and I thought, this country is sick and somebody has got to care. So it actually put me on a life path that I would have never had been on if hadn't been for a terrible experience in my own neighborhood that made me very ashamed of the place that I lived in.

So I sought to become a community organizer, because I thought that's how one who was looking for a more pedestrian way of trying to undertake reform – other than running for office – might actually get involved in doing it. I apprenticed at a place called the National Training and Information Center, and I worked on the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act, and later I worked on Community Reinvestment Act.

But, national movements aside, what it's really about is the community. And that's why I've spent the last thirty-three years as the executive director of a not-for-profit organization in the same neighborhood where I witnessed that march in Marquette Park, lo these many years later. And what's so interesting to me is, when I first took the job I didn't think it would last longer than two years. And I also thought that we were the scruffy little anomaly, and everybody else in the world had stamina and substance and staying power. But you know what? There is not a First National Bank of Chicago anymore, but there is a Greater Southwest Development Corporation.

So what is it, really, that we do when we're organizing? I read a piece lately that talked about Barack Obama's young days as an organizer in the mid-1980s in Chicago, the three or four years that he was there. And let me make note that I've never ever heard the Senator talk about how much he accomplished when he was an organizer. I've heard him say over and over again, it's the best education he ever had. Mark that difference. He didn't make the claim that he changed the world while he was on the south side of Chicago; he made the claim that went to school. But I think some who are examining that time in his life – my son is thirty-four years old now. When he was twenty-four to twenty-six years old, he was working at the DePaul University bookstore, wondering what he wanted to do. And it was through talking to lawyers who were teachers at the school that he decided to become an attorney. That was a formative time in his life just like Barack's life, just like my life. When I became the executive director of Greater Southwest, I was twenty-six.

So, why would it be the best education? A word that is often used – and I think Mr. York's article used it several times when talking to people from the neighborhood – is “sensitivity.”⁴ Barack had a sensitivity. The first thing an organizer has to do is to listen – a lot. You might have heard of one-on-one meetings; that's the pattern of practice, that's the technique or the tool. And one-on-one meetings are about listening to people so you understand what's really important to them. Some people called that self-interest. You can call it what you will. But it's understanding what's really important to them. It's something I think we all need to do more, and it's

⁴ Byron York, “What Did Obama Do As A Community Organizer?” *National Review*, September 8, 2008.

something that I learned as a young organizer, and it has helped me in so many ways because it's the best education I ever had.

And it helped me in practical ways, like listening to my wife. I learned early on that when my wife tells me something, she doesn't want me to respond necessarily, and she certainly doesn't want me to fix something or have an agenda. She wants me to understand, to *listen*. And so at the street level in my neighborhood, the first order of business is *listening*, so that you can actually hear what people say – without covering it with your own agenda, without shading it with your own political aspirations or your own political principals. It may not be what you wanted to hear at all, but you know what? You're the servant of the people there, so you actually, really do have to listen to this. And if you do this with enough people throughout the neighborhood, what you understand, or what you find, is commonality.

When different people tell you the same thing, all of a sudden you have commonality among different people. When I was a young organizer, we used to talk about issues, and the idea that issues were brought people together. We used to define issues as “problems that were identified as problems in common by a lot of people, upon which a lot of people would care to act.” But over the years I came to realize that organizing is not about issues. Issues are important. I think it's about values. I think it's about what people really aspire to in a community. It could be an urban community. It could be a rural community. A community is a group of people who choose to affiliate in some way, shape, or form *together*. I guess these days, it could be an internet discussion forum. That's certainly true among academics; they've been using listservs for years to do that, to come together as a community. But in my world, the community is geo-specified.

So let me tell you what we do – on the street, on the ground – when we go out and listen to people. In 2003 we decided – now remember, we've been in the same place for a long time. And when I was a kid growing up in this same neighborhood I work in now, it was very white, as demonstrated by that day in the park. Now it's about 40 percent African American, about 40 percent Hispanic and about 20 percent white. And back about five years ago or so, we took pause; we stepped back, and we said, just because we know how to do some things – we had built housing; we had kept in industry in the neighborhood, which kept jobs in the neighborhood; we helped small business; we had done all kinds of different things that we learned over the years – it doesn't necessarily mean that those are the right things to do in the future. And, by the way, when we figured all of this out before, it was a different neighborhood. The streets are the same, the houses are the same, but the people are different. And the neighborhood isn't really the geography, the neighborhood is *the community*. It's kind of like the difference in a church; it's not really the building, it's the congregation that makes the church.

And so here's what we did. We put a challenge, kind of a stretch goal for our organization, on the table. We said, let's find one hundred leaders in this neighborhood who we do not know, and let's spend the summer going out and doing one-on-one meetings with them.

It was really hard at first just to come up with the list; it took us three meetings to come up with the list of leaders – “leader” meaning people who have a following, people of generated trust among the constituency, naturally. Could we go out and find one hundred people like that? It took us three meetings. At the end of the first meeting we had eight people on the list, because

you don't know who you don't know. So we decided to go out to talk people we did know, harvest names and bring them back. And we came up with 114 names of people. And then we spent the summer out there listening.

We went out and we said, tell us what you think strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats are here. And then we were quiet. And our discipline was, if the conversation went quiet, let it stay quiet until the other person broke the silence. If they didn't break the silence and you felt like you had to talk, the instruction was to ask them to further explain something they had already said. So it was totally one-way listening.

We knew that there was a growing Muslim community in our neighborhood with which we didn't have much of a relationship, and after 9/11 they were very hard to find. And so we went out and found them and listened to them. We went out and found new Hispanic leaders. We found that in all the Catholic churches, which had been mostly Anglo before were now turning Hispanic, and that every Catholic church had a new Guadalupana association – an association to venerate Our Lady of Guadalupe. So we went and found the officers of those associations and listened to them.

Let me tell you what happened as we did this. At the end of the summer we analyzed what we had heard and came up with a report. And we invited fifty of the most compelling interviews to come to a meeting, and another twenty-five people whom we didn't interview because they are people with whom we work all the time. So we had invited seventy-five through a mailed invitation; we didn't put out flyers, didn't try to mobilize – there's a big difference between mobilizing and organizing. People think that what organizers seek to do all the time is to deliver thousands of people on a picket line somewhere. What we were seeking to do was just connect leaders together along their common values, and then see what they want to do, what they would figure out to do. Well, we had eighty-five RSVPs a week before the meeting. The night of the meeting we had 175 people in the room before there wasn't any more room, and there were another forty people in the hall.

We had taken great care to figure out where to hold the meeting. If we had held it in the Catholic church, only the Catholics would come. If we had held it in a mosque, only the Islamic people would come. If we had held it in a Hispanic church, only the Hispanics would come. So we held it in a hospital. We thought, everybody gets sick, and so it's kind of a neutral, common ground. And people came.

Here's what came out of those interviews.

There was a closed bank branch on 63rd Street, an old Charter One. We found the Inner City Muslim Action Network (IMAN), which we didn't even know about – it was six blocks away from our neighborhood, and we found that we have about a gazillion Muslim doctors in Chicago who are IMAN members. And a medical doctor, a young woman named Sherene Fakhran, who was an internist at Northwestern Memorial Hospital, had her master's degree in public health administration and had put together a business plan for a free health clinic, and they were borrowing office space and treating people for free. No funding. These are young, fire-in-the-belly-about-healing doctors who just want to heal people. And then they went to the older

doctors who don't really have a fire in the belly about healing anymore – it's more about making money – and they got them to donate their medical pharmaceutical samples. And so now they're dispensing drugs, and they're doing this every other Sunday. And they had a dream to create a medical clinic.

My community development corporation was just finishing building low-income elderly housing – assisted living, eighty-six units. And at the end of the lease-up, we had an \$800,000 developer fee come due, and so what we did was take that developer fee – well, we tried to help these folks find this building and buy this building, but Muslims don't do any interest. It's pretty hard to find interest-free financing. And so here's what we did. We took our \$800,000 developer fee, bought the building on the deal that they would start treating people if we rehabilitated it into a medical center, which they started doing two years ago. And we're on a ten-year lease-to-own from us. But they will probably pay us back in five years.

And here's the sweet part of this story. This is about organizing, because it's about making connections – powerful connections that can influence the quality of people's lives. A young, single Hispanic mother had a son at Gage Park High School. She was working full time and had no health insurance. Her son was a really good baseball player. Out in the suburbs of Chicago, kids just take playing high school baseball for granted, right? But at Gage Park, you can't play sports if you can't get a physical, and his mother couldn't afford a physical.

But she heard about the medical center and brought her son there. The doctors gave him an exam and sent him back. Then the coaches asked how this happened, and after he told them, they went to the medical center, and now those doctors are doing free exams for all of the uninsured kids at Gage Park High School. It is not an FQHC (federally qualified health center). There is no federal funding involved. They have an application in to become one; it may take three or four years. But in the meantime, kids are playing baseball.

I could give you a similar story about young mothers becoming parent mentors in our schools, becoming volunteer teacher aides. The kids are doing better in those schools. And the mothers, many of them are becoming certified teachers aides, and one is in college to become a teacher.

But in the middle of all of this, foreclosures has been our bane. I know more about foreclosures than I ever wanted to know. We've been working against predatory lending and subprime abuse, and maybe some other day I can tell you what differentiates those two things. But another piece of what we did was try to go to the State of Illinois to get a law passed against predatory lending. And I will tell you that our state senator was a fellow whom you might have heard of, because we're in the district that Barack Obama formerly represented as a state senator.

