



## The Alinsky Way of Governing

What happens when those in power adopt 'rules for radicals' to attack their less powerful opponents.

Presidential senior adviser Valerie Jarrett at a Las Vegas conference in May 2014. PHOTO: BLOOMBERG  
By Pete Peterson, WSJ, April 9, 2015 6:50 p.m. ET

Arizona Rep. Raul Grijalva, the ranking Democrat on the House Natural Resources Committee, recently caused a stir by sending letters to seven university presidents seeking background information on scientists and professors who had given congressional testimony that failed to endorse what is the conventional wisdom in some quarters regarding climate change. One of the targets was Steven Hayward, a colleague of mine at Pepperdine's School of Public Policy.

Though the congressman lacked legal authority to demand information, his aggressive plan, which came to light in late February, should not be a surprise at a time when power holders from the White House on down are employing similar means against perceived enemies.

Mr. Grijalva left a clue about how he operates in 2013 when the magazine *In These Times* asked about his legislative strategy. "I'm a Saul Alinsky guy," he said, referring to the community organizer and activist who died in 1972, "that's where I learned this stuff."

What sort of stuff? Mr. Grijalva sent his letters not to the professors but to university presidents, without (at least in the case of Mr. Hayward) the professors' knowledge. Mr. Hayward was not even employed by Pepperdine at the time of his congressional testimony in 2011.

But targeting institutions and their leaders is pure Alinsky; so are the scare tactics. Mr. Grijalva's staff sent letters asking for information about the professors, with a March 16 due date—asking, for instance, if they had accepted funding from oil companies—using official congressional letterhead, and followed up with calls from Mr. Grijalva's congressional office. This is a page from Alinsky's book, in both senses of the word: "Power is not only what you have but what the enemy thinks you have," reads one tip in his 1971 "Rules for Radicals."

Yet adopting Alinsky's tactics may not in this case fit with Alinsky's philosophy. This is Alinsky with a twist. Despite myriad philosophical inconsistencies, "Rules for Radicals" is meant to empower the weaker against the stronger. Alinsky writes: "*The Prince* was

written by Machiavelli for the Haves on how to hold power. *Rules for Radicals* is written for the Have-Nots on how to take it away.”

In a similar vein, the political philosopher Jean Bethke Elshtain supported Alinsky’s work in getting disengaged communities—typically in lower socio-economic strata—to assume the difficult responsibilities of citizenship. As a way of challenging “big government,” even conservatives such as former House Majority Leader Dick Armey have recommended Alinsky’s tactics (minus his professed hatred of capitalism, etc.).

But what happens when Machiavelli’s Prince reads and employs “Rules for Radicals”? In 2009 President Obama’s friend and adviser Valerie Jarrett was asked on CNN about media bias, particularly at Fox News, and she responded: “What the administration has said very clearly is that we’re going to speak truth to power.” I remember thinking: “Wait a minute, you’re the White House. You *are* the power.”

In that sense President Obama’s election was both the climax of Alinsky’s vision and an existential crisis for that vision. Alinsky promoted the few tactics available to the downtrodden: irreverence, ridicule and deception. “Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it, and polarize it,” he wrote. So the rise to power of the world’s most famous community organizer raises a question: Should Alinskyite tactics be employed by those in power, or should they be reserved for those without?

Mr. Grijalva’s campaign against seven academics serves as a cautionary tale of what can happen when power adopts these strategies to suppress opposition. The congressman’s office arranged additional pressure by notifying national and local media that these professors were under “investigation.” On the day the letters went out, the Washington Post blared: “House Dems: Did Big Oil seek to sway scientists in climate debate?”

After receiving a call from a Grijalva staffer, our local Malibu Times obliged with the front-page headline, “Pepperdine Professor Investigated by Congressman.” The online Delaware News Journal, the hometown newspaper for David Legates at the University of Delaware, wrote: “UD’s David Legates caught in climate change controversy.” Alabama’s Huntsville Times had a piece under the headline: “Arizona congressman asking questions about outside funding for UAH climate expert John Christy.”

To their credit, several editorial boards came to the defense of the professors. The Arizona Republic, the home-state newspaper of Mr. Grijalva and targeted Arizona State University professor Robert Balling, wrote that Mr. Grijalva’s campaign “fits the classic definition of a witch hunt.” Rep. Grijalva on March 2 acknowledged to National Journal that some of the information he demanded from the universities was “overreach” but defended his demand for information about funding sources.

How did it come to this? The inability of politicians to confront another’s argument, much less to attempt to persuade the other side, has become standard operating procedure. Now this toxic approach is extending to the broader world of policy—including scientific

research. Instead of evaluating the quality of the research, opponents make heavy-handed insinuations about who funds it—as though that matters if the science is sound. And now just about every climate scientist employed by an American university knows that Washington is watching.

More broadly, what has happened is that a generation of American politicians who came of age during Saul Alinsky's lifetime has moved into positions of institutional power that he so often derided as "the enemy." They are showing an inability to leave behind Alinsky's tactics that were intended for the weak against the strong. Civil discourse and academic freedom suffer while the "Prince" becomes more powerful.

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