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CLASS WARRIOR

Arne Duncan's bid to shake up schools.

BY CARLO ROTELLA

Riding in a black S.U.V. to an appearance at the Andrew Jackson Language Academy, in Chicago, Arne Duncan, the United States Secretary of Education, marked up his prepared remarks in an angular left-handed scrawl. Two aides briefed him on the upcoming event and urged him to stick to the written text. Matt Yale, his deputy chief of staff, reminded him, "You can't say 'screwed.'" Duncan often says "screwed" or "lied to" when he describes what American students face—low standards, chronically underperforming schools, inequities in spending and opportunity. He also repeats the claim, sometimes several times a day, that American schooling is stuck in old ruts while that of other nations has improved. We've fallen behind, he says, but we can still regain our former preeminence in public education and, while we're at it, "educate our way out of the financial crisis."

President Obama has allotted Duncan more than seventy billion dollars in federal economic-stimulus funds to hand out to the states—more money "by a factor of a lot," as Duncan puts it, than any Secretary of Education before him has had. In education, federal authority must often operate by persuasion, since schools are funded and administered primarily by states and local districts. But the stimulus money and the close relationship that Duncan, who was the C.E.O. of the Chicago Public Schools before going to Washington, has with Obama give him extraordinary leverage. Duncan has the potential to be a uniquely influential Secretary of Education.

Duncan had returned to Chicago to press the state of Illinois to follow the Administration's education agenda. Any state that wants its full share of stimulus money needs to give the Department of Education what are known as the "four assurances": progress in raising standards, in recruiting and retaining effective teachers, in tracking students' and teachers'

performance, and in turning around failing schools. Illinois's performance was, by those measures, "mediocre," according to Duncan. In his speech at Andrew Jackson, an elementary school that specializes in foreign-language instruction, he said that the stimulus money would save hundreds of thousands of teaching jobs and be used to promote reforms "without regard to ideology or past practice." Afterward, he played basketball at a downtown athletic club where he used to be a regular in the lunchtime pickup game, then met with the Chicago *Tribune's* editorial board. He told the board, "If folks are playing shell games, if folks are operating in bad faith, it puts their second chance at billions of dollars in jeopardy."

Duncan, who is forty-five, is six feet five and long-limbed, with a pale face that tapers to a wedgelike chin. He played basketball at Harvard, and then professionally in Australia. In 2001, Michael Jordan enlisted Duncan in his effort to play himself back into shape for his final N.B.A. comeback. Duncan has played ball with Barack Obama for nearly two decades, and first met him through Craig Robinson, Michelle Obama's older brother, who now coaches the Oregon State University men's basketball team. Duncan and Robinson have been friends since high school, when they moved in the same basketball circles on the South Side of Chicago.

"He plays basketball with the President," Lamar Alexander, the Republican senator from Tennessee, who served as George H. W. Bush's Education Secretary, told me. "If you're not in charge of anything"—no actual school systems, that is—"and you speak for the President, it matters that he's closer to the President than anybody else in the Cabinet."

In the fight over education in America today, there are, roughly speaking, two major camps: free-market reformers, who believe that competition, choice, and incentives must have a greater part in edu-

cation; and liberal traditionalists who rally around teachers' unions and education schools. Obama's choice of Duncan, who was the only big-city superintendent to sign both camps' manifestos during the Presidential campaign in 2008, was widely viewed as a compromise. But Duncan, who argues for linking teachers' pay to their students' performance, is firmly on the market-forces side. In Chicago, he even experimented with paying students for improving their grades. His appointment represented a defeat for the unions.

Republicans who otherwise have little use for the Obama Administration's policies approve of Duncan's commitment to market-based reforms. John Kline, of Minnesota, the ranking Republican on the House Education and Labor Committee, told me, "In many ways, it's a Republican agenda. He's taken on the N.E.A.—the National Education Association, the largest teachers' union—"on performance pay and removing poor teachers; he's promoting charter schools, and many of us in the Party support as much parent choice as possible. He's trading ground that many would not have expected from this White House."