The Senate in Illinois was controlled by the Republicans; the House was controlled by the Democrats; and George Ryan was our Republic governor. When we got George Ryan to the neighborhood to do a tour, he totally understood what predatory lending was. But even he at that time couldn't convince the Senate to pass a law for stronger regulations, and licensing mortgage brokers. And guess what? We're all paying for that now. Again, that's some other panel, some other day.

The Speaker of the House of the State of Illinois and the Governor got together, and they decided that we could pass a law – they thought they could pass a law – allowing the governor to direct the Illinois Department of Financial Institutions to create regulations. But for regulations to become code in the State of Illinois they have to pass something called the Joint Committee on Administrative Rules. Six Republicans, six Democrats, six House members, six Senate members. And one of those Senate members who was a Democrat was Barack Obama. So during the summer of 2001, Barack Obama met with his eleven other colleagues every two to three weeks. And then he would talk to the folks in the district, including people from our churches, our mosques, our block clubs, et cetera, about who was supporting and who was not supporting.

And so what we would do was to ask the pastors, do you know somebody in Bloomington-Normal, Illinois? We would ask the school principals, do you know somebody in Bloomington-Normal, Illinois? And we would go down to Bloomington-Normal, Illinois and meet with those folks in Bloomington-Normal, Illinois, and they would meet with their state representative, and it was the first time that neighborhoods had ever beaten the banking lobby in the State of Illinois. And we had some very strong rules against predatory lending – until the mortgage brokers sued in federal court, and the rules didn't hold up. And it caused us to have to organize again and again.

And so I'll end with a confrontation story. I'm not dissing confrontation. I'm saying that it's not most of what we do. But even in business there comes a time when one corporation sues another. That is confrontation. Confrontation is a tactic. It's not a religion. It's not a dogma. I don't get up every morning saying, who can we confront today? It's more about understanding what people really aspire to do, what their values are, how you can knit that together, and then how they can become a collective to make that happen – whether it's building a medical center, or having mothers volunteer in school, or confronting the mortgage brokers. It's all part of the same vision.

Community organizers don't have the responsibility because they're elected, to go back to words from a convention; they have it because they volunteer and choose to take it on. What they don't have is the budget!

(Laughter.)

Thank you very much.

HARRY BOYTE: First, I want to thank Bill Schambra and the Bradley Center for this opportunity. I think the question of community organizing is a topic in which there has been a great deal of heat and very little light. There could hardly be a more important topic both for the election – although I must say, the other day when David Brooks called the election itself a “show-business” experience, talking about the real McCain,⁵ it seemed to me that he greatly understated the problem – it's more like the Wizard of Oz. But in the midst of the Wizard of Oz, it is extraordinarily important to talk about what community organizing is, both because of that and because Senator Obama understands organizing so much as what he has been shaped by. It's important to think about what an Obama administration might be like.

⁵ David Brooks, “Thinking About McCain,” *The New York Times*, September 25, 2008.

I want to say, I speak not as a representative of the Obama campaign, although I do support Senator Obama and I am involved in the campaign. I speak with two other, interrelated hats; I speak as a civic scholar of community organizing for some years, and I speak as an organizer. I was an organizer when Dr. Martin Luther King assigned me that role when I worked for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference as a very young kid. I did community organizing with poor whites in the South. And our work at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute, at the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, has been about translating community organizing principles and methods and concepts – and I would say the overall philosophy – into many other environments.

What I want to do now is talk about three things, to begin, and I think we'll have opportunity to explore these in more detail. First of all, I want to describe the difference between mobilizing and organizing, a critical distinction which has almost entirely collapsed in the contemporary environment. Now, they are hybrids, mixes, and matches, and we can talk about that in more detail. But there is a very, very different flavor, gestalt, philosophy, methodology between mobilizing and organizing.

Secondly, I want to talk about organizing in the modern sense – what is it? Jim (Capraro)'s wonderful stories of Chicago remind me of the Women's Christian Temperance Union, which by the late nineteenth century had created dozens of clinics and community institutions of many kinds. The roots of community organizing are in that kind of experience, and in Tocqueville's description of America as a nation of community builders. But I am going to talk more specifically about the last generation of community organizing, which has a very specific and concrete history, trajectory, culture, and dynamic.

And then thirdly, I am going to talk a bit about what we might expect under an Obama presidency.

So, first, what's the difference between mobilizing and organizing? Well, here, in my view, the focus on Saul Alinsky as the founder of modern community organizing has been a significant confusion. Saul Alinsky over the course of his career shifted from the organizing work he undertook in Chicago – in *Back of the Yards* – in the 1930s, which he wrote about in his first book, *Reveille for Radicals* (1946). He was in turn part of a distinctive group we might talk more about, basically the anti-communist popular organizers of the 1930s. People like Ella Baker, Bayard Rustin, and Myles Horton, and politically people like Hubert Humphrey came out of that period, and it's a very important group to understand. They didn't like the vanguard. They didn't like the idea of secret, behind-the-scenes manipulation. What they liked was the popular organizing, and the energy, agency, and cultural development that they saw in that. There are wonderful passages in Alinsky's first book about organizing.

But by the end of his life, he was much more cynical. Although he disavowed the 1960s New Left and student protests, actually he was in some ways mimicking 1960s categories. He was much more pragmatic. He didn't like the ideological posturing. But he was quite cynical. He divided the world into "good guys" versus "bad guys." His second book, *Rules for Radicals* (1971), was really built around the idea of mobilizing the have-nots and the have-somewhat-mores against the haves. And it was shorn of the richness of cultural and human insight of his

first book. Interestingly, his second book, *Rules for Radicals*, became the bible of mobilizing politics.

Now there are understandable reasons for mobilizing as it took shape, and there is also a history here that is too long to go into, but it's basically the history of what Michael Sandel in his book *Democracy's Discontent* calls "mass politics."⁶ It's the idea of people in modern society as living in an uprooted world of large institutions, of a consumer market culture. Mass politics and then mobilizing politics is based on the idea of a person as an uprooted consumer, and building mass coalitions for redistributive purposes around a progressive agenda with a focus on human rights and individual entitlements, but in a mass world.

In mobilizing as it took shape in the 1970s, the context was significant and very explicit mobilization by big business interests to roll back the environmental consumer, affirmative action, tax redistribution of the 1960s for a variety of reasons. *BusinessWeek* announced it on its cover in 1974. John Connally gave a long interview to the *Wall Street Journal* about this in 1972, during the campaign.

But in response, building on this older history of mass politics, a variety of forms of mobilizing took place. The foundational method was door-to-door canvass.

Again, I understand the reasons – I once wrote a book with Heather Booth that was in significant measure a defense of the canvass.⁷ But I've come to understand what I would see as the major flaws and problems with mobilizing politics. Mobilizing has a script at its core, which is, first of all you find an enemy; secondly, you frame the issue as good-versus-bad, in Manichean terms; thirdly, you develop as emotional a language as you can – a lot of thought is given to that; fourth, you figure out what to do when people ask questions about your script. So, a door-to-door canvasser – and there have been four million young people who have done door-to-door canvassing over the last thirty-odd years – when somebody asks, "Is this company really all bad?" in, say, an environmental campaign, is supposed to know how to get them back to who they're supposed to be mad at, according to the mobilizing script. Mobilizing politics shuts down critical thought. It does not want interrogation, complexity, nuance, or ambiguity. And fifth, there's a subtext that those who are doing the mobilizing are going to rescue a mass population which is victimized by large-scale forces.

Now, it originated in progressive – especially environmental – groups. Citizens for a Better Environment developed the canvass in 1974. It has been taught through mobilizing networks. But of course, it has metastasized across the political spectrum. So I actually think that one of the hidden and fascinating dimensions of recent politics is the way conservatives and especially people like Karl Rove have proven to be geniuses at developing and translating the mobilizing formula into the conservative side. But it continues on both sides. I think that the purist's expression of mobilizing politics on the left is Ralph Nader and his network, which has both the consumer view of the person and the mobilizing techniques. And I would say in the cultural sphere, Michael Moore's movies are always based on that formula.

⁶ Michael Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy* (Belknap Press, 1996).

⁷ *Citizen Action and the New American Populism* (Temple University Press, 1986).

So, that's mobilizing, and we all know it. The problem is, it's conflated with organizing, and organizing has a very different history. Alinsky wasn't the founder of modern organizing. The two key figures in modern community organizing were Monsignor John Egan, who had been an organizer with Alinsky, and Monsignor Geno Baroni. Both were deeply shaped by the civil rights movement – Baroni more than Egan because Baroni was the Catholic coordinator for the March on Washington, and was very close to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

Egan told me many times – I had many interviews with Egan before he died – that his fight with Alinsky had always been about the conception of the person; Alinsky had a kind of scorn, especially at the end of his life, about religious values and faith, and Egan said that you can't really understand community organizing without understanding faith. That's the foundation, for many people, in taking action to build communities.

Monsignor Baroni, interestingly, was quite a philosopher of organizing. After being a key civil rights figure with an inner-city parish in this city – Washington DC – he founded something called the National Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs out of much of the same resistance to what he saw as “universalist liberalism” – that was his term – that someone like Michael Novak also felt. There's actually a whole genre of neoconservatives out of that period. But rather than simply go to the right, Baroni thought to create a third way, a kind of populist politics which was grounded in the idea of rebuilding communities and creating alliances across racial lines. And Baroni's speeches – with the National Center for Urban Ethnic Affairs; later with the National Commission of Neighborhoods, of which he was the architect; and then as the undersecretary for HUD under Carter – played a critical role. His speeches are remarkably eloquent, and if you look at his speeches on race, what is fascinating is the parallel between Baroni's speeches and Barack Obama's Philadelphia speech on race. The messages are very, very similar.

