

Burn Down the Suburbs?

By Stanley Kurtz

August 1, 2012 4:00 A.M.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *This article is adapted from [Spreading the Wealth: How Obama Is Robbing the Suburbs to Pay for the Cities](#), by Stanley Kurtz, from *Sentinel HC*.*

President Obama is not a fan of America's suburbs. Indeed, he intends to abolish them. With suburban voters set to be the swing constituency of the 2012 election, the administration's plans for this segment of the electorate deserve scrutiny. Obama is a longtime supporter of "regionalism," the idea that the suburbs should be folded into the cities, merging schools, housing, transportation, and above all taxation. To this end, the president has already put programs in place designed to push the country toward a sweeping social transformation in a possible second term. The goal: income equalization via a massive redistribution of suburban tax money to the cities.

Obama's plans to undercut the political and economic independence of America's suburbs reach back decades. The community organizers who trained him in the mid-1980s blamed the plight of cities on taxpayer "flight" to suburbia. Beginning in the mid-1990s, Obama's mentors at the Gamaliel Foundation (a community-organizing network Obama helped found) formally dedicated their efforts to the budding fight against suburban "sprawl." From his positions on the boards of a couple of left-leaning Chicago foundations, Obama channeled substantial financial support to these efforts. On entering politics, he served as a dedicated ally of his mentors' anti-suburban activism.

The alliance endures. One of Obama's original trainers, Mike Kruglik, has hived off a new organization called Building One America, which continues Gamaliel's anti-suburban crusade under another name. Kruglik and his close allies, David Rusk and Myron Orfield, intellectual leaders of the "anti-sprawl" movement, have been quietly working with the Obama administration for years on an ambitious program of social reform.

In July of 2011, Kruglik's Building One America held a conference at the White House. Orfield and Rusk made presentations, and afterwards Kruglik personally met with the president in the Oval Office. The ultimate goal of the movement led by Kruglik, Rusk, and Orfield is quite literally to abolish the suburbs. Knowing that this could never happen through outright annexation by nearby cities, they've developed ways to coax suburbs to slowly forfeit their independence.

One approach is to force suburban residents into densely packed cities by blocking development on the outskirts of metropolitan areas, and by discouraging driving with a blizzard of taxes, fees, and regulations. Step two is to move the poor out of cities by

imposing low-income-housing quotas on development in middle-class suburbs. Step three is to export the controversial “regional tax-base sharing” scheme currently in place in the Minneapolis–St. Paul area to the rest of the country. Under this program, a portion of suburban tax money flows into a common regional pot, which is then effectively redistributed to urban, and a few less well-off “inner-ring” suburban, municipalities.

The Obama administration, stocked with “regionalist” appointees, has been advancing this ambitious plan quietly for the past four years. Efforts to discourage driving and to press development into densely packed cities are justified by reference to fears of global warming. Leaders of the crusade against “sprawl” very consciously use environmental concerns as a cover for their redistributive schemes.

The centerpiece of the Obama administration’s anti-suburban plans is a little-known and seemingly modest program called the Sustainable Communities Initiative. The “regional planning grants” funded under this initiative — many of them in battleground states like Florida, Virginia, and Ohio — are set to recommend redistributive policies, as well as transportation and development plans, designed to undercut America’s suburbs. Few have noticed this because the program’s goals are muffled in the impenetrable jargon of “sustainability,” while its recommendations are to be unveiled only in a possible second Obama term.

Obama’s former community-organizing mentors and colleagues want the administration to condition future federal aid on state adherence to the recommendations served up by these anti-suburban planning commissions. That would quickly turn an apparently modest set of regional-planning grants into a lever for sweeping social change.

In light of Obama’s unbroken history of collaboration with his organizing mentors on this anti-suburban project, and his proven willingness to impose ambitious policy agendas on the country through heavy-handed regulation, this project seems likely to advance.

A second and equally ambitious facet of Obama’s anti-suburban blueprint involves the work of Kruglik’s Building One America. Traditionally, Alinskyite community organizers mobilize leftist church groups. Kruglik’s group goes a step further by organizing not only the religious left but politicians from relatively less-well-off inner-ring suburbs. The goal is to build coalitions between urban and inner-ring suburban state legislators, in a bid to force regional tax-base sharing on middle-class suburbanites. That is how the practice came to Minnesota.

The July 2011 White House conference, gathering inner-ring suburban politicians for presentations by Rusk and Orfield, was an effort to place the prestige of the Obama administration behind Kruglik’s organizing efforts. A multi-state battle over regional tax-base “sharing,” abetted by the president, would usher in divisive class warfare on

a scale likely to dwarf the puny efforts of Occupy Wall Street.

Obama's little-known plans to undermine the political and economic autonomy of America's suburbs constitute a policy initiative similar in ambition to health-care reform, the stimulus, or "cap-and-trade." Obama's anti-suburban plans also supply the missing link that explains his administration's overall policy architecture.

Since the failure of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty and the collapse of federal urban policy, leftist theorists of community organizing have advocated a series of moves designed to quietly redistribute tax money to the cities. Health-care reform and federal infrastructure spending (as in the stimulus) are backed by organizers as the best ways to reconstitute an urban policy without directly calling it that. A campaign against suburban "sprawl" under the guise of environmentalism is the next move. Open calls for suburban tax-base "sharing" are the final and most controversial link in the chain of a reconstituted and redistributive urban policy. President Obama is following this plan.

Middle-class suburban supporters of the president take note. It isn't just the pocketbooks of the "1 percent" he's after; it's yours.

— *Stanley Kurtz is a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center. This piece is adapted from his new book, [Spreading the Wealth: How Obama Is Robbing the Suburbs to Pay for the Cities](#).*

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