

Examiner.com Interview: Mr. Grassroots on Obama, Alinsky, and the Chicago Way (2012)

John Presta is the community organizer that Republicans have nightmares about. In fact, he wrote the book on it. Presta is the author of *Mr. and Mrs. Grassroots: How Barack Obama, Two Bookstore Owners and 300 Volunteers Did It*, an account of Obama's ascent to the presidency from the ground up.

Presta, who ran the bookstore Reading on Walden with his wife Michelle in the Beverly neighborhood of Chicago, was there in the beginning. His book details their role as grassroots organizers, from Obama's failed 2000 campaign to 2004, when he won the senate. The rest, of course, is history. In January of this year, Presta received a thank you note from the "skinny kid with the funny name," who now happens to be the President of the United States.

Presta writes a column for the Examiner and was kind enough to answer a few questions:

Since you are the quintessential community organizer, how does it feel to have your title used in a disparaging way by Republicans?

I wear it as a badge of honor. Not the least embarrassed by the words "community organizer."

You mention Saul Alinsky in your book. Are you surprised at the way his name has been used as a right-wing bogeyman? In the same vein as Jeremiah Wright and Bill Ayers?

Again, I proudly embrace the legacy of Saul Alinsky. My next book is based in part on "Rules for Radicals." I was a friend of Alinsky's partner of many years, Joe Meegan. They were different. To simplify, Alinsky was more global and Meegan was more local. I greatly admire the work Reverend Wright has done. His church is close by here and many of his followers were part of the 300 volunteers. I don't condone some of the things he said, but don't we all say things at times that we regret? Don't know Bill Ayers. Hope to meet him personally one day.

Are you still involved in grassroots politics? In what way are/will you be involved with the 2012 campaign?

We never stopped. In 2000, of course, we got our start with the Congressional campaign. In 2004, the U.S. Senate. In 2006, Alexi Giannoulias and Debra Shore. In 2008, the presidential campaign and lots of local races. We are really proud of the role we played early on in the rise of Cook County Board President Toni Preckwinkle. The odds were stacked against her. It was an unheard of victory and went against the grain. Three African-American candidates against one white candidate, the conventional wisdom goes, the white candidate wins. What Preckwinkle showed was the public wants to support and get behind great people. Preckwinkle's victory, I believe, directly led to Richard M. Daley's decision to step aside (of course, his wife's health was a factor too). Daley was always a little leery of the "grassroots." We also worked with an unlikely coalition of groups to propel Governor Quinn to victory. The unifying factor was we were all scared of Bill Brady and what he would do. Judging from Wisconsin, we were right.

If Hillary Clinton had become the nominee in 2008 would you have worked in a similar way for her?

Yes. Absolutely. Would love to have seen her as the vice-presidential nominee. That said, I think

Biden is a huge asset to the president.

How closely are you following the GOP primaries? Which candidate is your dream opponent? General thoughts?

Very closely. I predicted in my columns (and was berated for this by comments) that Romney is not inevitable. I would love to face Gingrich because of the big contrast. Romney, too. Especially with his riches and how out of touch he seems.

Isn't Ron Paul a "grassroots" kind of guy? What are your thoughts on him?

I like Ron Paul and what he has accomplished. He is a "community organizer," a "grassroots" kind of guy. I generally agree with his foreign policy views, but domestically his program would be a huge disaster. But as a campaigner, pretty good.

In the book you quote two of Obama's famous speeches (Oct. 2, 2002 Iraq War speech and the 2004 Democratic convention speech). These words struck me from the Iraq speech:

"So, for those of us who seek a more just and secure world for our children, let us send a clear message to the president today. You want a fight, President Bush? Let's finish the fight with Bin Laden and al-Qaeda, through effective, coordinated intelligence, and a shutting down of the financial networks that support terrorism, and a homeland security program that involves more than color-coded warnings."

Isn't it ironic that it took until 2011 with Obama as president to fulfill those words?

It shows the complexity of accomplishing these things. The important thing is he never gave up and never gave in. I felt Bush gave up on finding Bin Laden, but Obama made it a priority. What a gamble Obama took to go after him. It could have ended up like Carter's rescue mission in 1980. Had that mission succeeded, we would have never heard of Ronald Reagan. Just how it works.

Regarding The 2004 convention speech: reading it made me think that his critics had taken his words and applied the exact opposite to them. As if everything he believed and stood for was the exact opposite of what he said. Not really a question but...your thoughts?

I heard that speech dozens of times prior to that day. He just refined it. I run into people that heard him back then and they all say the same thing.

Is Obama an ineffectual speaker without a teleprompter, as some may have us believe?

When he gave his stump speeches during the 2000 and especially the 2004 campaigns, I can assure you he didn't use a teleprompter. He is very good with or without one. Republicans have nothing else to criticize him for.

How do you respond to liberals who have criticized Obama for being too conciliatory?

I always say what is the alternative. John McCain? Newt Gingrich? Rick Santorum? We have come too far now.

More generally, how do you think he is doing? What is the worst thing he has done in office? The best thing?

My personal belief is that he has a chance to be one of the greatest presidents. What makes a great president? When a president walks into a crisis (the great recession of 2008) and turns it around. We see now that it is turning around. Lincoln had the nation seceding and no president will ever top that accomplishment of keeping the nation together. Franklin Roosevelt had the great depression and eventually turned it around. It took many years, but he made the nation feel better. In many ways, Obama has out-performed Roosevelt, turning things around much quicker. I would like to have seen the two wars end quicker and that would be my criticism. Also, messaging was a big problem the first two years, but they are getting better at that.

Rahm Emanuel left the White House for a cushy office job back in Chicago. How do you think he's doing as mayor?

I supported and organized for Gery Chico for mayor and we delivered the 19th Ward for Chico with 50% of the vote and the biggest turnout in the city, with nearly 80% turnout (city turnout was in the 40s, I believe). But Mayor Emanuel is doing a great job under great financial pressures. He is fearless in making decisions. I don't agree with the police station closings and the library cutbacks and the mental health cutbacks. But things like the grid system for garbage pickup is the right thing to do. Just read he is considering slashing the "1.3 million dollar menu" for each alderman. He is very goal-oriented and if he has a goal (which he keeps close to the vest) he will achieve it.

How is your relationship with the Chicago Machine and players like Michael Madigan these days?

Don't know Madigan or Cullerton. Didn't know Daley either (met him a number of times). I am closely aligned with people like Toni Preckwinkle and that new progressive group becoming players in Chicago.

Do you still own and run your bookstore?

We closed the bricks-and-mortar portion of our store in 2007, but continued for a couple years as an online only bookstore. In early 2009, we decided to close the online store too.

Are you writing another book?

I am writing a couple of books. One is a manual on "community organizing" (take that Republicans) and "grassroots organizing." Several other projects I am considering

Besides the letter you received, have you had any recent contact with Obama?

No direct contact. My wife and I didn't go to the Inauguration in 2009. We would have seen him there. I am sure we will see him sometime during the campaign. He has told people to say "hello" a number of times and has signed my book for them.

What's next? Who wins in 2012?

Obama, of course. As far as Congress, it really depends, I believe, on the nominee. A stronger nominee helps them win one of the houses. A weak nominee is a complete disaster for the

Republicans.

Mr. and Mrs. Grassroots: How Barack Obama, Two Bookstore Owners and 300 Volunteers Did It by John Presta is published by The Elevator Group.