But organizing, as it took shape in the 1970s, interestingly enough had a very, very similar analysis to the mediating structures project at the American Enterprise Institute, which is that the foundations of community life – churches, neighborhood groups, family networks, ethnic organizations, small businesses, local ownership – were radically eroding in our new context. Organizing was seen as a way to rebuild a kind of civic culture in local areas. The Industrial Areas Foundation, which has been the parent of all of the four major networks – they cross lines, but – well, they wrote a statement in 1978 called *Organizing for Family and Congregation*.⁸ And to understand modern community organizing, this is a critical document to understand. Do you remember, Bill (Schambra), that you once called me up and asked, “Do they really believe this?” And I said, yes, it has been their work for thirty years.

Organizing for Family and Congregation came out a year or two after *To Empower People*, the mediating structures argument, which was seen as a conservative document.⁹ This is how it read, in part: “Our country is in the kind of crisis that both Madison and de Tocqueville warned us about. The intermediate voluntary institutions—including churches—are ineffectual in a power relationship with the powerful. As a result, the middle is collapsing, confused... sucked dry by a vacuum. The fundamental question is: who will parent our children? Who will teach them, train

⁸ *Organizing for Family and Congregation* (Industrial Areas Foundation, 1978).

⁹ Peter Berger and Richard John Neuhaus, *To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy* (American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1977), 45 p.

them, nurture them? How will they be taught and trained and nurtured? Will this parenting take place in a strictly secular setting where the system is said to be the solution, or time is money, or profit is the sole standard of judgment? Or will the true teachers and prophets—parents and grandparents, pastors and rabbis and lay leaders—win this war and continue to convey the best values of the Judeo-Christian tradition?”

That philosophical statement is the foundation of modern community organizing. And it’s really about what I would call a kind of civic revegetation of the landscape – or as the first president of the group that became the model, Communities Organized for Public Service (COPS) in the Mexican-American barrios in San Antonio, a guy named Andres Sarabia, told me when I asked him what was the key, he said, “The key was, we realized very soon that the issues of the dessert are not the main meal.” So I asked him what the main meal was, and he said, “The main meal is keeping in mind that we’re really rebuilding a community – we’re rebuilding the relationships of community, the foundations of community, the power that people get from community, the confidence, and the culture of community.” I’ve interviewed hundreds and hundreds of people in organizing, both organizers and leaders across the country and in dozens of states in the last thirty-odd years, and that has always been a consistent trait among them.

Now we can elaborate this more, but I want to say, it also was building on rich memories. So in Minneapolis and the Twin Cities, in the north side of town, an African-American settlement house called Phyllis Wheatley basically created a culture of civic learning and accountability for the African-American community, and trained generations of black leaders connected to the movement, connected to black churches, and connected to family networks. It saw its role, and people like W. Gertrude Brown and others who were involved in Phyllis Wheatley saw themselves, as community organizers. So there is also a history here that very directly feeds into the modern community organizing tradition.

Now, what does this have to do with Barack Obama? Obama clearly identifies deeply with this tradition of organizing – as rebuilding the life of communities. Probably his most extensive argument about the strengths and limits of organizing is (the fourth chapter) in the book *After Alinsky: Community Organizing in Illinois*, published in 1990.¹⁰ He talks about community organizing as bringing together the mediating institutions of a community and developing power, but also doing more *developing* community. And he argues that – in limits, he said that sometimes community organizations have too much of a consumer mindset. He said that community organizations and organizers sometimes are hampered by their own dogmas.

And here he cites John McKnight. If you want to see an intellectual influence on Obama’s thinking, it’s John McKnight and Jody Kretzmann at Northwestern University, both of whom have developed the idea of communities as full of assets, not mainly to be seen as full of deficits. Their work is extremely important in his understanding. He cites McKnight; he says, “Most [community organizations and organizers] still practice what Professor John McKnight of Northwestern University calls a ‘consumer advocacy’ approach, with a focus on wresting services and resources from the outside powers that be. Few are thinking of harnessing the

¹⁰ Barack Obama, “Why Organize? Problems and Promise in the Inner City,” IN Peg Knoepfle, editor, *After Alinsky: Community Organizing in Illinois* (Sangamon State University – now the University of Illinois at Springfield, 1990), pp. 35-40.

internal productive capacities, both in terms of money and people, that already exist in communities.”

So the point about community organizing – and I think Jim (Capraro)’s stories are really wonderful examples of this – is how to regrow, how to have a kind of civic revegetation of the civic landscape.

Let me just conclude by pointing out that if Senator Obama is elected president, I think we could see a great deal more of this kind of work not only in terms of broad-based community organization but also the translation of these values and methods into different settings. I think it’s a real area of potential common ground between moderate conservatives and moderate progressives who are concerned about the erosion of civic life in America – I would call it “populist” but I understand that that’s a contested term these days.

In my new book, *The Citizen Solution*,¹¹ I describe basically the translation of organizing methods into many settings. One is an organization that is an affiliate of Obama’s old network, Gamaliel Foundation, called ISALAH; it’s in the Twin Cities. ISALAH has become explicit about the values it stands for: building community, developing a sense of capacity, empowering hope. So it’s publicly explicit about the values that for some years community organizations talked about more internally. But also I describe many groups that are using organizing methods. So take, for example, a coalition on the west side of St. Paul, an old immigrant neighborhood in which the whole neighborhood – not simply community organizations but the churches, the businesses, the library – have claimed responsibility for educating children.

Now this goes back to an old Minnesota tradition which has radically eroded in recent years as the school system and education have become more professionalized and, I would say, more decontextualized, more detached from the life of communities. This whole community on the west side has claimed responsibility for educating children, and this means a variety of initiatives: There’s a youth apprenticeship project. Many, many young people are involved thinking about the meaning of work to the library, which has reconnected with the fabric of the community. There are the church groups, which talk in quite eloquent terms about learning how to work outside their church boundaries; divinity school education in the last generation has become narrowed and has taken out most of the community practice dimensions, so the pastors on the west side have had to relearn how to work with the larger community.

So that’s an example. Another example is Warrior to Citizen; I have a few handouts on organizing this coalition involving the National Guard, the Archdiocese of the Twin Cities, businesses, legislators of both parties, and mayors across the state. It’s entirely cross-partisan. It’s about reintegrating veterans as citizens into the life of communities. It’s civic leaders understanding that veterans’ experiences, whether they were good or bad, in war, in Iraq and Afghanistan, are full of civic resources to bring to communities in a kind of community revitalization process. So those are a couple of examples.

I can tell you, if we see an Obama presidency, we will see an enormous expansion of that kind of civic revegetation.

¹¹ *The Citizen Solution: How You Can Make a Difference* (Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2008).

Thank you.

STANLEY KURTZ: (Begins by quoting himself.)

“What exactly does a ‘community organizer’ do? Barack Obama’s rise to prominence has left many Americans asking themselves that question. Here’s a big part of the answer: Community organizers intimidate banks into making high-risk loans to customers with poor credit. In the name of fairness to minorities, community organizers occupy private offices, chant inside bank lobbies, and confront executives at their homes, forcing financial institutions to direct hundreds of millions of dollars in mortgages to low-credit customers. In other words, community organizers help to undermine America’s economy by pushing the banking system into a sink-hole of bad loans. And guess what? Barack Obama has spent years training and funding the organizers who do it.”

That’s how I began a recent piece on Barack Obama’s ties to the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, or ACORN. In that piece I detailed Obama’s extensive ties to ACORN. Obama trained ACORN leaders, consulted extensively with ACORN activists, and was instrumental in channeling funding to ACORN through his board positions at the Woods Fund and at the Chicago Annenberg Challenge. It’s true that Obama was personally reluctant to engage in the confrontational brand of organizer politics known as “direct action,” although as I’ve noted in a piece called, “Inside Obama’s Acorn,” we actually do have at least some evidence of Obama’s personal participation in classic Alinskyite intimidation tactics. For the most part, however, Obama seems to have been part of the “inside” strategy commonly found in groups of organizers, including ACORN, a strategy that often serves as a complement to more aggressive confrontational tactics. As a national figure with a political future from his days in law school, surely Obama would have been reluctant to personally tempt or disobey the law.

Yet Obama was unquestionably aware of the sort of tactics commonly used by groups like ACORN. We know this because a 1995 Woods Fund report supervised by Obama acknowledges the reluctance of even liberal donors and foundations to support the work of community organizers due to their confrontational tactics. Yet knowing this, Obama clearly made every effort to raise money for these radical organizations, including ACORN.

Now if you really want to know what community organizers do, you don’t have to take my word for it. Just get yourself a copy of a book published earlier this year called *Organizing Urban America* by Rutgers University political scientist Heidi Swarts.¹² This is the one of the first serious, book-length scholarly studies of ACORN and the Gamaliel Foundation, the two groups of community organizers to which Barack Obama’s ties are closest. Swarts is entirely sympathetic to these groups, and considers herself to be an organizer. For her research, Swarts interviewed an impressive array of organizers, including Obama’s ACORN mentor, Madeline Talbott and his Gamaliel mentor, Greg Galluzzo. Swarts conducted full-time fieldwork with Gamaliel and ACORN organizers in several cities, and was granted access to everything from

¹² Heidi Swarts, *Organizing Urban America: Secular and Faith-based Progressive Movements* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

staff supervision sessions to weekly staff meetings to negotiations with bank officers to massive demonstrations in the streets. So let me quickly summarize Swarts' own characterization of ACORN and the Gamaliel Foundation.

