

## Chapter Six

### Developing a Strategy: Advocacy's Roadmap

***“If you have an hour to chop a stack of wood,  
spend the first half hour sharpening your axe.”***

What is an advocacy strategy? Being an activist, taking on the challenge of pushing social change, is hard work. One of the hardest parts of that work is staying on track in the midst of political battle -- staying clear about your objectives, undaunted by the moves of your opponents, steady in your message and unified among your allies. Advocacy campaigns are like a long journey across strange, often hostile, terrain. Strategy is the map that keeps you focused and guided along the way.

When I teach workshops on developing advocacy strategy, I begin by giving people a short length of rope tied into a tangle of tight knots. Then I give everyone two tasks: first, untangle the knots and second, observe the methods you use for doing so. People's observations are always remarkably similar:

*“First I took a good look at it.”*

*“I worked at it one step at a time.”*

*“It would be easier if I could use some tools.”*

*“Sometimes I had to work the knot hard, sometimes very softly.”*

*“I had to be sure to protect the progress I made along the way.”*

These are also some of the most important lessons about developing advocacy strategy. Each advocacy situation, like each knot, is different. The best way to approach each problem is to break down the tasks involved and apply some basic common sense.

It is remarkable how often advocates, even experienced ones, don't take time to think strategically, to “first, take a good look at it.” Many suffer from “when you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail” syndrome. Instead of looking at the situation with a careful, strategic eye, they rely on what's familiar. If they know how to hold a news conference they hold a news conference. If they know how to organize a protest they organize a protest. If they know how to write reports they cook up a new one. Each of these tactics may be useful to the campaign at hand, but not necessarily so. They might, in fact, be exactly the wrong way to go.

From *The Democracy Owners Manual* by Jim Shultz  
(Rutgers University Press, 2002)

A good strategy, like a good route through new terrain, doesn't just rely on the roads you know. It starts where you are, ends where you want to go and provides a good, plausible route in between. What do you want? Who can give it to you? What do they need to hear? Who do they need to hear it from? What actions can deliver that message effectively? With a solid strategy, one that answers each of these questions well, you might change the world. Without a strategy, or with a poor one, you are more likely to get lost and accomplish very little.

### **What do you Want? (Defining Your Objectives)**

Most people begin their advocacy efforts knowing what their general goals are: better schools, a cleaner environment, more justice for the poor, better health care. These big goals are good long term beacons for your work, but advocacy campaigns have to be organized around shorter-term objectives that are clear, specific, and attainable. As the saying goes in Spanish, “¿Adónde estamos caminando?” - “Where are we walking?” If you want people to walk together toward some public goal, it helps a lot if they can see the destination.

### **The Different Types of Objectives**

There are many different kinds of objectives that an advocacy campaign might choose. Before deciding on which is the right one, it's worth considering the full menu of possibilities. Some groups pick initial objectives where the main goal is really to prepare for a larger campaign that you're not quite ready for. Groups do this by researching the issues, educating and organizing their base of supporters, working on the messages they will use, and by generating some initial public interest in the issue.

Ultimately, however, advocacy campaigns take aim at some specific change that advances the cause forward. Sometimes that is a change in public behavior, such as encouraging more people to recycle. Other times the objective is to pressure a corporation to change the way it does business, such as the campaign that forced Starbucks to pay a farmers a fair price for their coffee. In most cases though, advocacy is aimed at changing government policy -- winning more money for local schools or a law prohibiting health insurers from canceling people's policies. In all of these cases advocacy objectives need to be clear and specific. How much more recycling do we want? What coffee price is a fair price? How much more money for schools? What should happen to health insurers who cancel their patients' policies?

It is also true that sometimes the political winds are strongly against you and the change you seek is unlikely to happen any time soon. In these situations your objective may be, in the words of religious activists, “to bear witness”. It is what thousands did through protest in the earliest days of the Vietnam War and again through much of the 1980s against U.S. support for right-wing militaries in Central America. It is what thousands do today in protest against the death penalty. Bearing witness means engaging in public actions, in spite of contrary public opinion or political obstacles, to remind the

public and those in power that there is a dissenting view and keeping alive the hope that one day public opinion and the politics of the issue might change.

