

The Activist's Handbook

Winning Social Change in the
21st Century

Second Edition

Randy Shaw



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

Berkeley • Los Angeles • London

The Activist's Handbook

The Activist's Handbook

Winning Social Change in the
21st Century

Second Edition

Randy Shaw



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

Berkeley • Los Angeles • London

University of California Press, one of the most distinguished university presses in the United States, enriches lives around the world by advancing scholarship in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Its activities are supported by the UC Press Foundation and by philanthropic contributions from individuals and institutions. For more information, visit www.ucpress.edu.

University of California Press
Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.
London, England

© 2013 by The Regents of the University of California

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Shaw, Randy, 1956-.

The activist's handbook : winning social change in the 21st century / Randy Shaw.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-520-27405-1 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-520-95699-5 (ebook)

1. Social action—United States. 2. Community organization—United States. 3. Political activists—United States. 4. Political participation—United States. 5. Social reformers—United States.

I. Title.

HN65.S48 2013

303.480973—

dc23

201301261

Manufactured in the United States of America

21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

In keeping with a commitment to support environmentally responsible and sustainable printing practices, UC Press has printed this book on Rolland Enviro100, a 100% postconsumer fiber paper that is FSC certified, deinked, processed chlorine-free, and manufactured with renewable biogas energy. It is acid-free and EcoLogo certified.

To Erik Schapiro

Contents

Acknowledgments

Introduction

- 1** Don't Respond, Strategize
 - 2** Elected Officials: Inspiring Fear and Loathing
 - 3** Coalition Activism: Rounding Up the Unusual Suspects
 - 4** Ballot Initiatives: The Rules of the Game
 - 5** The Media: Winning More Than Coverage
 - 6** The Internet and Social Media: Maximizing the Power of Online Activism
 - 7** Direct Action: Acting Up, Sitting In, Taking to the Streets
 - 8** Lawyers: Allies or Obstacles to Social Change?
 - 9** Student Activists Lead the Way
- Conclusion: New Activism for the Twenty-First Century

Notes

Index

Acknowledgments

I have learned much about social change from my fellow activists. Whether through one-time meetings or common struggles, my discussions with activists have been essential to the insights expressed in this book. I have been particularly inspired in writing this new edition by the young activists whose struggles are described in the pages that follow. From the DREAM Activists to those battling sweatshop labor, to the students fighting for the environment and against rising college tuition costs, it is heartening to see new generations working for greater social and economic justice.

The Tenderloin Housing Clinic, which I co-founded in 1980 and have headed since 1982, has provided me with a perfect vehicle for implementing my ideas for achieving social change. When I wrote the original edition of this book, we had roughly twenty full-time staff; we now have closer to 250. I would not have had the mental energy to write this new edition without the strong, skillful leadership of Deputy Director Krista Gaeta, who administers much of the Clinic's daily operations. This edition has greatly benefited from my discussions of activist strategies with other current and former Clinic staff. This group includes Tim Lee, Sam Dodge, Jeff Buckley, Dean Preston, Pratibha Tekkey, Jamie Sanbonmatsu, Paul Hogarth, and Clinic cofounder Chris Tiedemann. Mercy Gonzalez provided important clerical assistance.

Leroy Looper, owner of the historic Cadillac Hotel who died in 2011, offered me a model of integrity and street-smart strategic savvy that I have benefited from for over thirty years. He and his wife, Kathy, became great friends, and I have always tried to live up to Leroy's ideals. I barely knew Sister Bernie Galvin when the original version of this book was published, but soon after we became close confidants and friends. We have talked regularly for over a decade to plan activist strategies for local and national affordable-housing campaigns. Fred Ross, Jr., whom I got to know

well when writing my prior book on the farmworkers movement, has also proved a valuable strategic sounding board. This new edition is dedicated to my longtime friend Erik Schapiro. Our early work in the Tenderloin and our collaboration during his days as a supervisor's aide and in the Agnos administration still reverberate in my thinking about activism today.

I am fortunate to have Naomi Schneider of UC Press as my editor. It was Naomi's idea for me to write a new edition of this book, and she expressed continual confidence in its development.

