

# Bill Ayers presidential election controversy

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During the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign, a **controversy** arose regarding Barack Obama's contact with **Bill Ayers**, a Distinguished Professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago, and a former leader of the Weather Underground, a radical left organization in the 1970s.<sup>[1]</sup> Investigations by the New York Times, CNN, and other news organizations concluded that Obama does not have a close relationship with Ayers.<sup>[2][3][4]</sup> Ayers served on two nonprofit boards with Obama. Both Ayers and his wife, Bernardine Dohrn, hosted a gathering at their home in 1995,<sup>[5]</sup> where Alice Palmer introduced Obama as her chosen successor in the Illinois State Senate.<sup>[3][6]</sup>

The matter was initially raised by Sean Hannity and other hosts on conservative talk radio programs, and then by moderator George Stephanopoulos during a debate between Clinton and Obama in April 2008. In October 2008, the matter was mentioned in attack ads, robocalls, mass mailings, and campaign speeches by Republican presidential candidate John McCain and vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin as an issue in the general election campaign. Obama has condemned Ayers' past,<sup>[7][8]</sup> and stated that he does not have a close association with him.<sup>[5]</sup>

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## Background

### William Ayers

Ayers was part of the five-member central committee heading the Weathermen starting at its creation in the

summer of 1969.<sup>[9]</sup> By early 1970 the group had begun a series of bombings, primarily of government buildings,<sup>[10]</sup> that would continue into 1975. The group intentionally chose its targets to avoid human injury.<sup>[11]</sup> However, a bomb eventually claimed three lives — members of the group who died during an accidental explosion<sup>[11]</sup> — and the remaining members took false identities en masse.



Professor Bill Ayers

In their time "underground", Ayers and Bernardine Dohrn formed a monogamous relationship, had sons born in 1977 and 1980, and in a late-1970s split of the group, were in the faction favoring surrendering to authorities; they took this step themselves in 1980, and they were both spared Federal prosecution due to government misconduct in investigating them. (Dohrn received three years probation and was fined \$1,500 on Illinois state charges, and later served seven months in jail for refusal to testify to a grand jury regarding former colleagues in the Weathermen.)<sup>[12]</sup>

Ayers and Dohrn are described as fixtures of their Chicago neighborhood of Hyde Park, "embraced, by and large, in the liberal circles dominating politics" there, according to Ben Smith, a writer for *The Politico*,<sup>[6]</sup> and their political and activist

colleagues believe their achievements of the recent decades overshadow their Vietnam-era radical activities.<sup>[5]</sup> He has been described as "very respected and prominent in Chicago [with] a national reputation as an educator."<sup>[1]</sup>

In conjunction with the approaching September 10, 2001, publication of a personal memoir, Ayers gave an interview to the *The New York Times* in July, which they published on September 11.<sup>[12]</sup> Ayers then wrote a letter to the editor stating the interview misquoted him and mischaracterized his views, particularly about their reporter's claim he wished he had set more bombs. "This is not a question of being misunderstood or 'taken out of context', but of deliberate distortion."<sup>[13]</sup>

## Interaction between Obama and Ayers

Obama and Ayers first met in 1995<sup>[14]</sup> when Ayers and Dohrn hosted a small gathering at their home in the Hyde Park section of Chicago, the neighborhood in which the Obamas lived,<sup>[2]</sup> at which then-state Senator Alice J. Palmer introduced Barack Obama to the group as her chosen successor for the 1996 Democratic primary.<sup>[2]</sup> Dr. Quentin Young, a longtime physician, who also attended, said it was a small group — maybe a dozen or so people — who were being introduced to the next senator from Chicago's South Side.<sup>[15]</sup> The formal announcement and endorsement by Palmer was held at the Ramada hotel.<sup>[16]</sup>

