

The Washington Times

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Friday, September 12, 2008

BEN-MEIR: Community 101

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At the Republican National Convention, Rudolph Giuliani and then vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin disregarded and seemed to mock Barack Obama's background as a community organizer. Mr. Giuliani, a former Republican presidential candidate, went on to liken community organizing to something corrupt.

What is the function of a "community organizer" and how did their remarks undermine central tenets of the American experience and an essential operator for community development to occur? Community organizers help local groups develop action plans and implement local development. Community organizers do not decide for others what their most pressing needs are, but rather facilitate dialogue as people together assess their challenges, opportunities and create socioeconomic projects they want. Community organizers are negotiators, conflict managers, and help build mutually beneficial and peaceful relationships.

The reality is that neighborhoods and villages of people generally do not spontaneously come together to improve their socioeconomic conditions. Catalysts are needed to jump-start the process and organize meetings. Communities do not automatically work through conflicts that naturally arise when they together plan local development and consider the broad range of interests and ideas reflected among them. Third-party facilitators help to ensure an inclusive, partnership-building and productive experience. Community organizers perform these and other key functions until development initiatives are self-sustaining and people are meeting their needs through their own capabilities (material, skills, and network).

Community organizing has a deep history in the United States. Its first initiatives in urban areas in the late 1800s were inspired by Alexis de Tocqueville and John Dewey - philosophers who connected community development to the intrinsic identity of the country. Contemporary community development grew significantly in the United States in the 1960s and its political roots are in decentralization and federalism - concepts embodied in

the Constitution and that the Republican Party historically championed.

So, what kind of social policies come out of the community organizing perspective? None that warrant its attack at the Republican National Convention. For one, Mr. Obama's community organizing perspective had to have informed his recent proposals to reform the White House Office of Faith Based and Community Initiatives, to broaden access to support, while reducing unhealthy government-religion entanglements.

Community organizing redresses the dislocation of families in the United States and around the globe caused by free trade or other social and natural phenomenon. People with community-organizing backgrounds would likely intuitively know that for reconstruction and reconciliation in Iraq to endure, it needs to be locally driven - a lesson finally applied by the United States after billions of dollars were wasted and insecurity reigned in that country for years. In fact, community organizing is about rallying people's participation, which is needed to deal with the range of domestic and international issues facing the United States. Most likely, the community organizing perspective of Mr. Obama helped his presidential campaign put in place strategies that generated historic levels of grassroots support throughout the country for his election and enabled him to overcome significant odds to win the Democratic primary.

Mr. Obama should take advantage of this political opportunity created by the ironic remarks of Republicans Mrs. Palin and Mr. Giuliani and explain how community organizing directly relates to successfully dealing with the serious challenges confronting the United States, including terrorism. Facilitators of, and participants in, well-organized community development initiatives are empowered in a way that diminishes feelings of alienation and the kind of discontent that can lead to violence.

The Obama campaign ought to make the case that community organizing is the right kind of experience needed at the highest level of decision-making. Non-ideological, pragmatic Republicans that support their party for the very reason it was founded - to better enable the people of states and communities to manage their own affairs - may see that their priorities are better served through the community organizing experience of Mr. Obama.

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