My children, Anita and Ariel, were young kids when I wrote the first edition of *The Activist's Handbook*. Both are now out of college and working in public schools to assist low-income students. Their personal experiences have added to the concern over testing-driven education "reform" that I discuss in this new edition. My late grandmother Hylda Levin was a New Deal Democrat and McGovern supporter who always vowed she would take me to Canada, if necessary, to avoid the draft. Although she died in 1975, her spirit lives on.

Finally, I am most indebted to Lainey Feingold, my wife and best friend since 1977. Lainey helped make me an activist and provided me with important and enthusiastic editorial assistance. This book could not have been written without her.

Introduction

When I wrote the original version of *The Activist's Handbook* in the early 1990s, activists faced a very different social landscape. "Online activism" and "social media" were still in the future, and the potential of email and the Internet to boost activist campaigns was untapped. Americans got their news solely from television, radio, and daily newspapers. Campaigns for marriage equality were off the political radar, and a powerful national immigrant rights movement did not exist. We heard little about growing inequality between "the 99 percent and the 1 percent," and few imagined the election of the nation's first African American president in 2008.

These and other changes in the past two decades require a completely new version of the original book. This second edition examines new strategies, tactics, issues, and grassroots campaigns, and revisits whether activists have learned from past mistakes. It allows me to describe how activists should harness social media and other new tools to achieve their goals, and how new media can be best connected to traditional organizing and "old media" strategies. Student activism, at a low point when the original book came out and little mentioned, has since surged and is now the subject of an entirely new chapter. I have expanded my discussion of direct action activism to include additional campaigns and groups, and I explain why greater innovation is needed in response to opposition tactics. Since the original book, activists have become far more engaged in electoral politics, and the new book enables me to discuss how new media tools have enabled activists to increase assistance to progressive campaigns nationwide.

The times have changed, as have many of the issues, campaigns, and activist tools. But the fundamental rules for winning struggles for social change still apply. In fact, the strategies and tactics that brought activists success in the past provide valuable guidance to us today. For example, in Montgomery, Alabama, in December 1955, a seamstress named Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing a driver's

order to move to the back of the bus. Her arrest spurred a citywide bus boycott that brought national attention to Parks and a young minister named Martin Luther King, Jr. Although it took another decade of struggle before stateimposed segregation laws were eliminated, Rosa Parks's courageous act stands as the symbolic start of the modern civil rights movement.

The civil rights movement comprised thousands of heroic acts, but even after her death Rosa Parks's story resonates long after other events of the period have been forgotten. When, forty years after her legendary act, Parks held a book signing in a small bookstore in Oakland, California, thousands of people waited in line for hours merely for the opportunity to see her up close.

Rosa Parks's stature, along with that of Cesar Chavez, Rachel Carson, and other activist icons, has grown rather than diminished over the years. I believe it is because people today have nostalgia for a seemingly bygone era when individuals at the grassroots level could initiate campaigns that made a difference in the world. Underlying the reverence for Parks is the common perception that today's political climate is so dominated by big money and so burdened by institutional barriers (e.g., the Supreme Court, filibusters) that campaigns for significant social change cannot prevail.

We saw a break in this cynicism in 2008 when millions of Americans, and particularly young people, put their hopes, dreams, and time into Barack Obama's presidential campaign. Although Obama achieved some major goals in his first term, many of his supporters were left disappointed. They saw his failure to accomplish more as signaling the inability of the nation's political system to accept transformative change. This feeling was bolstered when the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* ruling struck down hard-won restrictions on campaign financing. This left many convinced that the system was rigged and that activists could never win real change against corporate and wealthy interests.

In this book I flatly reject the widely held notion that current political conditions have confined social change activism to the history books. The civil rights, farmworker, environmental, and other social movements all faced seemingly insurmountable barriers, yet all used the right combination of strategy and tactics to prevail. Their success shows that today's activists can use strategy and tactics to triumph in their own campaigns for change. As difficult as the path to progressive change in the United States appears in the second decade of the twenty-first century, activists in prior generations have overcome far greater institutional and cultural obstacles.