### **Picking the Right Objective**

The art of picking the right objective is half policy analysis, half political intuition. The first question is: What will actually solve the problem and, among the alternatives, what are their costs and the practicalities of each one? Potential alternatives also needs to be evaluated politically. Is the fight one you can win? How does it position you politically and organizationally to help advance your larger aims? These are questions that advocates and advocacy coalitions should sort through together at the start. When evaluating potential objectives there is a set of important qualities to look for.

First, advocacy objectives need to be dramatic and compelling. They need to be able to attract the active involvement of people busy with other priorities and attract the interest of the media and the public, both of which have many other issues demanding their attention. When a national coalition of health and consumer groups set out in the mid-1980s to warn expectant mothers about the risks of drinking during pregnancy, they needed something more engaging than a once-a-year “public awareness week” on the issue. Instead, they mounted a national campaign for legislation requiring birth defect warning labels on every alcoholic beverage container in the nation. That objective sparked the interest and involvement of hundreds of groups and thousands of citizens, enough to win a landmark law from Congress mandating such labels.

On the flip side, your objective should also be small enough to achieve something of value within a reasonable time, in most cases one to two years. This doesn't mean you have to win a total victory that quickly, but at least something substantial enough to give those involved a sense of momentum and hope. There are many different smaller wins you can mark along the way -- a boost in media attention, new coalition partners, and new support from policy makers. Campaigns that start out with huge expectations, but have little to show for their efforts, find their participants drifting away to other work that seems more compelling and productive.

Finally, your objective should also lay the groundwork for future advocacy campaigns by creating a political climate that works to your longer term advantage. Campaigns do this by drawing public attention to the larger issues, by bringing together the kind of support base you'll need over the longer term, and by putting your long term opponents in the harshest public light possible. In the mid-1980s, California health care advocates waged a fight against the lethal practice among private hospitals of turning away critically-ill patients who didn't have health coverage -- a practice they labeled “patient dumping”. The anti-dumping campaign drew broad support and huge media attention, culminating in a new state law prohibiting hospitals from turning away patients in critical condition.

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However, the campaign against patient dumping also accomplished much more. It assembled the coalition of consumer, health, and labor groups that would go on to win larger victories on issues such as access to prenatal care and consumer protections from HMOs and it became the spark for a vibrant new movement for access to care. “The patient dumping campaign laid the groundwork for everything we did for the next ten years,” says campaign leader Maryann O’Sullivan. “It put the issue of access to care on the political map and it put pressure on powerful opponents like the state medical association to become advocates of reform rather than obstacles to it.”<sup>i</sup>

### **How Much to Ask For**

One of the hardest decisions in defining an objective is how much to ask for or demand. On the one hand, it is generally a good idea to start out asking for more than you’re willing to settle for or expect to win because along the way you will need something to trade away in compromise. Alcohol labeling advocates started out demanding not only written labels but also a picture label of a pregnant woman next to a drinking glass with a slash through it. Advocates never expected lawmakers to agree to put the image on bottles, but it gave them something to negotiate away when alcohol makers and legislators sought to water down the proposal. It is also true that in some cases having a more extreme proposal can make political room for a more moderate one that otherwise wouldn’t have a chance. In the 1930s, a national campaign was waged for the so-called “Townsend Plan” a radical depression-era proposal to give every senior citizen in the United States a \$200 per month pension (big money in those days). While the free pension plan never got off the ground, it did create the spark under Congress to approve a less radical alternative, Social Security (paid for by employee contributions).<sup>ii</sup>

However, when advocates stop listening to public opinion and stake out positions too far beyond what current politics will allow, the results can be disastrous. Following the 1992 election, the new Clinton administration made health care reform its number one priority. Ecstatic health care advocates became overconfident and made the strategic error of demanding too much. In California, the activist group Neighbor to Neighbor qualified a ballot measure (Proposition 186) to establish a “single payer” health care system in the state, which would have shifted nearly all private health care into government hands, a proposal that had consistently polled miserably in state voter surveys. “We were intoxicated,” remembers one campaign leader. “We believed our own bumper stickers.”<sup>iii</sup> Insurers spent millions branding the plan as health care by government bureaucracy and on election day the initiative was crushed seventy three percent to twenty seven percent. Sabin Russell, who covered the campaign for the San Francisco Chronicle called the campaign, “a disaster for single payer,” a move that converted a serious policy idea into a political joke.<sup>iv</sup> It is one thing to aim for objectives that broaden the public’s vision. However, when advocates force a public choice on an alternative that is clearly unpopular, the result is to marginalize that alternative and make it less viable, not more.