Newt Gingrich, the former Speaker of the House, told me that Duncan is Obama's "one real bipartisan appointment." Duncan, whose speaking style is earnest if less than electrifying, has recruited Gingrich and Al Sharpton to make a series of appearances with him. Gingrich described their road show as part of "a deliberate strategy to say to the forces of reactionary bureaucracy that Obama means business and change will happen." The symbolism of big talkers on the left and right seemingly putting aside their differences helped Duncan to present himself as an open-minded arbiter receptive to all ideological quarters. He is not always successful in that regard. Diane Ravitch, of New York University, has described him as "Marga-

ret Spellings in drag," a reference to one of George W. Bush's education secretaries, and accused him of giving the Bush Administration a "third term in education."

Duncan must contend with critics on the right who don't accept the federal government's active role in education and those on the left who see him as a neoliberal enforcer, exploiting Obama's Democratic bona fides to impose the free-

are now. Four years ago, a Democrat could not have called for more charters in the way Obama did in his speech." Klein was referring to Obama's address to the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, on March 10th of last year, in which Obama had called not only for charters but for merit pay for teachers—long a taboo for unions.

The speech marked the ascendancy of a cohort of superintendents exemplified by Duncan, Klein, Paul Vallas (Duncan's predecessor in Chicago and now the head of the Recovery School District in Louisiana), and Michelle Rhee, the chancellor of the District of Columbia Public Schools. "You can look at them as the offspring of a previous generation who gave us the standards movement," Amy Wilkins, who directs government affairs for the Education Trust, a nonprofit group that advocates for disadvantaged students, said. The most prominent figures in that earlier generation were Southern governors—Bill Clinton, Dick Riley, Jim Hunt, and Lamar Alexander—who "looked at achievement in their states and said, 'Holy cow!'" Wilkins told me. She credits them with bringing the insistence on accountability, choice, and incentives "out of academics' heads and into the public sphere" on the state level. "It's a mo-

ment that's been a long time coming," Wilkins said. "The hard heads and soft hearts are replacing the softheaded and hardhearted."

Duncan, like his boss, is a pragmatic idealist from the South Side of Chicago. David Axelrod, who serves as the President's senior adviser—and first met Duncan when he was a thirteen-year-old hanging around the basketball courts of the University of Chicago—told me that Obama and Duncan are "in lockstep on educational issues." But the affinity goes deeper. "They come essentially from the same community," Axelrod said. "Arne



Duncan controls an unprecedented budget. Photograph by Platon.

market reform agenda on the unions. And yet Duncan believes that "a perfect storm for reform"—a heightened awareness of global competition, agreement that there is a crisis, plus the desperation of near-broke states—will allow him to push his program through. "You can feel the forces gathering," Joel Klein, the chancellor of New York City's schools, who shares most of Duncan's views, said. "Charter schools, pay for performance, taking national standards through an evolutionary process, getting real data from the states—a few years ago we weren't talking about these the way we

came back; the President came there in his twenties. Each of them came as kind of an outsider—Arne even though he grew up there, and Obama because he came there—and both had to learn the community and earn trust.”

Hyde Park, the neighborhood where both men lived before moving to Washington, is the home of the University of Chicago. It’s also a semi-integrated island, amid the mostly black neighborhoods of the South Side. Duncan was born and raised there, and he and his two siblings, Sarah and Owen, who are younger than he is, attended the university’s Laboratory Schools, which were heavily populated by faculty children. (The Obamas’ daughters went there, too.) Duncan’s father, Starkey, who died in 2007, was a professor of psychology who specialized in the study of nonverbal communication. At the Lab School, Duncan absorbed “the idea of the school being the center,” shaping a child’s identity. This is part of why he talks about keeping school buildings open fourteen hours a day as community centers. The school, he said, “could catch almost every kid and develop their passion in something.”