The critical impact of strategy and tactics on the outcome of

social change campaigns is often overlooked. One reason is that most analyses of U.S. politics are not written by activists. People who participate in social change activism recognize that the chosen tactics or strategies often spell the difference between victory and defeat; outside commentators, however, evaluate actions by what *did* happen, not by what alternative strategy or tactic might have brought a better result. Moreover, the value of tactics and strategies is best demonstrated at the local level, but most accounts of institutional barriers to political change focus exclusively on Washington, D.C.

In the following pages I detail the strategies and tactics that activists in diverse fields have found necessary for success. I focus on winning campaigns and show how efforts that lost might have been victorious had the proper tactics and strategies been used. I also analyze why a particular tactic was successful and why it was preferable to other approaches. By discussing the strategic and tactical choices faced by activists, I take the reader inside the thought processes of experienced activists in the midst of their struggles.

Central to all social change activism is the need to engage in proactive strategic and tactical planning. Activists must develop an agenda and then focus their resources on realizing it. Unfortunately, many activists have failed to establish and implement their own agendas and instead have focused on issues framed by their opponents. Although the contemporary political environment frequently requires activists to respond to threats or defend past gains, these defensive battles cannot be waged at the expense of proactive campaigns for change. Social change activists can avoid fighting battles on their opponents' terms by establishing a broad, realizable program for fulfilling their goals. The means of carrying out the program are often the subject of lengthy meetings and internal debate. Once they have agreed upon an agenda and endorsed tactics and strategies, activists should expend their energy primarily on implementation, responding to the opposition's campaign solely within the framework of furthering their own programs. This proactive approach ensures that the social change organization sets the public debate, forcing the opposition to respond to the unceasing drive for progressive reform.

Against the backdrop of proactive agenda setting, particular tactics and strategies have consistently maximized the potential for achieving social change. These tactics include creating what prominent Texas community organizer Ernesto Cortes, Jr., has described as a "fear and loathing" relationship with elected Officials to ensure political accountability; forging coalitions with diverse and even traditional opposition groups; harnessing the mainstream

and alternative media to the social change agenda; and using sit-ins, “die-ins,” and other forms of direct action.

Through a discussion of current political issues and events, I analyze the impact of particular strategies and tactics on the outcome of campaigns centered on neighborhood preservation, immigrants’ rights, homelessness, economic inequality, crime, tenants’ rights, sweatshops, the environment, AIDS policies and programs, student battles against tuition hikes, disability rights, gay and lesbian rights, and school reform. These issues serve to illustrate the diverse avenues activists may take to achieve social change: state and local ballot initiatives, electoral politics, grassroots lobbying and advocacy, direct action, media events, and litigation. Participants in these struggles range from the ACT UP activists of New York City to young DREAM Activists and undocumented Latino families across the nation. They include the urban poor of San Francisco, blue-collar and radical environmentalists, and teachers challenging the corporate takeover of public schools. These diverse constituencies have not always fit the popular chant that activists are involved in the “same struggle, same fight,” but they have used similar tactics and strategies to achieve their goals.

My analysis covers local, state, and national battles. I have placed greater emphasis on national campaigns in this new version of the book, for two reasons. First, the rise of the Internet and social media has made it easier for activists to participate in national struggles. Second, activists are working in many areas—immigration, education, economic fairness, health care, public transit—where key decisions are made in the national arena. Most progressive activists remain primarily involved in struggles in the geographic area in which they live, and I discuss many local campaigns that have made a real difference in people’s lives. New media tools have expanded national activism without detracting from local campaigns, and activists can now think and act both nationally and locally.

Bookstores and libraries contain dozens upon dozens of business-oriented how-to books. There exists a virtual industry of works designed to assist people in developing skills in management, negotiation, sales, communications, networking, and media relations. These volumes emphasize the tactics necessary to defeat in-house competitors, overseas competitors, and any other competitor who stands in the way of business success. People in the business of seeking social change, however, have few such resources to turn to for guidance. This book is meant to provide such guidance, particularly to a younger generation that has exhibited strong interest in fights for social and economic justice.

