

Governor Palin and Mayor Giuliani Disregard Community Organizing

by Yossef Ben-Meir / September 6th, 2008

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. 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 and opportunities and create socio-economic 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 socio-economic 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, Senator 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 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 Senator 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.

Barack Obama should take advantage of this political opportunity created by the ironic remarks of Republicans Governor Palin and Mayor 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 such 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 Barack Obama.

Yossef Ben-Meir is a sociologist at the University of New Mexico and president of the High Atlas Foundation, a nonprofit organization founded by former Peace Corps volunteers and dedicated to community development in Morocco. The views expressed in this article are his own. [Read other articles by Yossef.](#)

This article was posted on Saturday, September 6th, 2008 at 8:00am and is filed under [Activism](#), [Culture](#), [Labor](#). [ShareThis](#)

3 comments on this article so far ...

Max Shields said on September 6th, 2008 at 12:42pm #

I try to avoid any intervention in the faux political games between these two war parities.

Remember Bill Clinton? The Repubs would say something audacious like he's poisoning his mother and the "sensible" liberals would be all over the place to his defense. This went on through the Monica fornication, upside down kangaroo trial aka impeachment...Meanwhile while the "sensible" liberals rallied to Bill...Bill was bombing the hell out of multiple sovereign nations and the civilians and children who lived there.

In other words, who cares what these two imperialist war parties say about EACH OTHER? Together they're killing us!!!

Btw, community organizing can be a lot of things, but it really doesn't need Obama (with his very light on results, and fairly meager community organizing resume) to defend it.

Martha said on September 8th, 2008 at 11:04am #

The article starts off from the mistaken belief that Barack was a "community organizer" when the reality is he sampled it, didn't like it, admits he was ineffective and high tailed it to Harvard and all the big money that would follow. Barack doesn't represent community organizers and the author's hysteria is misplaced as a result. Calling Barack (or allowing him to call himself) a "community organizer" is the insult.

Deadbeat said on September 8th, 2008 at 7:29pm #

Barack doesn't represent community organizers and the author's hysteria is misplaced as a result.

I think this is weak argument to make when MOST Americans never have been engaged in community organizing whether successful or unsuccessful. Clearly many more American have served in the military killing other human beings than they have serving a poor community or any other community even their own. Most folks go to work and come home to do it all over again the next day.

There are clearly other aspects of Obama's record that are ripe for criticism but to belittle his work as a community organizer however effective or "ineffective" he was while an organizer is not one of them.

In the end it actually weakens your argument.