### **Sometimes Your Objectives Get Picked For You**

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Advocates do not always have the luxury of selecting their objectives. Sometimes objectives are forced on you by circumstances beyond your control. Gay rights advocates, for example, did not pick “gays in the military” to be their first political fight under the Clinton administration (in fact most gay rights groups would have preferred a more winnable battle over employment discrimination). It became the leading national gay issue only after a reporter asked Clinton about it just days after he was elected. From that moment on it became an unintended litmus test, for Clinton and others, on the issue of gay rights. Immigrant rights advocates did not choose to fight a California ballot initiative battle (Proposition 187) over whether the children of undocumented immigrants could attend public school or receive public health care. That too was forced on them, in this case by their opponents.

Circumstances not only confront advocates with surprise threats but also surprises them with unexpected opportunities. In 1997, Congress approved legislation to provide matching funds to states that set up health insurance plans for low-income families with children. Children’s advocates and health care advocates around the nation were sent suddenly scrambling to organize state level campaigns to take full advantage of the unexpected political gift.

When circumstances beyond your control offer an opportunity the challenge is to move quickly to get the most out of it. When you’re handed a threat, the challenge is a harder one -- to make the best out of a fight you may not win. Emily Goldfarb, a leader in the immigrants’ rights battle, advises advocates in these circumstances to ask themselves two questions, “What do we want things to look like when it’s over? What can we do to make ourselves in the best shape possible afterwards?”<sup>v</sup> Even losing battles are opportunities to strengthen your cause, by learning new political skills, building your base, or reaching out to new allies. Gay rights advocates working on the military service issue were able to recruit conservative icon Barry Goldwater to their cause. Immigrant rights groups used the ballot campaign (which they lost) to forge new alliances with teacher groups, health care workers, business and political leaders and to establish important new relationships with the media.

### **Who Do You Need to Move? (Targeting Your Audiences)**

Advocacy is about getting someone to move, to do something they wouldn’t otherwise do. The question up front is: Who is it you need to move in order to get what you want? I once asked a group of health activists I was working with in South Africa, “Who has the power to make health care available for everyone?”, to which they responded with strong democratic sentiments, “We have the power, the people.” Ultimately and hopefully this is true, but someone is vested with the official authority to make the actual decision. That might be your school board, city council or mayor. It might be state lawmakers, congress, or the president. It could also be the head of a corporation or some anonymous official buried away in a government agency. Somebody will make the actual decision to implement or not implement the change you want and

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they are your “primary target”. Everything you do should be aimed ultimately at them and their decision.

However, these people and these institutions are by no means your only target. They won’t be making their decision alone in a closed room with all the windows shut. What they decide will be influenced by the actions of many others. What will their key allies and supporters be telling them? How will the media report the issue? What position will be taken by various community and political organizations? All of these people and institutions are your “secondary targets” and influencing what they think, say, and do about your issue is just as important. An effective advocacy strategy requires a clear list of both these targets and who can influence them, along with a clear plan for how to reach and move each one.

### **What Do They Need to Hear? (Creating Your Messages)**

Once you know who you need to move, the next question is: What do they need to hear (what advocacy message) in order to be pushed in your direction? Once developed, this advocacy message becomes your campaign’s mantra, repeated over and over again every chance you get. Effective advocacy messages have two sides to them. First, they must make your case on the merits and second, they need to make it clear to your main targets that it is also in their self-interest to do what you are asking. On the merits, an advocacy pitch should lay out, in a clear, compelling and concise way, the problem you are trying to solve and the solution you are suggesting. For example, “Our elementary school classrooms are crammed full with as many as thirty five children, one main reason that we have one of the poorest educational records in the nation. By reducing our elementary classes to a maximum of twenty students, we can give all of our children the kind of one-on-one teacher attention they need to excel.” On the self-interest side, messages need to be subtle, but with the point made clear that there are rewards or consequences ahead for your political target depending on how she or he performs. For example: “Senator, the PTA has one million members in the state and 25,000 just in your district. This class size reduction bill is our number one priority and our members are looking forward to hearing what you decide.”