Obama served as president of the board of directors for the Chicago Annenberg Challenge, a large education-related nonprofit organization that Ayers was instrumental in starting.<sup>[2]</sup> The board disbursed grants to schools and raised private matching funds while Ayers worked with the operational arm of the effort. Both attended some board meetings in common starting in 1995, retreats, and at least one news conference together as the education program started. They continued to attend meetings together during the 1995–2001 period when the program was operating.<sup>[2]</sup>

Obama and Ayers served together for three years on the board of the Woods Fund of Chicago, an anti-poverty foundation established in 1941. Obama had joined the nine-member board in 1993, and had attended a dozen of the quarterly meetings together with Ayers in the three years up to 2002, when Obama left his position on the board,<sup>[1]</sup> which Ayers chaired for two years.<sup>[17]</sup> Laura S. Washington, chairwoman of the Woods Fund, said the small board had a collegial "friendly but businesslike" atmosphere, and met four times a year for a half-day, mostly to approve grants.<sup>[5]</sup> The two also appeared together on academic panel discussions, including a 1997 University of Chicago discussion on juvenile justice. They again appeared in 2002 at an academic panel co-sponsored by the Chicago Public Library.<sup>[1]</sup> One panel discussion in which they both appeared was organized by Obama's wife, Michelle.<sup>[18]</sup>

In 2008, a spokesman for the Obama campaign said the last time Obama and Ayers had seen each other was when Obama was biking in the neighborhood in 2007 and crossed paths with Ayers. The spokesman said "The suggestion that Ayers was a political adviser to Obama or someone who shaped his political views is patently false."<sup>[19]</sup>

The *New York Times* reported that Obama did not have a significant relationship with Ayers.<sup>[2]</sup> According to several sources, Ayers played no role in starting Obama's career, which was primarily launched when Deborah Leff, then president of the Joyce Foundation, suggested Obama be appointed as chairman of the six-member board that oversaw the distribution of grants in Chicago.<sup>[2]</sup>

In a November 2008 interview, Ayers said that he knew Obama only slightly: "I think my relationship with Obama was probably like that of thousands of others in Chicago and, like millions and millions of others, I wished I knew him better."<sup>[20]</sup>

## Presidential campaign issue

Obama's contacts with Ayers had been public knowledge in Chicago for years.<sup>[21]</sup> British writer Peter Hitchens wrote about Ayers in the *Daily Mail* in early February, 2008.<sup>[21][22][23]</sup> The connection was then picked up by blogs and newspapers in the United States, including in the liberal Huffington Post.<sup>[24]</sup>

## Primary debates

*Washington Post* media writer Howard Kurtz has written that the connection between the two Chicagoans was "all but ignored by the news media, other than Fox" until it was raised in a primary debate.<sup>[25]</sup> At that Democratic Party primary debate in Philadelphia on April 16, 2008, moderator George Stephanopoulos questioned Obama about his association with Ayers (after conservative commentator Sean Hannity suggested the question the day before).<sup>[26]</sup> Stephanopoulos asked the candidate: "Can you explain that relationship for the voters, and explain to Democrats why it won't be a problem?"<sup>[17]</sup> Obama responded:

This is a guy who lives in my neighborhood, who's a professor of English in Chicago who I know and who I have not received some official endorsement from. He's not somebody who I exchange ideas from on a regular basis. And the notion that somehow as a consequence of me knowing somebody who engaged in detestable acts 40 years ago, when I was eight years old, somehow reflects on me and my values doesn't

make much sense, George.<sup>[5][27]</sup>

Obama's response led to an exchange between him and Clinton, in which Clinton said, "Senator Obama served on a board with Mr. Ayers for a period of time, the Woods Fund, which was a paid directorship position."<sup>[17]</sup> Obama then referred to President Bill Clinton's pardoning of Linda Sue Evans and Susan Rosenberg,<sup>[28]</sup> two former Weather Underground members convicted for their actions after joining the splinter group May 19 Communist Organization. The following Sunday, Stephanopoulos asked Republican presidential candidate John McCain about Obama's patriotism, and McCain responded: "I'm sure he's very patriotic", then added, "But his relationship with Mr. Ayers is open to question."<sup>[17]</sup>

On May 17, as the controversy continued, the Obama campaign issued their own "Fact Check" regarding Clinton's statements on the alleged relationship between Ayers and Obama.<sup>[29]</sup>

## General election campaign

### McCain and campaign statements

In April 2008, John McCain began to question Obama's interactions with Ayers,<sup>[30]</sup> and it became an issue later in the general election campaign.