According to Swarts, ACORN members see themselves as “oppositional outlaws” and “militants unafraid to confront the powers that be.” According to Swarts, ACORN's identity as a uniquely militant organization is reinforced by contentious action. For example, ACORN organizers like to tell the story of how they so scared a US senator during a demonstration that he actually ran over some demonstrators with his car in his haste to escape. Lead ACORN organizers, according to Swarts, tend to see the organization as a solitary vanguard of genuine radicals and principled leftists with an ideology focused on economic redistribution and tactics built around confrontational direct action. ACORN's culture, says Swarts, is based on combativeness, confrontation, and loud expressions of anger.

Again, as a practitioner of ACORN's “inside” strategy, Barack Obama may have eschewed such tactics himself, although perhaps not entirely. Yet by providing extensive training and financial support for ACORN, and by working in close cooperation with ACORN leader Madeline Talbott, who specialized in exactly this sort of confrontation, Obama was lending aid and encouragement to ACORN's militancy.

Now according to Swarts, ACORN and the Gamaliel Foundation are far more alike than different in their ultimate goals and ideology. But the divergent composition of these groups leads to somewhat different organizational cultures. With a more culturally, economically, and politically diverse membership, groups like Gamaliel, organized around religious congregations, are less overtly militant and confrontational – although not entirely so. In fact, according to Swarts, the innovative cultural strategy devised by Gamaliel organizers – whom Obama has also trained, by the way – features professions of pragmatism and even a denial of ideological leftism. Yet Swarts also makes it clear that these denials of leftist radicalism cannot be taken at face value. According to Swarts, among themselves lead Gamaliel organizers freely deploy the very leftist ideology that they so carefully avoid using in front of their blue collar members. In short, according to Heidi Swarts, ACORN is made up of openly ideological, militant leftists, while Gamaliel organizers practice a form of stealth radicalism. As a student and teacher of Gamaliel methods, Obama would appear to have mastered these stealth techniques. (I've argued this at greater length, by the way, in a piece for *National Review* entitled “Senator Stealth.”)¹³

If you'd like to know more about what Gamaliel organizers actually believe – as opposed to how they publicly present themselves – you should get a hold of a book called *Doing Justice: Congregations and Community Organizing* written by Dennis Jacobsen,¹⁴ director of the Gamaliel Foundation's National Clergy Caucus. Jacobsen's book is a required text for first year Gamaliel organizers, and it is pervaded by a form of liberation theology that is a very close cousin of the black liberation theology favored by the Reverend Jeremiah Wright.

¹³ Stanley Kurtz, “Senator Stealth,” *National Review*, September 1, 2008.

¹⁴ Dennis A. Jacobsen, *Doing Justice: Congregations and Community Organizing* by (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2001).

In Jacobsen's conception, America is a sinful and fallen nation, to whose pervasive classism, racism, and militarism authentic Christians must offer constant resistance. Drawing on the book of Revelation, Jacobsen exhorts, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! . . . Come out of her, my people, so that you do not take part in her sins." For Jacobsen, in other words, America is Babylon. The United States, Jacobsen maintains, employs illegitimate nationalism, propaganda, racism, bogus "civil religion," and class enmity to bolster its entrenched and oppressive corporate system. Authentic Christians forced to live in such a nation can "come out of Babylon," says Jacobsen, only by entering into "a perpetual state of internal exile."

Rather than experiencing feelings of internal exile, of course, many Christians do feel at home in the United States. According to Jacobsen, these inauthentic and misguided Christians have been lulled into the false belief that the United States is somehow different from other countries – that it stands as a genuine defender of freedom and democracy. In reality, says Jacobsen, these benighted, so-called Christians have "blinded themselves to the realities of racism, and deluded themselves into imagining that the vast military force of this country is the agent of justice." According to Jacobsen, the desire of most Americans to create an individualized, safe, secure life for themselves and their families constitutes an unacceptable emotional distancing from the sufferings of the urban poor. Jacobsen says that whenever he feels himself seduced by the American dream of personal security – this "unconscionable removal from the lives of those who suffer" – he rejects its pull as the deplorable "encroachment of America on my soul." To "feel at home in the United States," maintains Jacobsen, is not only to fall victim to a scarcely disguised form of political despotism, it is to betray Christianity itself.

Although Jacobsen acknowledges that the sufferings of the poor in America do not quite rise to the level of the Nazi Holocaust, he nonetheless stresses the fundamental similarity: "The accommodation and silence of the church amidst Nazi atrocities are paralleled by the accommodation and silence of the church in this country amidst a calculated war against the poor." Present at the Pentagon "to fast and vigil with a group of religious resisters against the madness of nuclear build-up and militarism generated in that place," Jacobsen is horrified when he finally realizes that many in the American military actually think of themselves as Christians. For Jacobsen, this means that the church has "aligned itself with oppressive forces and crucified its Lord anew."

The solution, says Jacobsen, is community organizing: "Metropolitan organizing offers a chance to end the warfare against the poor and to heal the divisions of class and race that separate this sick society." "Militant mass action . . . fueled by righteous anger," maintains Jacobsen, offers authentic community, and therefore "the possibility of fulfillment in a vacuous society." He continues: "If the pain and human degradation all around us doesn't stir up within us sufficient anger to want to shake the foundations of this society, then it's probably best for us to go back to playing church . . ."

Other than the sense of community generated by militant struggle itself, what does Jacobsen offer as the cure for America's ills? Jacobsen is short on detail here, yet there are tantalizing hints. Jacobsen invokes the communal property and absence of private ownership in the early church as a possible saving model. Despite his initial skepticism regarding such selflessness, says Jacobsen, he has seen this sort of "radical sharing of limited resources" on a trip to a poor

African church in Tanzania. Unfortunately, says Jacobsen, “The church in the United States lacks community. The American church by and large is privatistic, insular, and individualistic. It reflects American culture.”

These, then, are the beliefs at the spiritual heart of the Gamaliel Foundation’s community organizing efforts. As noted, there are clear echoes here of Jeremiah Wright’s and James Cone’s black liberation theology, and it’s evident that Obama has an affinity for organizations that embody this point of view.

Recognizing Barack Obama’s intimate involvement with, and extensive record of directing foundation support to, organizations like ACORN and Gamaliel paints a picture sharply at variance with the image of Obama as a post-ideological, post-partisan pragmatist. A fuller understanding of the Alinskyite groups that shaped Obama’s worldview makes it clear that the Jeremiah Wright episode was no anomaly. Obama has a decidedly radical background, rooted in the ideology and tactics of community organizing, and I’ve seen nothing to persuade me that much has changed in his inner political orientation. Quite the contrary, in fact. So we as a country may all be about to receive an exceedingly practical lesson in exactly what it is that a community organizer does.

BYRON YORK: I counted myself, I guess, among those who didn’t know what community organizers do until recently. But since I was covering the campaign for *National Review*, I became interested in it to the extent that it told me something about Barack Obama.

I think the first thing to remember about Obama and organizing is that when he got into it, he didn’t know what it was, either, except that I think he viewed it as an intensely political calling. If you look at his book *Dreams from My Father*, he wrote about deciding to become a community organizer, and he said, “When classmates in college asked me just what it was that a community organizer did, I couldn’t answer them directly. Instead, I pronounced on the need for change – change in the White House, where Reagan and his minions were carrying on their dirty deeds; change in the Congress, compliant and corrupt; change in the mood of the country, manic and self-absorbed. Change won’t come from the top, I would say. Change will come from a mobilized grassroots.”

So he had this idea of bringing about political change by going to Chicago. He was in New York at the time. He had graduated from Columbia University, and he had a couple of jobs which were okay but didn’t seem to capture his imagination very much.

Also for him, it was a racial thing as well. He very specifically wrote that he wanted to go organize black folks. And when I went to Chicago I talked to Jerry Kellman, the community organizer who had hired Obama to bring him to Chicago. If you read *Dreams from My Father*, by the way, Obama used pseudonyms for everyone, so Jerry Kellman is “Marty Kaufman” in the book. Kellman told me that Barack had been very inspired by the civil rights movement: “I felt that he wanted to work in the civil rights movement, but he was ten years too late and this was the closest he could find.” So Obama went to Chicago with that intention.

I thought that it was interesting that Jim Capraro said that he'd never heard the Senator talk about what he had accomplished as a community organizer; Obama talked more about the education it gave him. But I think it is reasonable to look at what he accomplished, and it was relatively small-bore stuff. He was there for three years, and there were two "greatest hits," I guess, that Obama accomplished as an organizer.

One, a lot of his work was focused in a place called Altgeld Gardens, which is a housing project built in the 1940s on the very, very far southern end of Chicago – I personally did not know that Chicago went that far south. But if you are aware of Chicago, go down to 130th Street and you find a landscape that people who visit Chicago and just stay downtown or even go to Hyde Park never see. Altgeld is a low-rise housing project, and just to the north is an enormous sludge sewage treatment plant. Off a little bit to the northeast are the Continental Grain elevators, which are huge and rusting and have a strangely sky-scraperish look. And then just to the east there is a landfill that is just an enormous and growing mountain of garbage. It is not a people-friendly or beautiful landscape. And here you have this big housing project stuck down there.

So Obama went down there and began to work with some of the people there, and one of the things they noticed was that the mayor's office had lots of summer job offices where teens could come for summer jobs, but there wasn't one south of 95th Street, which is a long way away from Altgeld and the other neighborhoods in which he was working. So Obama organized some people in the neighborhood to make a presentation.

The whole deal with an organizer is that he is kind of like a choreographer. The idea is to identify people in the community, decide on what you want to do, prepare them, rehearse them, and then have them do whatever it is. So in this case, they went down to meet with the mayor's people. It wasn't that hard of a thing; they had a reasonable case: If you're going to have these job centers, you might as well have one down there. So they won on that one.

