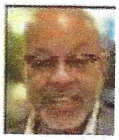
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'Rules for Radicals' — the Aurora edition

A website operating under the domain Aurora2027.org has appeared nearly a year before Aurora's next municipal election. Its publishers have undertaken to issue report cards to six current and former elected officials.

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Saul Alinsky has been dead for more than half a century. His political organizing techniques, however, remain very much alive.



One need not look to Washington, Chicago or Portland to examine them. Aurora, Colorado, will do quite nicely.

In 1971, Alinsky published "Rules for Radicals," a primer on acquiring and exercising political power. Among its 14 tactical rules was this particularly revealing instruction:

"Pick the target, freeze it, personalize it and polarize it."

Enter Operation Aurora.

A website operating under the domain Aurora2027.org has appeared nearly a year before Aurora's next municipal election. Its publishers have undertaken to issue report cards to six current and former elected officials.

All six have failed.

The identities of those issuing the report cards, however, appear to be missing in action.

Apparently, accountability is easier to administer than to practice.

Official domain registration records indicate that the website was registered on Nov. 19 using a service that shields the identity of its registrant from public disclosure. Its initial registration expires 17 days after Aurora's next municipal election.

Neither domain privacy nor a one- year registration is unusual. But neither tells Aurora's citizens who finances this enterprise, who determines its editorial positions or what organizational interests it represents.

Anonymous political advocacy is a constitutional liberty. It is not a credential.

What makes Operation Aurora particularly interesting is how readily its structure lends itself to examination through Alinsky's 13th rule.

Pick the target: Six current and former elected officials have been selected. Their progressive counterparts have not been subjected to equivalent report cards.

If the enterprise were intended to provide a comprehensive assessment of municipal governance, one might reasonably expect an examination of everyone involved in governing.

If its purpose is electoral advocacy, the selection is considerably easier to understand.

Freeze it: Assign the targets failing grades.

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There is something rather ingenious about borrowing the academic report card for political purposes. The format carries the appearance of measurable achievement without necessarily requiring the inconvenience of measuring anything.

A student fails mathematics because he cannot demonstrate proficiency in mathematics. By what comparable standard does a Councilmember fail because she voted against a minimum wage increase?

Was employment reduced? Were businesses displaced? Did household incomes decline? What evidence establishes the consequences of the decision?

These are questions of economics and public policy, not arithmetic conducted with the political preferences of an anonymous examiner.

Personalize it: The website assembles legislative votes, controversial remarks and political associations into individual profiles.

Some of the documented conduct deserves scrutiny. But much of the material consists of disagreements over public policy.

There is a considerable difference between documenting that someone voted against a proposal and demonstrating that the vote harmed the people that official represents.

Indeed, if disagreement were sufficient evidence of incompetence, representative government would have been an exercise in institutional failure from its inception.

Polarize it: Operation Aurora's homepage explicitly declares its opposition to a return to Republican rule.

This is a revealing piece of information because it establishes the political objective against which its editorial judgments must be understood.

The distinction between assessing governmental performance and advocating an electoral outcome is not an insignificant one. The former requires a willingness to follow evidence wherever it leads. The latter begins with a preferred destination.

What happens when the evidence leads somewhere inconvenient?

Alinsky's fifth rule concerns using ridicule as a political weapon. Here, too, the report card format invites examination.

A failing grade communicates condemnation in a fraction of the time it takes to explain municipal zoning law, the economics of wage regulation or the competing objectives of criminal justice policy.

But brevity is not necessarily evidence of intellectual efficiency. Sometimes it simply eliminates complexity.

If one genuinely wished to assess the performance of Aurora's elected officials, one might begin with Aurora itself.

Is the city safer? Are there fewer victims of crime? Are businesses investing? Are municipal finances sustainable? Are public services improving? Is City Council capable of conducting the business for which its members were elected?

And perhaps most importantly, what relationship exists between the decisions of individual council members and those outcomes?

Such an inquiry might produce conclusions inconsistent with the political preferences of those conducting it.

That is precisely what makes it an inquiry.

Aurora has also experienced organized political mobilization involving the Denver chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America. Several issues emphasized in its publicly announced activities appear prominently on Operation Aurora.

Whether that reflects shared political objectives or a direct organizational relationship remains unknown.

The resemblance to Alinsky's tactics does not establish that his book served as the website's instruction manual. Nor does ideological overlap establish organizational sponsorship.

But those distinctions do not make the questions about the website's methodology, financing and editorial control any less relevant.

There is, incidentally, another Alinsky rule worth considering — his fourth, which involves holding one's adversaries to their own professed standards.

Operation Aurora's publishers might find that principle closer to home.

Who are they? Who finances their operation? What qualifies them to evaluate governmental performance? Are they prepared to disclose their organizational affiliations and subject their own assertions to independent scrutiny?

The right to remain anonymous does not confer a corresponding right to be believed.

Ultimately, the issue facing Aurora's citizens is not whether political advocacy should exist. It is whether citizens can distinguish political advocacy from objective information, factual records from editorial interpretations and the pursuit of political power from the responsibilities of governing.

Alinsky wrote a book about political power.

He did not write a textbook on municipal government.

That distinction is worth remembering the next time someone hands you a report card.

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