Duncan’s passion was basketball. He was encouraged by his mother, Sue, who had been a competitive tennis player in her youth. Tim Willins, a classmate of Arne’s at the Lab School, who is now a corporate lawyer, told me that Sue Duncan played ball with them in an alley behind the Duncans’ house. “And, man, could she box out. I never got a rebound over Sue.” (I was also in the same class as Duncan, 1982, at the Lab School.)

Duncan says that his family was regarded as “a little crazy.” At his basketball games, Sue, an intense woman with fly-away hair, kept stats and called out, “Steal it! Steal it!” with a mynah-bird inflection. The Duncans didn’t have a television;

every evening, Starkey would read to the family—“Huckleberry Finn,” “Moby-Dick,” “The Lord of the Rings”—while the kids drew, did homework, or just sat and listened. As Arne got older, he did situps and pushups while his father read. “I wasn’t a rebellious kid,” he told me. “Not only didn’t I question it; it’s a cherished memory.” Except on days when he had basketball practice or a game,

thing that wasn’t even close,” Duncan said. “My career has been devoted to closing that gap.” And he took to heart the example of a do-it-yourself outsider, what he would now call an educational entrepreneur, addressing the failures of the public-school system.

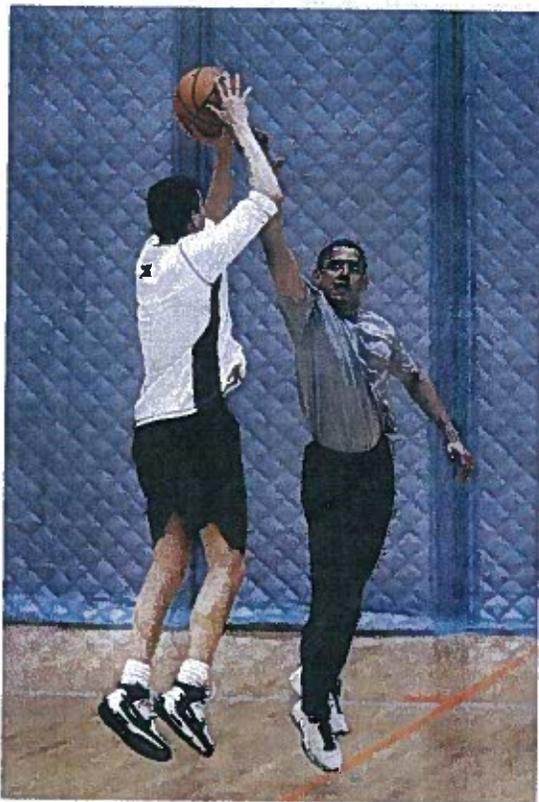
Sue Duncan told me, “I was asked to teach a Bible-study class at a black church in Kenwood. I wasn’t religious,

but I had studied religion in college”—at Smith—“and I said yes.” There were nine girls, all about nine years old. “We passed a Bible around, and not one of them could read. Not one.” So she started an after-school program. She taught basic skills, gave exercises when the schools didn’t assign any homework, and recruited volunteer tutors from the university. Her own children grew up there, she said: “They all started going while I was pregnant with them.” (Owen Duncan now helps his mother run the center; Sarah coordinates the University of Chicago’s Community Schools Program.) Sue became a familiar figure in Kenwood: “I was the crazy white lady, driving around in a blue van full of black kids.”

Sue’s moved from one church basement to another, growing larger and becoming more deeply involved in the lives of the children who attended. Sue Duncan described the children she saw every after-

noon as coming from poor, typically undereducated families. Most didn’t have fathers living at home. Often, they had no one to read to them. The odds were against them in school and in life.

Kerrie Holley went from pupil to instructor at Sue’s, convening a math-study circle and helping Arne with calculus. He is now an I.B.M. Fellow, the company’s highest designation for its scientists. Speaking of Kenwood, Holley said, “It’s better now, but I remember physically having to watch my back. It was risky,



Once a basketball pro, Duncan has known Obama for two decades.

when he finished with classes he went to Sue’s.