Obama's other "greatest hit" also concerned Altgeld. One day, someone had noticed construction workers in these big, protective suits working in the administrative office at the housing project, and that's how they found out that there was asbestos in that building. They then made the reasonable assumption that if there was asbestos in that building, it was probably in the apartments as well. So a movement started to get the city to clean up the asbestos. It took much longer than Obama's tenure there to do that, but he did play a role in getting that done.

There is kind of an interesting scene in his life as an organizer, though. There's a Catholic church on the grounds of the project, Our Lady of the Garden, and they often had meetings in the gymnasium there. So that had a meeting and they got the head of the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA) to come down. Now, Obama did tell his leaders that he didn't want them to be confrontational. He was always telling them that they were going to get better results if they were nice; don't scream at him. But a chaotic scene ensued. People got mad, and the organizer who was supposedly holding the microphone to ask questions of the CHA chief wouldn't give him the microphone. Finally, the head of the Chicago Housing Authority beat a retreat out to the car and got out of there.

I think that there was something about that scene that told Obama that perhaps it was time to leave. He was clearly frustrated with what he was doing, and I think that reason that he was frustrated was that he didn't have any power. He could get people together to sign a petition, and he could get this and that, but he clearly wanted a lot more than what he had. Mike Kruglik, another organizer who today remains an organizer – I met him at his office in the Gamaliel Foundation downtown in Chicago – told me that Obama was “constantly thinking about his path to significance and power. He said, I need to go there [there being Harvard Law School] to find out more about power. How do powerful people think? What kinds of networks do they have? How do they connect each other?”

Now, there is also this scene that Jerry Kellman told me about. They were attending a forum at Harvard University, and as they were walking along the yard, Obama said, “Listen, there is something I have to tell you. I have decided to leave. I am going to go to law school.” And as Kellman told me, the reasons Obama gave were as follows. One, he wanted to make some money. Two, he didn't want to end up like his father. You can read in the book – and I'm going only on the account in the book – he admired his father greatly, as an absent father, but then found out that his father was kind of an embittered, powerless old man in Kenya, and he didn't want to end up that way. So he left Chicago; he decided to quit community organizing to go to law school.

I think that the interesting thing about Obama's career trajectory is that the frustrations that he felt as a community organizer also came upon him in his later jobs. He went to law school, came back, and began doing civil rights law. And that wasn't quite enough. So he needed to run for political office. Then he became a state senator. And then that wasn't really quite enough to get the things he wanted done, done. So he became a United States senator, and that wasn't enough to get the things he wanted done. So now he is running for president of the United States, which is probably the top career option for him. So if he wins – I do think that some of the previous statements were right. I think that if he does win, he will be the biggest, most powerful community organizer in the world, but I'm not sure that he won't become unsatisfied again, because the whole story of his time as a community organizer is one that ended in frustration, because he had this idea of bringing about change and driving Reagan and his minions out and all of this, but the reality of it inevitably disappointed him.

So I think that it's not clear. We know that he uses the techniques he learned as an organizer very effectively in his campaign. It's an extremely well-organized campaign. But the bottom line is, I'm not sure – I don't think we can say how it will affect him in the White House, should he win election, because there is this constant pattern of frustration with organizing. Whether he will actually be able to bring about these changes that he says he wants to bring about is entirely unclear.

Thank you.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Gee, I detect more than one understanding of community organizers in this discussion, which is of course the whole point of this.

Harry (Boyte) and Jim (Capraro), Byron (York)'s last point is implicit in Stanley (Kurtz)'s presentation as well. To listen to Jim's account of a community organizer, it sounds as if the person immediately in front of you is the primary concern. Rebuilding *this particular* neighborhood or *this particular* community is the focus of the work. From Harry we heard a kind of denigration of the notion of going beyond that to a kind of a mobilization model. And yet according to the account of organizing – and even Senator Obama's participation in it – that Stanley and Byron presented, it's not so much about the person in front of you; it's more about the larger understanding of power in society – and as Byron pointed out, a frustration in learning that organizing *this particular* neighborhood is inadequate, that it doesn't really get to the root of the problem – which requires a step up into the next level of power.

Harry and Jim, it occurs to me that this might be a way of sharpening the difference. To phrase it as a question, how do you understand that balance? I think Obama at one point described two parts to community organizing: get the stop sign, and the larger educative function, which I think is getting at this. You get the stop sign for this neighborhood, but at the same time you teach a lesson about the larger political system. What is that? What would he have us understand about the larger political system based on his experience as a community organizer?

HARRY BOYTE: I think the really remarkably innovative core of organizing, in terms of our mass society, is what you just said, Bill (Schambra) – that everyone is a person. The dignity, the specificity, the narrative quality of the *person* rather than the kind of mass world of categories is the foundation of organizing. If you look at someone like Monsignor Baroni's philosophy, what he railed against in liberalism was the tendency to think about white ethnics as abstractions – or Catholics, or – if you look at Egan's remarkable reflections, and both of them had an enormous influence on –

By the way, I must say that I think it's great that *National Review* reporters (such as Byron York) are beginning to look at community organizing. I just think that it's the first step of a long journey!

BYRON YORK: Who knows where we'll end up!

(Laughter.)

HARRY BOYTE: Talk to a lot of organizers and a lot of people who have been involved. Read Obama's first book itself, which is full of this sensibility that I'm talking about – I mean, it's a wonderful treatment of how he himself as a young and confused man discovered his own identity through the stories of the people with whom he was interacting, and then the transformations he saw around him as people developed a sense of power and public life. And then also the kind of plurality of the human condition.

And none of that is to say that you can't build that out of those larger-scale efforts at change. In fact, I would say that something like the Women's Christian Temperance Union in the nineteenth century was a great example. It had millions of members across the country, but its foundation was community-building activities in local chapters. It also actually sponsored in this case (not) temperance legislation but a variety of other reforms at multiple levels.

What we can imagine from an Obama administration is a lot of shift to the kinds of work you were trying to do when you were with HHS in the first Bush administration, Bill (Schambra), as director of evaluation, I believe – which is, how do you develop government programming, policies, and agency practices which are attentive to the cultures and the renewal and the ecology of local communities rather than seeking to standardize or to displace? And in fact, in the Obama campaign, for example, Bob Weissbord, who is the chair of the urban policy committee, has been articulating a vision which is explicitly a criticism of traditional liberal approaches as displacing agency, and arguing that we need a concept of government practice that is about facilitating and being a resource for community building and community agency.

That's what we would see a lot of in an Obama administration.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Let the record show that I was director of evaluation for a very tiny piece of HHS. (Laughter.) Jim?

JIM CAPRARO: Several thoughts come to mind. As articulate and eloquent as Harry (Boyte) is about the difference between mobilizing and organizing, I think Stanley actually made the case as compelling as it could be made. If you are an organizer, you know ACORN. You know Gamaliel. You know NTIC (the National Training and Information Center). There are just schools, lots of different ideologies, lots of different thought. ACORN takes mobilizing to the n^{th} degree.

HARRY BOYTE: Not as much as Nader. But it is much further along toward mobilizing.

JIM CAPRARO: And Stanley (Kurtz) is just making Harry's point. It sounds as if it's a contradiction, but actually it's not. It's just interesting for me to observe this.

The whole idea of "choreographer" is interesting, too. If you really do go out and listen to people, you hear a lot from a lot of different people. And you end up actually knowing what a lot of people think – more than they know about what each other think. You become the nexus for what's important to them. And so getting them to kind of come together and (a) understand that they have this commonality that they may not even know that they have, and (b) work together to noodle through, what do you do? And then you go and do some sort of an activity. You go and do some sort of implementation to try to get a summer jobs office in your neighborhood. In those days, in that Chicago political administration, that's not a small thing to do – especially from public housing residents. Your description of Altgeld is right, Byron (York); it's the place that God forgot. I mean, I don't know this, but my bet is that somebody got a great lease from CHA for land that nobody else would do *anything* with.

BYRON YORK: It was actually built right after World War II for returning workers because there used to be a big industrial area around there.

JIM CAPRARO: Oh, yes – Lake Calumet.

BYRON YORK: As a matter of fact, Jerry Kellman took Obama by the site, in a car tour, of where Wisconsin Steel had been – which was actually still there and rusting at that point. It's gone completely now.

JIM CAPRARO: The thing about choreography is that people are now at a level they've never been at before. You have people requesting something from the city; they've never done that before. Whether it was for the removal of asbestos in Altgeld Garden – which *is* kind of a famous campaign in Chicago, or the placement of a job center, or getting the stop sign, these were folks who didn't ordinarily act politically. I mean, they were concerned, they complained, and they were affected by it, but they didn't come together and try to create power collectively to do something about it. So it's really kind of a discovery process for everybody, at that point in time. An organizer who has experience, which Barack didn't have a lot of in those days because he was young and learning, brings his own history with him as well. He can say, well, we tried this over here and this is what happened, and we tried this. And a little bit of instinct, which I would imagine is why Barack said what he said about confrontation and moving behind it.

In the campaign that I talked about – go out and talk to one hundred leaders, bring them together – at the end of that meeting here's what we did. Now remember, we actually had Muslims, Hispanics, Christians, blacks, whites, browns. We had a core of about forty or fifty people who didn't speak English, and were listening to the meeting with earbud headsets on like to do at the United Nations. And at the end of the meeting, we said, we want you to take the next twenty minutes and find someone you don't know, and get to know them. It's the essence of building community, creating relationships. It's the essence of organizing. And so they did that, and then we asked people to talk about what they learned about each other.