### **Who Do They Need to Hear it From? (Picking Your Messengers)**

Saying the right thing is important, but so is making sure that your message is delivered by the right people. Advocacy campaigns need a mix of messengers, people who can give their points a combination of human sympathy, expert credibility and political clout. Messengers who put a human face on the issue help ground campaigns in compelling reality, making a campaign’s message difficult to ignore. The tragedy of alcohol-related birth defects was brought home to California lawmakers when a nurse named Amy Casey testified about an infant in her intensive care unit whom hospital workers called “the button baby”, so deformed by fetal alcohol syndrome that nurses stitched a button to his tongue to prevent him from swallowing it and choking. “If you

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spent eight hours with this child last night, as I did,” she testified, “this would not be a controversial bill.”

Messengers like these, who make an issue human, need to be matched with others who give the effort rock-solid credibility on the facts -- researchers, academics or others whose credentials can match those speaking for the other side. A successful campaign also needs people and groups that have direct political clout with their specific targets. These could be campaign contributors, key constituents, business associates, personal friends, or organizations that are a part of your target’s support base. Immigrant rights advocates in California lobbied the assembly speaker by recruiting his barber to talk to him while he got his hair cut. Advocacy campaigns also make themselves strong by having diverse messengers, making it difficult for opponents to pigeonhole and dismiss you. Alcohol warning advocates had both Planned Parenthood and leading “Right to Life” advocates on their side, giving the campaign an image that spanned the ideological spectrum.

### **Taking Action**

With your objective, your targets, your messages, and messengers clear, it is time to settle on the concrete actions that will make you heard and get the powers involved to move. As one of the workshop participants untangling the knot noted, “It would be easier if I could use some tools,” and there are many different tools that advocates can use to take action. These range from gentle to in-your-face, from lobbying, to media work, to protest. Which one is the right one to pick depends on the situation, but as a rule, it’s best to take those actions that involve the least work and the least confrontation, but still get the job done.

### **The Conventional and Courteous**

Sometimes you can move your targets simply by putting your information on the table, such as by sending a letter to a public official or making your case in a private meeting. The next step is to communicate that same information, but this time in public through the media. When Consumers Union wanted to draw attention to the inflated prices that some supermarkets were charging for milk, they released a comparative price survey that told the story. The media attention was enough to alert consumers to shop elsewhere, putting pressure on the supermarkets to lower their prices and catching the attention of policy makers in a position to force prices down by law or regulation.

### **Flexing Your Political Muscle**

When gentle communication isn’t enough the next step in building the pressure is to demonstrate the breadth of your support and to make it painful for your target to be on the wrong side. Initially, advocates do this with letter writing campaigns or coalition visits to the officials involved. When making your case and demonstrating your support isn’t enough it may then be time to put a hard public spotlight on your target. In 1993,

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activists put the public spotlight on President Clinton's lack of action in the fight against AIDS by confronting the President directly at a Georgetown University public forum on the disease. "You promised during your campaign that you would establish a 'Manhattan Project' for AIDS, and all we got was another task force," challenged one audience member. The confrontation made national news and pushed Clinton to take more aggressive action against AIDS.<sup>vi</sup>

### **Protest and Direct Action**

Sometimes public pressure and embarrassment aren't enough to move officials and the next step is direct confrontation - through protest, direct action and civil disobedience - all tactics with an honored tradition in the United States dating back to the Boston Tea Party. There are occasions when nothing short of massing in the streets or violating the law and risking arrest will force the issue. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. explained in his Letter From the Birmingham Jail, "The purpose of our direct-action program is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation."<sup>vii</sup> It is also possible to combine these actions, with some parts of a movement waging direct confrontation to apply maximum pressure, while others focus on maintaining decent relations with the authorities involved, trying to harvest the best compromise possible. As in the example of the knot -- "sometimes I had to work the knot hard, sometimes very softly" -- with all of these actions, the challenge is to know how hard to push and when.