Although the media will never promote young people's activism as it did in the 1960s, when it was "new," the eighteen-to-thirty-four-year-old generation has demonstrated a tremendous desire to work for progressive change. We see this in many of the social justice struggles discussed in this book, and it was prominently demonstrated in the 2008 Obama presidential campaign. Today's young people want to address poverty, the environmental crisis, and other forms of social and economic injustice, but most are graduating from college thousands of dollars in debt. They need paid jobs that enable them to work full-time for social change. Obama's 2008 campaign could have offered such opportunities by retaining its best-trained young organizers to boost the president's agenda after the election, but this did not occur. With foundation and government support for community organizing having sharply declined in the past decade, idealistic young people face greater challenges than prior generations did in securing full-time, paid jobs working for change. As a result, new generations of activists often lack organizational mentors who can train them in the skills of creating and winning social justice campaigns. This book helps to fill that void.

President Obama's reelection creates enormous opportunities for activism. As I discuss in the context of the immigrant rights, environmental, and gay marriage movements, activists' response to the president has proved determinative for their movement's success. The Republican Party's obstructionism is a major challenge, as are corporate and big-money interests at the local level. All of these obstacles have been overcome in the past, and can be defeated in the future.

But make no mistake: while having President Obama or another Democratic president in the White House, or a sympathetic mayor in City Hall or progressive ally as governor, opens the door to opportunities, only grassroots activism can translate this into meaningful change. From the Freedom Rides of the civil rights movement, to the "no business as usual" actions of ACT UP, to young DREAM Activists risking deportation to gain a legal path to the American Dream, grassroots activism has been the driving force for change. To paraphrase Mark Twain, reports of the demise of progressive social change have been greatly exaggerated. A generation of activists who understand the tactics and strategies essential for success can bring greater social and economic justice to the United States in the twenty-first century.

Don't Respond, Strategize

In a previous era, social change activists were guided by the immortal words of Mary “Mother” Jones: “Don’t mourn, organize.” These words, spoken following the murder of a union activist, emphasized the value of proactive responses to critical events. Although American activists today face less risk of being killed, they still must heed Mother Jones’s command. A political environment hostile to progressive change has succeeded in putting many social change activists on the defensive, and the need for proactive planning—what I like to call tactical activism—has never been clearer.

Unfortunately, proactive strategies and tactics for change all too frequently are sacrificed in the rush to respond to the opposition’s agenda. Of course, activists must organize and rally to defeat specific attacks directed against their constituencies; if a proposed freeway will level your neighborhood, preventing the freeway’s construction is the sole possible strategy. I am speaking, however, of the far more common scenario where the opposition pushes a particular proposal or project that will impact a constituency without threatening its existence. In these cases, it is critical that a defensive response also lays the groundwork for achieving the long-term goal.

The best way to understand tactical activism is to view it in practice. The Tenderloin neighborhood of San Francisco, where I have worked since 1980, is a virtual laboratory demonstrating both the benefits of tactical activism and the consequences of its absence. The Tenderloin won historic victories using proactive strategies in response to luxury tourist developments threatening its future, but had less success in responding defensively to crime. This chapter also discusses how the Occupy movement used proactive activism to reshape the national debate about inequality, and how activists played into their opponents hands by allowing homelessness to be reframed from a socially caused housing

problem to a problem of individual behavior.

THE TENDERLOIN: TACTICAL ACTIVISM AT WORK

The Tenderloin in San Francisco lies between City Hall and the posh downtown shopping and theater district of Union Square. Once a thriving area of bars, restaurants, and theaters, the Tenderloin gave birth to the city's gay and lesbian movement and was long home to thousands of merchant seamen and blue-collar workers living in the neighborhood's more than one hundred residential hotels. When I arrived in the Tenderloin in 1980, it was often described as San Francisco's "seedy" district—a not entirely inaccurate depiction. For at least the prior decade, the Tenderloin had more than its share of prostitution, public drunkenness, and crime. It was notorious for its abundance of peep shows, porno movie houses, and nude-dancing venues; the high profile of these businesses and their flashing lights and lurid signs fostered the neighborhood's unsavory reputation.