And what was amazing, coming from people – I watched a forty-five-year-old African-American professional woman who is also a block-club chairman go to the most redneck-looking white guy in the room, and when we asked her what happened, she said, “Well, I wouldn't have thought this, but our daughters are both in the same grade in the same high school. This is what we have in common.” What they found was that they had common interests. It's hard to understand if you have common interests if you don't know what your own interests are, if you don't know what your own values are, and if you don't know what you need to navigate life. It's hard to understand if you have something in common with somebody else until you learn what they need to navigate life.

And so at the end of that meeting, we asked people to exchange phone numbers with five people they didn't know, to have a one-on-one with them, and then to come back together two months later, and we would create a vision for the community. We said, here's what we're going to ask you to do. We're going to go through an exercise that says if this community is really the best it can be in ten years, if it wants for nothing, and if we have everything we need – the smartest people, resources, time, and talent expended – what would the community look like? When you answer that question, we want you to answer it in a way that serves your needs but also serves the needs of the five people you haven't met yet.

When I think about self-interest, I think about the Russian dolls. When somebody is really up against it – they're losing their house – it's like Maslow's hierarchy of needs. What's right in

front of you is most desperate right now – I’ve got to get another job because my loan reset and I’ve got to make these payments. But if you could get beyond that, you might actually be able to see wider and farther afield. And as people become able to influence their own environment, which is what power really is about, their ability to understand self-interest *and*, by the way, all of our responsibility to care about each other’s self-interest, rises in its importance. It’s not a static thing. It’s a dynamic thing.

HARRY BOYTE: And it’s also important – remember in *Dreams from My Father* Obama actually wisely articulates a concept of self-interest which is the richest in the organizing world – which is not narrow issues, but a sense of the story of every person. Although the language of self-interest sounds somewhat wry, he discovers that actually what he is really looking for is the animating story of the person. And that’s a remarkable thing to look at, and I would say that it’s actually built into the campaign.

JIM CAPRARO: One last comment I’ll make: the thing about leaving organizing to actually go make some money, I can relate to that – although I’ve never done it! (Laughter.)

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Now, Stanley (Kurtz) and Byron (York), this sounds so different from the way you’ve –

(Laughter.)

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: It’s getting folks together to sort of expand their horizons beyond their narrow self-interest. Is that all there is to it? Stanley, have you sort of concocted this larger agenda for community organizing that isn’t –

STANLEY KURTZ: A mobilizing style.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Yes. What’s going on here?

STANLEY KURTZ: Well, Jim (Capraro) and Harry (Boyte) are extremely thoughtful and well-spoken, but I find their portrayals thoroughly unpersuasive. Everyone is a person except for the target, you know? And Obama was sending money to ACORN and Gamaliel. And by the way, if you read Swarts, she interviews Greg Galluzzo, and –

HARRY BOYTE: Swarts is a very thin book. Stanley, you’ve got to read some other things.

STANLEY KURTZ: Well, it’s at least got a page on which she quotes Greg Galluzzo saying something – unless she was lying about the quote. He says that everything they try to do is to stoke anger in people. Now, Gamaliel invites politicians to come and speak – and they’re not even allowed, under the rules of these things, to speak back to the people. It’s a complete shut-down style.

Now, Obama was funneling money to these groups. If you read that report that he supervised, and there is another report that was written I think in 2001 – I talk about it in “Senator Stealth.” One of the authors was Jean Rudd, who used to head the Woods Fund. If you read these reports,

these folks at the foundations are preoccupied with the difficulty of getting even liberal donors and foundations to support organizers because they're all concerned about these confrontational tactics. This isn't something I'm cooking up. This is something that the people who are scrounging around for money for these people are preoccupied with because they know that the people donating money, in the words of these reports, think of these groups as places that humiliate their friends in the business and political world. So this isn't just something I'm cooking up.

Now you go back to Hubert Humphrey and the Democratic-Farm-Labor Party. Hubert Humphrey led the purge of the Democratic Party of the communist members right after World War II, while Obama is hanging around with Bill Ayers and Jeremiah Wright. By the way, Bill Ayers advertised himself as being a communist with a small *c* just when he was beginning to partner with Obama on the Chicago Annenberg Challenge.

Now, you're going to have a really hard time convincing me. I may not have years of organizer experience, but I've had an experience that you folks haven't had; I've been the butt of these Alinskyite tactics. The Obama campaign tried to shut down me when I went onto a radio station. About half an hour before I got there, they had been called by seven thousand people demanding that I not be allowed on the air. So they called the Obama folks and invited them to have someone come on to debate me. They refused, demanded that I not be allowed on the radio, and then they asked for the name of the head of the station so they could call and demand that I not be allowed in the radio. They did the same thing to David Freddoso. These are Alinskyite tactics, and Obama is using them in the campaign.

Obama talks a lot about listening to his wife and getting doctors to heal people, but if you cross him he hits you with the Alinskyite mobilizing. I don't want that as my president.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Byron, do you want to get into this?

BYRON YORK: Well, I think the thing to remember about Obama and organizing – and maybe organizers in general – is that it's one thing to work on your techniques for organizing, but you have to kind of remember what you're organizing people for. I think the thing that struck me about Obama in Chicago – and I'm not even sure he would disagree – is that a lot of his work was ultimately wrong-headed.

A lot of his work involved confronting the well-known culture of dysfunction that we've seen among certainly black populations on the South Side of Chicago. He was confronted with this dysfunction. What's the solution? Demand some summer jobs. Have an after-school program. But the dysfunction was actually more deeply rooted than that. I spoke to a woman named Yvonne Lloyd, who was one of the leaders that Obama worked with, and she said that every ten years she worked for the census, and she always had Altgeld. "When you look at those forms from the census," she told me, "you had three or four generations in one apartment – the grandmother, the mother, the baby, and then her baby. It was supposed to be a stepping stone, but you have people who are never going to leave."

So, this is the world that Obama is working in, trying to make things better for these people. But when the single most important policy initiative in a generation comes along to actually cut through that problem – the Welfare Reform Act in 1996 – Obama does everything he can do to undo it, because he just thinks it’s wrong, he doesn’t want it to be punitive, and he wants to make sure that all sorts of benefits are restored. And today he said – I think he said it at the Saddleback summit – that welfare reform turned out to be a lot more successful than a lot of people thought. And I think he was including himself in that.

So I think with Obama, and you’d have to worry about this with the campaign, there are these marvelous organizational skills without a good sense, or perhaps a misguided sense, of why he is actually organizing.

HARRY BOYTE: There is a lot to be said about the difference between ACORN and Gamaliel. Organizing redefines the enemy, and it redefines the objective. The enemy doesn’t become those people over there. Actually, there is a great skill about polarizing and depolarizing, and having conflict while you also create long-term relationships. Organizing sees the enemy as privatization, silo cultures, and all of those forces that devalue, fragment, make people dependent, and erode community. That’s the enemy. It’s not the left-right categories that a group like ACORN uses much more. And the positive vision can be found. A much more important figure than Jacobsen in the organizing movement is Johnny Ray Youngblood, who has been a major figure in the Industrial Areas Foundation and a reverend – head of East Brooklyn Congregations (EBC). This is Youngblood’s vision. He says, what organizing is about is in the first instance rebuilding the infrastructure, the tissue of a community; pulling together the churches and the community groups and the family networks and strengthening them. Secondly, it’s about developing work for people. Work is central because it teaches a kind of self-reliance. Thirdly, it’s about ownership, interestingly enough. It’s about small houses and developing ways to keep them, and small businesses. He offers a much better take than Jacobsen on what the vision of broad-based organizing is.

STANLEY KURTZ: Let me say something about that. That Jacobsen book was written for Gamaliel. Several times, there, he gives his thanks to Greg Galluzzo. Greg Galluzzo signed off on that book. It’s given to first-year organizers.

HARRY BOYTE: A lot of things are.

STANLEY KURTZ: I went to DePaul, and I read a very interesting master’s thesis on fundraising for Gamaliel. The argument of the thesis was essentially that Galluzzo controls the whole thing – individually – and they can’t raise money because Galluzzo won’t let go of control of the organization. In fact, the author was complaining that his own board hardly knows what the actual organization does.

Now, why is Greg Galluzzo guarding things so closely? And this is one of Obama’s personal mentors. I would suggest it’s because he is using these militant tactics, and of course he tells Swarts that everything they do is to try and make people angry. So we can go all we want into the history and the theory, but if you want to look at who Obama is –

HARRY BOYTE: You've got to start talking to people.

STANLEY KURTZ: – who Obama is really working with –

(Cross talk.)

HARRY BOYTE: You need to talk to organizers and leaders.

STANLEY KURTZ: Well, they're talking to me. They're trying to shut me up!

(Laughter.)

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Okay! (Laughter.) Questions from the audience?

CHARLOTTE HAYS: Mr. Boyte, you said that privatization is the enemy. What does that mean? Does that mean private action, or do you want everything to be government oriented?

HARRY BOYTE: It means that we're shut in our own worlds – of the imagination as well as our own neighborhoods. This is not the concept of private versus public-as-government. Peter Berger of the mediating structures project (formerly) of the American Enterprise Institute gave a conservative-leaning argument that in our world, we separate between private life and public understood as government. What we need to do is rebuild the mediating, intermediary world. That's what it means. We need to create the relationships that Jim (Capraro) is talking about. We need to create the public spaces in communities so that we get to know each other. That's what I mean.

AL MILLIKAN, American Independent Writers: Have any of you carried further the suggestion that Sarah Palin made comparing a small-town mayor with a community organizer, and saying that the mayor has responsibility that the organizer doesn't have? How much freedom does an organizer have that a small-town mayor would not have?