### **Undermining Your Opposition**

While you are working hard pushing in one direction there is almost always someone else (often far stronger) pushing in the other. Knowing your opponents and how to undermine them is also a key part of advocacy strategy. There are times when it is possible to negotiate with a foe and avoid political battle altogether. If you can gain through negotiation something as good or better than what you are likely to win by confrontation, settlement may be a better option than fighting. In the end, it may be better to save your advocacy resources for a different battle. In most cases, however, up-front agreements aren't possible and there are some well-tested methods for weakening your opponents as you strengthen yourselves.

### **Pick Battlegrounds Where You Have the Advantage**

First, know your opponents' strengths and pick the battleground where you have the best advantage. This is exactly what proponents of the California health care initiative failed to do. They carried their fight into an election contest where the insurance industry's oversimplified attacks, backed by millions of dollars in TV advertising, were far more powerful than what activists could counter. Health advocates have fared far better when they've picked incremental battles popular with the public (such as specific patient rights) and fought those battles in the legislative arena where a dedicated network of activists, organizations, and sympathetic lawmakers have been better positioned to counterbalance industry cash.

### **Use Your Opponents' Weaknesses Against Them**

Just as important as knowing your opposition's strengths is understanding your opponents' weaknesses and taking advantage of them. The most devastating political weakness is unpopularity with the public, especially the image of unchecked power. When your opponent is a wealthy interest using its financial clout to win its political way, that wealth and power itself becomes their biggest weakness. Framing your issue as a David vs. Goliath crusade against big oil, big business, big polluters, or big developers, helps define the sides to your advantage. Using public campaign or lobbying reports to highlight their lavish spending is a good way to make that image stick.

Another common weakness is internal division and if your opponents suffer from it find a way to exploit it. Anti-tobacco activists finally broke through the tobacco industry's impenetrable political armor after they were able to get just one manufacturer to publicly break from the industry line, "cigarettes do no harm". It is also possible to use your opposition's most outlandish statements against them. Community groups opposing Christian Coalition efforts to take over local school boards highlighted the declaration by one candidate that, "Public schools serve as a vehicle to promote atheism by teaching evolution."<sup>viii</sup> Publicizing statements like these paint opponents with the label of political extremism that they deserve and helps turn the public against them.

### **Don't Let Them Hide**

If your opponents are unpopular, don't let them hide, however hard they try. Former Christian Coalition executive director, Ralph Reed, once explained his group's stealth strategy in this very Jesus-like way, "I want to be invisible. I do guerilla warfare. I paint my face and travel at night. You don't know its over until you're in a body bag."<sup>ix</sup> The Christian Coalition was engaged in a behind-the-scenes effort to elect candidates to local school boards without revealing them as conservative activists with a religious agenda. Community groups used letters to the editor, public candidate forums, phone banking and other tactics to unmask these covert campaigns. Backers of Proposition 65, a successful 1986 environmental protection initiative in California, exposed their oil company opponents by vandalizing opposition billboards, adding the words "Paid for by Chevron Oil". This drew wide TV and newspaper coverage and focused public attention on who really opposed the anti-toxics measure.

### **Make the Fight Against You Too Costly**

In the end, victory against a stronger opponent sometimes comes, not because you have overpowered them, but because you have made the battle so painful or costly that it is no longer worth fighting. Alcohol makers finally gave in on birth defect warnings because the public relations damage they suffered from "the liquor industry vs. healthy babies" became too high a price to pay. Making the issue personal turns up the heat even more. Clothes designer Jessica McClintock finally gave into demands over workers'

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rights in her factories after protesters picketed her house and embarrassed her in front of her neighbors. Advocates should ask themselves, if we can't beat them, how can we make it too painful for them to keep fighting?

### **Compromise - Yes, No or Maybe?**

One of the hardest questions that arises in advocacy strategy is about compromise. Should you? When should you? When is a potential compromise better or worse than winning nothing at all? Some people treat compromise as a theological question - a half loaf is always better than no loaf at all, or always worse. In reality, the challenge of compromise is much more complicated than that.

As a health care advocate in California our coalition was always thrown into its worst conflicts over the strategic question -- if we can get lawmakers to approve a bill giving health benefits to some of the uninsured but not all of them, is it a deal we should agree to? Inevitably, some people would make the case against compromise, "As soon as we agree to a solution that leaves some people out, the political heat will be off and the rest will never get included." Then someone else would counter, "How can we in good conscience stop passage of a law that would give millions of families health care that they wouldn't get otherwise?" Both these perspectives have value so how do we decide between them?