The Tenderloin's location in the heart of a major U.S. city distinguishes it from other economically depressed neighborhoods. Many people who spend their entire lives in Los Angeles or New York City never have cause to go to Skid Row or the South Bronx; Bay Area residents can easily avoid the high-crime area of East Oakland. However, most San Franciscans are likely to pass through the Tenderloin at some point—to visit one of the city's major theaters or the Asian Art Museum, to see a friend staying at the Hilton Hotel or Hotel Monaco (both located in the Tenderloin), to conduct business at nearby City Hall, or to reach any number of other destinations. San Franciscans have firsthand experience with the Tenderloin that is highly unusual for low-income neighborhoods.

The thirty-five blocks at the core of the neighborhood constitute one of the most heterogeneous areas in the United States, if not the world. The Tenderloin's 20,000 residents include large numbers of senior citizens, who are primarily Caucasian; immigrant families from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos; a significant but less visible number of Latino families; perhaps San Francisco's largest concentration of single African American men, and a smaller number of African American families; one of the largest populations of gays outside the city's Castro district; and a significant number of East Indian families, who own or manage most of the neighborhood's residential hotels. The Tenderloin's broad ethnic, religious, and lifestyle diversity has held steady as the rest of San Francisco has become more racially segregated over the past decades.

With government offices and cultural facilities in the Civic Center to the west, the city's leading transit hub on Market Street to the south, the American Conservatory and Curran Theaters to the north, and Union Square (one of the most profitable shopping districts in the United States) to the east, in the late 1970s the neighborhood's economic revival was said to be just around the corner. This widespread belief in the imminent gentrification of the Tenderloin profoundly shaped its future. During that time, Tenderloin land values rose to levels more appropriate to the posh lower Nob Hill area than to a community beset with unemployment, crime, and a decrepit housing stock. Real estate speculators began buying up Tenderloin apartment buildings, and developers began unveiling plans for new luxury tourist hotels and condominium towers.

Further impetus for the belief in imminent gentrification came from the arrival in the late 1970s of thousands of refugees, first from Vietnam, then from Cambodia and Laos. The Tenderloin was chosen for refugee resettlement because its high apartment-vacancy rate made it the only area of the city that could accommodate thousands of newly arrived families. The refugees' arrival fostered optimism about the Tenderloin's future in three significant ways. First, the refugees filled long-standing apartment vacancies and thus raised neighborhood property values and brought instant profits to Tenderloin landowners. Second, many in the first wave of refugees left Vietnam with capital, which they proceeded to invest in new, Asian-oriented businesses in the Tenderloin. These businesses, primarily street-level markets and restaurants, gave the neighborhood a new sense of vitality and drove up the value of ground-floor commercial space.

Third, and perhaps most significant, those eager for gentrification expected Southeast Asian immigrant families to replace the Tenderloin's long-standing population of seniors, merchant seamen, other low-income working people, and disabled persons. The families, it was thought, would transform the neighborhood into a Southeast Asian version of San Francisco's popular Chinatown.

My introduction to the Tenderloin came through Hastings Law School, another significant player in the Tenderloin development scene. In 1979, when I was twenty-three, I enrolled as a student at Hastings, a public institution connected to the University of California. During the 1970s, Hastings had expanded its "campus" by vacating tenants from some adjacent residential hotels. Until 2006, its relationship to the low-income residents of the Tenderloin was based on the perspective of territorial imperative, one shared by urban academic institutions such as Columbia and the University

of Chicago. Hastings was aptly described during its expansion phase as the law school that “ate the Tenderloin.”

I became involved in trying to help Tenderloin residents soon after starting at Hastings. My personal concern was tenants’ rights, an interest developed when I lived in Berkeley while attending the University of California. On February 1, 1980, I joined fellow law students in opening a center to help Tenderloin tenants prevent evictions and assert their rights. Our center, called the Tenderloin Housing Clinic, started with a budget of \$50, and our all-volunteer staff was housed in a small room at Glide Memorial Church, in the heart of the neighborhood.