In August 2008, the Republican Party created the website, *barackbook.com* (<http://www.barackbook.com>), as a spoof of Facebook, on which Ayers is listed as one of Obama's "friends". This website contains a mocked-up user profile for Ayers, which describes the controversy and Obama's alleged connections with him.<sup>[31]</sup> That month, the American Issues Project began running an ad that emphasized the relationship between the two, which contained the following text: "Barack Obama is friends with Ayers, defending him as, quote, 'Respectable' and 'Mainstream.' Obama's political career was launched in Ayers's home. And the two served together on a left-wing board. Why would Barack Obama be friends with someone who bombed the Capitol and is proud of it? Do you know enough to elect Barack Obama?"<sup>[32]</sup>

In October 2008, after the McCain campaign announced that it would step up attacks on the Democratic presidential candidate,<sup>[33]</sup> Sarah Palin delivered speeches saying that Obama was "palling around with terrorists". For support, Palin cited a *New York Times* article that had actually concluded that Obama and Ayers were not close. The article stated that other "publications, including *The Washington Post*, *Time*, *The Chicago Sun-Times*, *The New Yorker* and *The New Republic*, have said that their reporting doesn't support the idea that Obama and Ayers had a close relationship."<sup>[2]</sup> CNN has independently deemed Palin's allegations false, saying: "There is no indication that Ayers and Obama are now 'palling around,' or that they have had an ongoing relationship in the past three years. Also, there is nothing to suggest that Ayers is now involved in terrorist activity or that other Obama associates are."<sup>[3]</sup> The Republican National Committee<sup>[34]</sup> and the McCain campaign each launched additional attack ads, calling Obama "too dangerous for America."<sup>[35]</sup>

On October 16, the McCain campaign launched a massive robocall campaign which played an automated message linking Ayers to Obama.<sup>[36]</sup>

## Obama campaign response

The Obama campaign added a section about Ayers to its "Fight the Smears" website, where it argued that the attack by "a desperate McCain campaign" and other groups was a "smear"<sup>[37]</sup>, citing newspaper commentaries calling it "phony"<sup>[38]</sup>, "tenuous"<sup>[39]</sup>, and "exaggerated at best if not outright false"<sup>[40]</sup>.

In August 2008, the Obama campaign's attorney Robert Bauer wrote TV stations running the American Issues Project ad, saying, "Your station is committed to operating in the public interest, an objective that cannot be satisfied by accepting for compensation material of such malicious falsity," and wrote Deputy Assistant U.S. Attorney General John C. Keeney, describing the ad as a "willful attempt to evade the strictures of federal election law."<sup>[32]</sup> The Obama campaign ran a TV ad of its own in selected markets that said in part, "With all our problems, why is John McCain talking about the 60s, trying to link Barack Obama to radical Bill Ayers? McCain knows Obama denounced Ayers' crimes, committed when Obama was just eight years old."<sup>[41]</sup> That month, Obama began responding to Palin's speeches on October 5, 2008, at an event in Asheville, North Carolina: "Senator McCain and his operatives are gambling that they can distract you with smears rather than talk to you about substance. They'd rather try to tear our campaign down than lift this country up. That's what you do when you're out of touch, out of ideas, and running out of time."<sup>[42]</sup>

## Ayers response

Ayers himself kept a low profile during the controversy. After the election, he wrote an op-ed piece in which he explained:

