

Articles & Addresses by Father Richard J. Neuhaus

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The Uses of Confrontation

I first met the late Saul Alinsky when I was a very young pastor in black Brooklyn. It was at the Urban Institute in Chicago, which in the 1960s was at the center of honing young clergy, Protestant and Catholic, for urban ministries. Alinsky was already then a fabled veteran of confrontational activism, an amiably rough man who was loquaciously exultant in communicating his discovery that the Catholic Church was the lever with which to move the world, or, as it was put then, to radically change The System. The Catholics had the resources and the people, while Protestant clergy, with usually dwindling city parishes, had the time and energy for agitation. In that first meeting, there were perhaps thirty younger clergy and seminarians in the room. Alinsky began with this: "If there's anybody here who has any ideas about becoming a bishop some day, he should leave right now." I was impressed.

Alinsky's books *Reveille for Radicals* and *Rules for Radicals* were hot items in their time. His lasting contribution is the Industrial Areas Foundation, which is still going strong today. IAF recruits local churches to challenge "the power structure" on behalf of radical change by "pitting power against power." Power is, as IAF organizers unabashedly proclaim, the only game in town. (A good introduction to IAF goals and tactics, written from an admiring perspective, is Jim Rooney's *Organizing the South Bronx*, available in paperback from State University of New York Press.) IAF is reported to have more than sixty-five affiliated organizations around the country, and claims to represent, through its affiliates, millions of people. In its boot camps for organizers, IAF prides itself on taking an unsentimental and brutally realistic approach to the power struggle. The purpose is to "wean church people off the conventional religious expectation" that their role is to achieve dialogue and cooperation. The goal is to win, and the means is confrontation and conflict. The tactic, as Rooney explains, is to unambiguously target a vulnerable public official or an institution as "the enemy," to very publicly defeat the enemy, and then build on the momentum to attack the next vulnerable target.

The IAF approach is very political and unapologetically partisan. IAF as an organization usually keeps a low profile. It has, for instance, no website, although it is the directing force behind coalitions such as BUILD in Baltimore, WIN in Washington, D.C., and numerous similar campaigns. South Bronx Churches (SBC) is among affiliates that have an impressive record in marshaling public and private resources for low-income housing, although not without stepping on the toes of a Catholic urban coalition that it upstaged. Stepping on toes, indeed stomping on toes, is the ordinary operating procedure for IAF and its affiliates. Critics of IAF say it is "divisive" and has the unhappy effect of "politicizing" churches, to which IAF leaders

happily plead guilty. Readers of Tom Wolfe's *Bonfire of the Vanities* will remember his account of the riotous mass mugging of New York's mayor (a stand-in for Ed Koch), a classic IAF-style confrontation. At the same time, and I have some ambivalence about this, IAF leaders have said they are promoting the "mediating institutions" approach to public policy advocated by Peter Berger and me in our *To Empower People*.

Over the years, readers have asked about IAF, usually occasioned by the involvement or proposed involvement of their local churches. My standard response has been that I have known IAF leaders, on and off, over many years, that they do have a heart for creating leaders for sometimes necessary social change, but that intention is joined to a manipulative methodology and a tendency to use religion for narrowly partisan purposes. In short: look very carefully at what you may be getting into. One reader, Edward H. Sisson, a Washington lawyer, has looked very carefully indeed and does not at all like what he has found. He was a member of the vestry of St. John's Episcopal Church in Bethesda, Maryland, when that parish was invited to join an IAF affiliate known as Action in Montgomery (AIM). After his investigation of IAF's history and methods, he strongly opposed joining. He is willing to make the very substantial file he accumulated on IAF available to readers who send him \$20 (for duplication and mailing costs) at 555 Twelfth Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20004. In my judgment, the material raises substantial questions that should be considered by any church thinking about signing up with an IAF project.

Saul Alinsky died many years ago. In the 1960s he was viewed as part of a mainly Jewish world of the Old Left dating from the 1930s. Some leftists committed to a Marxist version of class struggle condemned him as a dangerous revisionist. Then and now, IAF cannot always be easily slotted on the left-right spectrum. The problems, including moral problems, arise in connection with recruiting religion to a methodology of unremitting confrontation, deliberate polarization, targeting of "enemies," and obsession with power. But, it is said, it is all in a good cause. Maybe so. A Lutheran pastor who is a friend of long standing has worked with IAF for decades. "Sure we use tough street talk to rouse the people and get the attention of the establishment," he says, "but the most effective and most devout Christian leaders I know have come out of this program." Such testimonies are not hard to come by, and they, too, should be weighed by churches thinking about joining up with IAF.