The one piece of genuine wisdom I have heard on the question of compromise comes from Richard Brown, a professor of public health at UCLA. In the midst of one of these health reform debates he offered the observation -- a compromise is worth having if it puts in place the programs you want in the long run and if it creates incentives that, over time, will move the people and institutions you want into those programs. More generally, that advice could be translated to this -- does the compromise move you closer to where you want to go or does it move you farther away? The answer to that question will be different in every situation. I would add to that prescription one other. If there are sacrifices to be made in accepting a compromise or in rejecting it, the people who will actually be making those sacrifices must have a strong role in making the choice. During those debates over compromise on health care for the uninsured, the advocates who objected the loudest always had health insurance themselves. The voice that should count most in that situation ought to be those who must live, either way, with the decision.

### **Evaluation and Aftermath**

Even the best advocacy strategy cannot predict every change of political wind that will happen. Events change, new opportunities emerge and so do new threats. Advocates need to take stock and see if what they're doing is working. If you've hit a brick wall targeting your Mayor, would you be better off going after the City Council? If you can't get media attention holding news conferences, would you get more attention if you picketed or held a candlelight vigil? If going on the attack is only making you more isolated, would you be better off putting your energies into winning a new ally or two

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who can open some doors? If traditional lobbying isn't working, is it time to become more confrontational and combative?

It is also true that no advance is safe forever. As with the knot, "I had to be sure to protect the progress I made along the way." Winning a change in law or corporate practice is only as permanent as the public attitudes behind it. As Czech President and democracy champion, Václav Havel, has written, systemic change is "something superficial, something secondary, something that in itself can guarantee nothing."<sup>x</sup> Immigrant rights advocates thought they were protected because they had secured their rights in court, only to see those rights come under attack as public opinion shifted against them. On the other hand, health care advocates made progress because their "patient dumping" campaign helped awaken the public that their personal health care worries required political solutions. In the end, the best strategy for change is to have public opinion on your side. That, more than clever tactics, is what wins advocacy victories and protects them.

**ADVOCACY STRATEGY IN A NUTSHELL**

**Example: “Fix Our Parks”**

**The Objective**

We want our local parks to have safe playground equipment and organized recreation programs for our children and teens.

**The Target Audiences**

*4The Decision Makers:* parks and recreation commission; mayor; city council

*4The Influencers:* local media; PTA; neighborhood associations

**Messages**

*4* “Our local parks are full of dangerous equipment and have virtually no organized recreational programs. Better parks will keep our children safe, give them something constructive to do and will build a stronger community for all of us.”

**Messengers**

*4*Children, teenagers, parents, local sports figures.

**Taking Action**

*4*A survey of local parks, released to the media, showing how many unsafe playgrounds there are, how many recreation programs, etc.

*4*A walking tour of local parks with the news media.

*4*A lobbying visit by kids and parents to local officials.

*4*A kids and parents protest at City Hall demanding action.

Note: This example is based on an actual (and successful) campaign waged by Coleman Advocates for Children in San Francisco.

<sup>i</sup> From an interview with the author.

<sup>ii</sup> Theda Skocpol, "Lessons From History" The Children's Partnership, Santa Monica, CA 1997 (p. 9).

<sup>iii</sup> Jim Shultz, *The Initiative Cookbook - Recipes and Stories from California's Ballot Wars*, The Democracy Center, San Francisco, CA , 1996 (p. 76).

<sup>iv</sup> From an interview with the author.

<sup>v</sup> From an interview with the author.

<sup>vi</sup> Randy Shaw, *The Activist's Handbook*, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA 1996 (p. 225)

<sup>vii</sup> Martin Luther King, "Letter from the Birmingham Jail" 1963, published at:

<http://www.msstate.edu/Archives/History/USA/Afro-Amer/birmingham.king>

<sup>viii</sup> *A Community Battles the Religious Right*, People for the American Way, Washington DC, 1993 (p. 20)

<sup>ix</sup> *ibid.* (p. 19)

<sup>x</sup> C. Douglas Lummis, *Radical Democracy*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, NY 1996 (p. 35)