When we opened the Clinic, the Tenderloin did not appear to be on the verge of an economic boom. Some thriving Asian markets had opened, and nonprofit housing corporations had begun to acquire and rehabilitate some buildings, but the dominant impression was of an economically depressed community whose residents desperately needed various forms of help. The inhabitants of the Tenderloin, unaware of the agenda of those predicting upscale development, would have laughed at anyone proclaiming that neighborhood prosperity was just around the corner. How quickly everyone’s perspective would change in the months ahead!

Almost immediately, I found myself plunged into what remains my best experience of how tactical activism can transform a defensive battle into a springboard toward accomplishing a significant goal. In June 1980 I was invited to a meeting at the offices of the North of Market Planning Coalition (NOMPC). NOMPC initially comprised agencies serving the Tenderloin population. In 1979, however, it obtained enough staff through the federal VISTA program (the domestic incarnation of the Peace Corps) to transform itself into a true citizen-based organization. The VISTA organizers were like me: recent college graduates from middle-class backgrounds excited about trying to help Tenderloin residents. The convener of the June 1980 meeting, Richard Livingston, had secured the VISTA money for NOMPC with the vision of getting neighborhood residents involved in planning the community’s future.¹

Livingston revealed that three of the most powerful hospitality chains in the world—Holiday Inn, Ramada, and Hilton—had launched plans to build three luxury tourist hotels in the neighborhood. The three towers would reach thirty-two, twenty-seven, and twenty-five stories, respectively, containing more than 2,200 new tourist rooms. The news outraged us; the encroachment of these big-money corporations would surely drive up property values, leading to further development and gentrification and, ultimately, the obliteration of the neighborhood. Fighting

construction of the hotels, however, presented mammoth difficulties. None of the hotels would directly displace current residents, so the projects could not be attacked on this ground, and zoning laws allowed for the development of the proposed luxury high-rise hotels, which removed a potential legal barrier.

The situation seemed hopeless. The Tenderloin's residents were entirely unorganized, NOMPC's newly hired VISTA organizers were energetic but inexperienced, and our opponents were multinational hotel corporations in a city where the tourist industry set all the rules. How could we succeed in preserving and enhancing the Tenderloin as an affordable residential community for the elderly, poor, and disabled in the face of this three-pronged attack? The answer lay in tactical activism.

Prior to the threat of the hotels, NOMPC's central goal for the Tenderloin was to win its acceptance as an actual neighborhood worthy of assistance from the city. The lack of participation by Tenderloin residents and agency staff in the city's political life had led to a consensus, accepted even by progressive activists, that a viable neighborhood entity north of Market Street did not exist. The hotel fight gave NOMPC the opportunity to educate the rest of the city about the state of affairs in the Tenderloin. As the Coalition organized residents to fight the hotels, the overall strategy became clear: first, to establish that the Tenderloin was a residential neighborhood and, second, to insist that, as such, it was entitled to the same zoning protections for its residents as other San Francisco neighborhoods. If NOMPC could force City Hall and the hotel developers to accept the first premise, the second premise—and NOMPC's strategic goal—would follow.²

The attempt to rezone the neighborhood in response to the hotel development threat was certainly not inevitable; it was the result of carefully considered tactical activism. Instead of using the hotel fight as a springboard for change, the organization could have made the usual antidevelopment protests, then sat back and awaited the next development project in the neighborhood. The organizational identity could have been that of a fighter of David-and-Goliath battles pitting powerless citizens against greedy developers. Livingston, NOMPC organizer Sara Colm, and other Tenderloin organizers understood, however, that development projects are rarely stopped and are at best mitigated. This is particularly true where development opponents are primarily low-income people and where the local political leadership—as is true for most cities, large and small—is beholden to developers and real estate interests.

The organizers foresaw that a succession of fights against specific development projects would destroy the residential character of the neighborhood they wished to strengthen. A

rezoning of the community, in contrast, would prevent all future development projects without directly attacking the financial interests of any particular developer. A proactive battle for neighborhood rezoning was thus both the most effective and the most politically practical strategy. “No hotels” was not a solution to the neighborhood’s problem—rezoning was.