HARRY BOYTE: I've written several things on the Palin and also Pataki and Giuliani attacks on community organizing. And there has actually been a huge amount of discussion on this; it's an important topic –

JIM CAPRARO: One big difference, speaking as an organizer – but I'm not from a small town so I don't have that experience – is that I'm not free to be the leader. My job is to actually make people have enough interest to become engaged in something, become engaged with each other, and then figure out what they believe together is important. Then we all work on that. There was a young woman (organizer) who came into our neighborhood who had a lot of anger, and went into part of the neighborhood that was Polish, with lots of immigrants from Poland, and they weren't interested in the issues she was interested in, and she wasn't a very good organizer because of it. You really do have to subordinate yourself if you're going to do it well. You won't last very long if you don't.

It's kind of the opposite of being a mayor. When you are a mayor, people are electing you to become a leader. You profess a leadership style and a set of opinions, a way in which you will direct, and then you are elected and you're responsible. For me, as an organizer for thirty-three years in the same place, the reason I felt we had to go out and talk to people is because the neighborhood changed around us, demographically, and I was worried that what we were doing wouldn't be credible anymore because it really wouldn't represent the new people who were there now because the neighborhood didn't look like it used to. Being able to subordinate yourself isn't an easy thing. For most mayors I know, it's not an easy thing at all to subordinate yourself –

BYRON YORK: I think Palin had it pretty much right. When Obama sought more responsibility, he ran for public office.

STANLEY KURTZ: I'd like to link that back to something Jim (Capraro) said in his talk. Jim was stressing the local elements of things. National movements aside, he was saying, let's focus on the community. I want to reverse the emphasis here and go back to a piece written by someone named Sol Stern, an excellent piece on ACORN to which an answer piece came out authored by academics/activists John Atlas and Peter Dreier, the latter of whom is a very prominent expert on organizers. I discuss both of them in an essay I wrote.¹⁵

A couple of things about that: First of all, Dreier agreed with Stern's discussion of all of these confrontational tactics. His worry was that the foundations would stop supporting organizing, but he wrote that the tactics work very well; they get more members when they use those tactics. So he wasn't running away from them.

The one big criticism he had of Sol Stern was that Stern underplayed the national direction of these movements. Just as an organizer – as Byron (York) was describing – kind of sets up something but the people with whom he is working take the initiative when they actually get there, there is a lot more national direction than people realize behind this. As I probe more into the economic situation I'm finding more evidence of a lot of national coordination between ACORN leaders and Democratic congressmen. This is a direct connection. So if you're a local organizer, you may not be like a mayor, but if you're a national organizing leader, you may have even more influence than we realize.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Harry (Boyte), let me put a twist on this question for you, because you obviously have had a debate over many decades about the character of community organizing, and you and I have had many exchanges privately and in print about this question, and we both agree that there is some area of commonality between a kind of a conservative tradition that is reflected mediating structures and *To Empower People* and the work of the American Enterprise Institute back in the 1970s –

HARRY BOYTE: And the Republican platform of 1980.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Yes. And it's work you favor. Of course you want Stanley (Kurtz) and others to sort of pay attention to a kind of a tradition of community organizing that is

¹⁵ "Inside Obama's Acorn," *National Review Online*, May 29, 2008.

different from mobilizing. But always when we look at a presidential campaign and a new administration – and as you say, we can look for more of this kind of community organizing – isn't a reasonable fear that the confrontational IAF tradition that you have been courageously criticizing for many years within the movement is nonetheless going to be swept into power? Or can you refer to private conversations within the Obama campaign in which you've already sealed the deal, and we're not going to get that kind of confrontational community organizing ensconced in our various departments in Washington?

HARRY BOYTE: As you may notice, confrontation and conflict are a part of politics left, right, and center, and that's not going to go away. In fact, in everyday politics community building often surfaces conflicts which are submerged. So I'm not going to pretend that conflict is going to disappear in a Utopian moment under the Obama administration!

What I can say is that there is a fundamentally different sensibility in organizing. You find it not only in *Dreams from My Father* but also in books like Richard Wood's *Faith in Action*; Marion Orr's *Transforming the City*, which compares ACORN in a much more sophisticated way than Swarts' book – as well as the organizing that comes out of IAF and Gamaliel and other networks; and Mark Warren's *Dry Bones Rattling*.¹⁶ There is a rich literature, now. This isn't simply a study here or there. There is actually quite a body of literature over the last decade about what organizing is.

And look, we're in a hugely complicated world. But it's interesting, I think, that there is renewed attention to self-organizing citizen efforts across the board. And that's not only in terms of community organizing; I was telling Stanley (Kurtz) before about the World Bank and UN Development Agency calling for a major shift from top-down, technocratic, distributive approaches to support for self-organizing citizen initiatives all around the world in terms of development. I think you can see this, and I am absolutely certain this will increase in significant ways under an Obama administration.

JIM CAPRARO: If I go back to George H. Bush's "thousand points of light," I think of lots of people becoming engaged in making their places better. If we pay respect to the differentiation that Harry has been preaching, the worry that I'm hearing is a worry about mobilizing taking a national agenda. But I would hasten to add that organizing and engagement, citizens actually become involved in making where they are better, can do nothing but help government. I think that was a foundational principle of the Reagan administration when they first came in. Their philosophy was, government needs to shrink, and citizens – local leadership – need to become more engaged in making their place better, and then that was – as I remember – repeated during the George H. Bush administration with the now-famous "thousand points of light" speech.

The way most people I know do organizing, the national movement stuff is about this big (Capraro makes a sign for very small). Go back to where you live. Are there civic associations there? Are there community organizations? Everybody in the audience, I entreat you to do this:

¹⁶ Richard L Wood, *Faith in Action: Religion, Race, and Democratic Organizing in America* (University of Chicago Press, 2002); Marion Orr, editor, *Transforming the City: Community Organizing the the Challenge of Political Change* (University Press of Kansas, 2007); Mark Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy* (Princeton University Press, 2001).

Call up your brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers. Are there civic associations there? Are there people engaged there? All of that is really good organizing, and Gamaliel – now, I knew Greg Galluzzo when he was a Jesuit priest. Baroni actually was the first in the national organizing set of thought leaders to say that organizing needs to be about building community, and community development is a bona fide activity of that.

But that's not what's being studied here. What's being studied is a very small sliver. It's where Barack happened to go to learn – because he answered a newspaper ad in the *New York Times*, I think it was, and then came to Chicago and spent three years and learned the skills of engaging people. And he – quite right – came up against, God, I'm trying to get a job center when the system is really broken. And so, therefore, he sought different and larger venues to be able to make a difference.

It actually sounds to me like what he did in Chicago for three years really worked for him. He found out what his own personal calling was, and he started to move in directions to pursue that calling. As for running for another office and another office, there are a whole lot of people in this town who have followed that aspiration!

Laughter.)

STANLEY KURTZ: First of all, I'm delighted to learn that regardless of whether John McCain or Barack Obama wins, Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and the American Enterprise Institute are going to be swept into power!

(Laughter.)

STANLEY KURTZ: I really think we're missing some things here. I want to go beyond the tactics issue, but I can't resist saying that I think Swarts' description of the tactics is interesting. Portraying these organizers as post-ideological and bridging the gap between Republicans and Democrats – and we're getting a perfect example of it right here today – is completely unpersuasive. We've lost sight of the basic ideology behind this, which according to Swarts – and I think that she is absolutely right, and I say that not just because I read Swarts but because of a long piece I did called “Barack Obama's Lost Years” on his work in the Illinois Senate¹⁷ – is an economically redistributionist political ideology. Now, I'm not persuaded on your approach on the tactics, Jim (Capraro) and Harry (Boyte), but if we just bracket that, the ideology here is radically different. It couldn't be further from Ronald Reagan. This is all smoke and mirrors, I have to say. It's *thoughtful* smoke and mirrors. It's well spoken and sincere. But I don't buy it.

HARRY BOYTE: Obama is a populist, so he does have a moderately redistributionist economic program. But populism is different from the left in that it's always built on building community. That's the foundation, from the nineteenth-century movement to the civil rights movement.

STANLEY KURTZ: It's even more left than the left!

¹⁷ “Barack Obama's Lost Years,” *The Weekly Standard*, May 11, 2008. Online at <http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/015/386abhgm.asp> (last accessed Oct. 3, 2008).

HARRY BOYTE: Well, you can call Martin Luther King un-American, but that's ridiculous!

(Cross talk.)

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Okay, let's go to the next question, if we could, please.

KHALILAH WOMACK, student at Clark Atlanta University: There are thousands of effective community organizers working inside communities who have never heard of ACORN or Gamaliel. This type of organizing gives a sense of ownership that outside organizations would never be able to accomplish. So my question is to Mr. Kurtz. How can you pigeon-hole community organizers as people with purely political agendas or other negative motives when many truly want to produce communities that work?

STANLEY KURTZ: Well, I think that community organizers have sincere motives. They want to help their communities. I'm talking about the groups that Barack Obama, the man who is trying to be president of the United States, has been most closely connected with. That's why we're here right now.

JIM CAPRARO: Those are two of the groups he has been connected with. He has been connected with hundreds of organizations.

STANLEY KURTZ: Absolutely. He tries to find them all.

(Cross talk.)

JIM CAPRARO: Those are the two you choose to focus on.

STANLEY KURTZ: Those are the two that *he* chose to focus on.

HARRY BOYTE: No. That's ridiculous.

JIM CAPRARO: No.

STANLEY KURTZ: Oh, really? So how do you explain that he gave money to these guys, which don't fit your paradigm –

JIM CAPRARO: The Woods Fund gave money to *lots* of community organizations, including those two.