With the mainstream news media and the blogosphere caught in the pre-election excitement, I saw no viable path to a rational discussion. Rather than step clumsily into the sound-bite culture, I turned away whenever the microphones were thrust into my face. I sat it out.<sup>[43]</sup>

His post-election piece argued that the attacks on Obama had been a "profoundly dishonest drama", including a false depiction of Ayers as a terrorist ("I never killed or injured anyone") and an exaggeration of his connection to Obama ("We didn't pal around, and I had nothing to do with his positions").<sup>[43]</sup>

## Reactions to the controversy

Obama has condemned Ayers' past through a spokesman.<sup>[7]</sup> After the controversy arose, Ayers was defended by officials and others in Chicago. Mayor Richard M. Daley issued a statement in support of Bill Ayers the next day (April 17, 2008), as did the *Chicago Tribune* in an editorial.<sup>[44][45]</sup> Ayers remained on the Board of Directors of the Woods Fund of Chicago.<sup>[46]</sup> Woods Fund Chair Washington said it was "ridiculous to suggest there's anything inappropriate" about the two men serving on the foundation board.<sup>[1]</sup>

In late May 2008, Michael Kinsley, a longtime critic of Ayers,<sup>[47]</sup> argued in *Time* that Obama's relationship with Ayers should not be a campaign issue:

If Obama's relationship with Ayers, however tangential, exposes Obama as a radical himself, or at least as a

man with terrible judgment, he shares that radicalism or terrible judgment with a comically respectable list of Chicagoans and others — including Republicans and conservatives — who have embraced Ayers and Dohrn as good company, good citizens, even experts on children's issues...Ayers and Dohrn are despicable, and yet making an issue of Obama's relationship with them is absurd.<sup>[48]</sup>

The Obama-Ayers connection was mentioned in Jerome Corsi's *The Obama Nation*, a book published in August, intended to defeat Obama's election campaign, and in conservative author David Freddoso's *The Case Against Barack Obama*, where he wrote that the situation raised questions about Obama's judgment and influences.<sup>[49]</sup> In May and August, *Chicago Tribune* columnist and editorial board member Steve Chapman suggested that while Obama was "justly criticized for his ties" to Ayers, the coverage of that connection should be matched by equal coverage of John McCain's associating with convicted Watergate burglar G. Gordon Liddy.<sup>[50][51]</sup> As of late October, Chapman had still not received any information from the McCain campaign, despite McCain's promise to provide full disclosure.<sup>[52]</sup>

On September 9, journalist Jake Tapper reported on a comic strip published on Ayers' blog, that explained the soundbite: "The one thing I don't regret is opposing the war in Vietnam with every ounce of my being... 'When I say, 'We didn't do enough,' a lot of people rush to think, 'That must mean, "We didn't bomb enough shit.'" But that's not the point at all. It's not a tactical statement, it's an obvious political and ethical statement. In this context, 'we' means 'everyone.'"<sup>[53]</sup>

Stanley Kurtz, a conservative commentator and Senior Fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, examined the University of Illinois at Chicago records for the Chicago Annenberg Challenge (CAC) for the period in the 1990s when both Obama and Ayers were employed there, and reported his findings and opinions in the *Wall Street Journal* in late September 2008. "The Obama campaign has cried foul when Bill Ayers comes up, claiming "guilt by association," Kurtz wrote. "Yet the issue here isn't guilt by association; it's guilt by participation. As CAC chairman, Mr. Obama was lending moral and financial support to Mr. Ayers and his radical circle."<sup>[54]</sup>

William C. Ibershof, the lead federal prosecutor of the Weather Underground case, wrote to the *New York Times* on October 9, 2008:

I am amazed and outraged that Senator Barack Obama is being linked to William Ayers's terrorist activities 40 years ago when Mr. Obama was, as he has noted, just a child. Although I dearly wanted to obtain convictions against all the Weathermen, including Bill Ayers, I am very pleased to learn that he has become a responsible citizen.<sup>[55]</sup>

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