In concert with the local chapter of the Gray Panthers, many of whose senior activist members lived in the Tenderloin, NOMPC unified residents by forming the Luxury Hotel Task Force. The Task Force became the vehicle of resident opposition to the hotels, but it had a greater and more strategic importance as a visible manifestation that the Tenderloin was a true residential neighborhood. Although most Task Force members had lived in the Tenderloin for years, they were invisible to the city’s political forces. Suddenly, hotel developers and their attorneys, elected Officials, and San Francisco Planning Department staff were confronted with a group of residents from a neighborhood whose existence they had never before recognized. The Tenderloin residents’ unified expression of concern over the hotels’ possible impact on their lives permanently changed the political calculus of the neighborhood. Once the developers’ representatives and city Officials encountered the Task Force, NOMPC’s strategic goal of establishing the Tenderloin as a recognizable residential neighborhood was achieved.

The battle against the hotels was short and intense. After learning of the proposal in June, we held two large community meetings in July. More than 250 people attended the meetings, a turnout unprecedented in Tenderloin history. The formal approval process for the hotels began with a Planning Commission hearing on November 6, at which more than 100 residents testified against the project. Final commission approval came on January 29, 1981, in a hearing that began in the afternoon and ended early the next morning.

The projects clearly had been placed on the fast track for approval; the city was in the midst of “Manhattanization,” a building boom during which virtually no high-rise development project was disapproved. This made the accomplishments of the Luxury Hotel Task Force that much more astounding. As a result of residents’ complaints that the hotels would have a “significant adverse environmental impact” on rents, air quality, and traffic in the Tenderloin, the commission imposed several conditions to mitigate these effects. The hotels had to contribute an amount equal to fifty cents per hotel room for twenty years for low-cost housing development (about \$320,000 per hotel per year). Additionally, each hotel had to pay \$200,000 for community service projects, sponsor

a \$4 million grant for the acquisition and renovation of four low-cost residential hotels (474 units total), and act in good faith to give priority in employment to Tenderloin residents.

Such “mitigation measures” are now commonplace conditions of development approval in U.S. cities, but they were unprecedented in January 1981. In the view of local media and business leaders, that a group of elderly, disabled, and low-income residents had won historic concessions from three major international hotel chains in a prodevelopment political climate was an ominous precedent. *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Abe Mellinkoff weighed in strongly against “the squeeze” in two consecutive columns following the Planning Commission vote. Referring to the mitigations as a “shakedown” undertaken by “bank robbers,” Mellinkoff urged the business establishment to publicly protest this “rip-off of fellow capitalists.” As Mellinkoff saw it, Luxury Hotel Task Force members were “crusaders” and “eager soldiers” whom City Hall had allowed to prevail in “a war against corporations.” Clearly, NOMPC’s strategy had worked. The hotel fight had made the Tenderloin a neighborhood to be reckoned with.³

The decision to use this defensive battle to achieve a critical goal resulted entirely from continual discussions of strategy and tactics among the thirty to forty residents who regularly attended Luxury Hotel Task Force meetings. A good example of the group’s extensive tactical debates arose when the Hilton Hotel offered to provide lunch at a meeting to discuss its project. Gray Panther organizer Jim Shoch, whose tactical insights were critical to the Task Force’s success, made sure that every facet of the Hilton offer was analyzed for its implications. Some Task Force members felt that lunch should be refused so the Hilton couldn’t “buy us off.” The majority wanted to take advantage of a high-quality lunch, recognizing it as a vast improvement over their normal fare. Ultimately, the group went to the lunch but gave no quarter to the Hilton in the meeting that followed.

These time-consuming and often frustrating internal discussions enabled residents to understand that they did not have to accomplish the impossible (i.e., prevent approval of the towers) to score a victory. Without this understanding, the city’s ultimate approval of the hotels could have been psychologically and emotionally devastating. Instead, the Planning Commission’s approval did not diminish residents’ feelings that they had achieved a great triumph in their own lives and in the neighborhood’s history.

With city Officials having recognized the Tenderloin as a viable neighborhood, the Task Force turned to the second half of NOMPC’s agenda: establishing the Tenderloin’s right to residential rezoning. In 1981, San Francisco residents could initiate the rezoning process