STANLEY KURTZ: Absolutely, and they did it very consciously knowing, in a report chaired by Barack Obama, that these guys use intimidation tactics. It's right there in the report. They didn't say, you know, what we need to do is to draw a careful distinction between the community organizers that mobilize and the ones that organize. Let's cut out the funding for the guys who mobilize and channel it all toward those good civic societies. *It didn't say that.*

BYRON YORK: After the Palin speech at the Republican National Convention, I went back to some of the people I had talked to for the Obama article, which I did I think in June, and there was a lot of anger. They felt that Palin had tarred all community organizers. The argument came up that if you're doing anything in your community – if you live on a block and there is an abandoned house there and you get together with other people on the block and you make sure the house is either sold or torn down or whatever – then you're a community organizer, too. And while I suppose in the broadest sense of the term that might be true, I think that you do separate people who are trying to get a new restaurant in their neighborhood from professional, come-in-from-the-outside community organizers like Obama –

JIM CAPRARO: I'm sorry, but I just have to –

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Please let him finish.

BYRON YORK: Now, Jim (Capraro), maybe I know where you are going. You are working in the neighborhood in which you grew up. But it is true that Obama came into Chicago with this idea of what he wanted to do; he was entering the place for the first time; and he did have a deeply political motive. I haven't spoken to him about this, but if what he wrote about himself is correct, I think he did have a deeply political motive, and it ended up with his going into politics.

JIM CAPRARO: There are several community organizations in Chicago which have gotten restaurants. The one I worked for kept the world's largest bakery there. Moreover, the bakery undertook a \$300 million expansion. This is not light-weight stuff like getting the neighbors together to get the stop sign. We have on occasion received funding from the Woods Charitable Trust. I'm sure we're in a report somewhere. You need to read all of the reports. You need to read all of the minutes of all of the board meetings!

STANLEY KURTZ: A lot of people want to get those documents.

(Cross talk.)

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: If I could just say one thing about that, I can guarantee – and this goes to Stanley's point – that if you approach a foundation with a philosophical framework like Woods, and you say that you want to organize the folks in a particular neighborhood to do good things for this neighborhood, you will experience what all groups experience when they go to foundations with that kind of appeal: you will be turned down. Foundations, as you know, have very well-developed understandings of power relationships and leverage and partnership and collaboration and theories of change and logic models – all of which are about transforming society. They're not about making this particular neighborhood better. They're all very much based on a larger understanding of power in society.

So I think it certainly is fair to say that the foundations are looking for something beyond that kind of narrow, neighborhood focus.

HARRY BOYTE: Let me mention another book, a very important book to understand the difference between mobilizing and organizing; it is studied in every one of the broad-based

organizing networks including Gamaliel. You've got to read it, Stanley! It's Charles Payne's *I've Got the Light of Freedom*.¹⁸ It talks about the freedom movement that shaped me and was the foundation of Baroni and Egan and the kind of organizing that developed in the 1970s; it's about the background of that. But Payne makes the distinction between mobilizing, which is the historical reconstruction of the movement – the large events and protests and marches, and the day-to-day work of organizing. And he makes a tremendous case about the roots and richness of an organizing approach to building communities as the foundation of the movement. That's the book that every single organizer in Gamaliel studies much more than they study Jacobsen, I can tell you that.

STANLEY KURTZ: I would like to raise a question here. In some ways, Byron's article began to do this – questioning the good of these efforts. To some degree we're saying, well, they want to do something good for the neighborhood. We're not talking about motives, here. The fact of the matter is, ACORN and Reverend Wright and Obama were very, very supportive of Chicago's living wage ordinance, which many people argue is exactly the wrong strategy to take to rehabilitate these neighborhoods.

There were council members, many of whom were from poor districts on the south and west sides of the city, who were begging for those Wal-Marts to come in and be a kind of a seed, to improve the neighborhood. One of the pieces I wrote about Obama focused on the work he did with Friends of the Parks, to rehabilitate a park.¹⁹ A *Los Angeles Times* reporter went back to the park and found it in a state of disrepair. The drug dealers had come back. I think if they had been more open to Wal-Mart instead of these things that were supposedly going to help their neighborhood by fighting evil American capitalism, it would have done a lot more good. So we have to raise a real question here, every time somebody says, I want to help my neighborhood, about whether they're doing the right thing.

QUESTION: I'm going to try and get us away from ideology for a second, if that's possible, and ask a historical question. It's about the history that has been happening to date. Mr. Obama has run a remarkably effective campaign. And – you brought this up, Mr. York – I'd just like any reflection you might have, those of you who know the campaign and have been watching it closely. Specifically, I'd like to know the relationship between Obama's understanding of community organizing and the way that the campaign has been run.

BYRON YORK: I think that he has done a few things. One, I remember talking to Mike Kruglik, who was an organizer with him. And – you guys may have been involved in this, Jim (Capraro) and Harry (Boyte) – they came up with something called Camp Obama, I believe, which brings people in and teaches them in a community-organizing style to go back to their city in Iowa or Missouri or Nevada or Colorado to do that sort of thing.

The other thing is, I think in the campaign specifically you're seeing a melding of Obama's community organizing techniques with a kind of grassroots, web-based approach that we've seen from MoveOn.org and other political campaigns. So he has made enormously good use of that.

¹⁸ Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (University of California Press, 1995, 2007 with new preface).

¹⁹ "Inside Obama's Acord."

We all know how much he has raised in small contributions. And while I don't think Alinsky wrote about getting small contributions from the internet, I think that Obama has made good use of that.

HARRY BOYTE: It's a very important question. I think the interesting thing about the campaign, which is of course constrained by the electoral form it takes, is that it has given a great deal of space for self-organized activities rather than scripted, mobilizing activities. So for example, the idea that you actually train organizers through Camp Obamas, rather than having people who go out and door-knock according to a preconceived script – by the way, talking about mobilizing taking over, what have we had for the last eight years? We've had a mobilizing politics which uses good-versus-evil frames. But the interesting thing about the Camp Obama method is that it is based upon learning how to listen to where a person comes from. So narrative and story is the foundation of organizing. Learn to listen to your neighbors. Hold a house meeting. Figure out yourself how best to organize your neighborhood rather than using some prepackaged formula and script. Now that's really an amazing innovation in American presidential politics.

JIM CAPRARO: And the magic in that is that it's not top-down command-and-control. Camp Obama is about teaching the listening skills so that you can go out and find what's important to people, and then find commonality. Think about my story regarding predatory lending, and going down to Bloomington-Normal, and talking to pastors and talking to principals, who then talk to the people who are in their churches and talk to the parents of the kids who are in their schools. And lo and behold, there are foreclosures there, too, and then those folks go talk to those legislators – and as I said, it's the first time that something got passed that wasn't approved by the American Bankers Association, the community bankers association, and the mortgage brokers associations, all of which paid big money to lots of lobbyists to be down there. They were actively opposing it. But it's because there was this populist element that it got passed. And when organizing is done well, that's how it's done. And it's because it really connects with local people's values, not because it's some leftist ideologue's agenda. Now, I'm not discounting that; I'm not saying that Mr. Kurtz is wrong. Of course that exists out there.

COMMENT: Michael Moore is a great example. Or Ralph Nader.

JIM CAPRARO: Right. But the organizing we're seeing now really is based on what's important for local people, and that's what's causing them to become active and engaged. It's not single-issue, national stuff.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: These will have to be our last comments, Byron and Stanley.

BYRON YORK: Just on the campaign, lest we think too much that Camp Obama is something truly new under the sun, Democrats have been trying to figure out how to do this. They were very disappointed with what happened in 2000 and 2004. A number of them decided that they had messed up by relying on volunteers. And this group American Coming Together (ACT), which was kind of unprecedented in its size as a turnout group, raised millions and millions of dollars in (IRS Section) 527 contributions. And their idea was to hire people, so they hired tons and tons of people and sent them into Ohio and Pennsylvania and other places to get out the vote.

And there were front-page articles in the *New York Times* about this being the great new organizing model for them.

Unbeknownst to us, the Bush campaign was doing something that turned out to be much more successful and smarter; they had actually more e-mail addresses than the vaunted Democratic groups, and they relied on a network of volunteers. So on election day, evangelical Christians who most political strategists didn't even know existed in Ohio came out and voted for George W. Bush – all on this volunteer model. They had a huge volunteer effort in Florida, which Bush won reasonably handily.

So in some sense, I think we see Obama trying to replicate some of what Bush did so successfully in 2004, which is not to hire some guy – you know how Howard Dean's volunteers angered people so much when they showed up in Iowa and they just irritated everybody.

HARRY BOYTE: Mobilizing.

BYRON YORK: So, hiring people coming in from the outside didn't work very well. But they are trying to replicate, just in that voter contact sense, the volunteer model that was so successful for Bush.

STANLEY KURTZ: Once again, I want to challenge the idea that these efforts are all sweetness and light.

(Laughter.)

STANLEY KURTZ: Look at my “Barack Obama's Lost Years” piece and you'll see my description of his fight for the racial profiling bill. Now that was a bill that was in fact passed with local organizer tactics. And who were the people that Barack Obama relied upon to do the organizing behind that bill? Reverend Meeks. Father Pfleger. Jeremiah Wright was probably off on one of his world tours on that day, and so was the representative from Jeremiah Wright's church. This racial profiling bill was deeply problematic; I present evidence in this article that bills like this may well increase crime in minority areas, not decrease it.

So, again, there are questions of tactics: What are they? Are they effective? What are their results? Then there is the question of what these tactics are moving on behalf of – and I would suggest that the racial profiling bill is a perfect example of Barack Obama using organizing tactics effectively on behalf of disastrously bad legislation.

WILLIAM SCHAMBRA: Well, let's thank our panelists for a terrific conversation!

(Applause.)