Sue’s is an after-school program in North Kenwood-Oakland, a beat-up neighborhood north of Hyde Park, that his mother has operated since 1961. It is now supported by private donations and is formally called the Sue Duncan Children’s Center, and it had a profound influence on her son. “It’s been a huge part of my motivation, the difference between the day”—at the Lab School—“and then the evening with kids who had some-

dirty, unsafe. And you had to know what time of day it was. You had the Disciples, the Blackstone Rangers." The Blackstone Rangers once firebombed a church whose basement Sue Duncan's program occupied. "It was face to face," Holley said. "She'd say, 'You can't come in here. You gotta leave.' But the gangs respected it. She's here. She's doing what she's doing. She won't back down."

Arne grew close to a group of older neighborhood boys who hung out at Sue's. Among them were Holley; Ron Raglin, who now directs a college-preparatory program for the Chicago Public Schools; and Michael Clarke Duncan (no relation), an actor best known for his role in the movie "The Green Mile." (The singer R. Kelly and the martial artist Michelle Gordon also attended Sue's.) When schoolwork was completed, they played basketball. As the boys got older and better at the game, they ranged out from Sue's in search of competition, taking Arne with them.

Once, when Duncan was in high school, a basketball star he knew from Sue's came to him for help in studying for the A.C.T. test. "He was being recruited by some big places," Duncan said. "He was thinking Marquette, something like that. And we sat down, and he couldn't read. He was a B student at Martin Luther King. This was the year they won the state championship. He was a good kid. He stayed clear of gangs, drugs; his teachers liked him. He did everything right, everything that was asked of him, and he was functionally illiterate. It wasn't his fault. He'd been lied to all his life. We had a heart-to-heart talk, and I had to tell him. And he didn't make it. He went to junior college, but he didn't make it."

Duncan told me another story about the boys at Sue's. "There's a photo of our group, the inner circle from my mom's program," taken back in the late nineteen-seventies, he said, "and some of those guys are dead. Growing up down there, and having friends from the program and from the streets die when I was twelve, thirteen—that scarred me. It was hard to comprehend. As much as the success stories have shaped me and given me hope, those deaths might be an even bigger motivator. The guys who got killed were the guys who didn't finish high school. It was

literally the dividing line between you live or you die. Nobody who went to college died young."

But how widely do the lessons of the South Side apply? "It shows that the stakes are so high," he said. "Education predicts disparities in life chances, outcomes, life income, and the disparity has never been starker. I do absolutely see—the dividing line in our society is around educational opportunity, more than around race, even though the two are obviously related. Educational opportunity increasingly divides the haves and have-nots, who's contributing to society and who's a weight on the society."

Have middle-class kids in suburban schools also been "tied to" by educators? "More often than you'd think, the answer is yes," Duncan said. "Cities, suburbs, sometimes in rural schools it's even worse."

After graduating from Harvard, Duncan played guard and small forward for the Eastside Spectres and the Launceston Ocelots, in Australia, where he was known as the Cobra. He met his future wife, Karen, at a gym in Tasmania. (They now have two young children.) He almost stayed. But in 1991 John Rogers, the founder of the Chicago-based Ariel Investments, helped persuade him to come back. Rogers had been a basketball star at the Lab School a few years ahead of Duncan and, like Craig Robinson, had played at Princeton. (Rogers has flown to D.C. to play pickup ball with Duncan and the President, and his former wife, Desirée Rogers, is the White House social secretary.) Rogers had promised to make college affordable for all forty sixth-grade students at the William Shakespeare Elementary School—the Kenwood school from which kids would arrive at Sue's with no homework assignments—if they went on to graduate from high school. So Duncan came home, and became the director of the Ariel Education Initiative, which engineered the transformation of Shakespeare into the Ariel Community Academy.

In 1999, Paul Vallas, the C.E.O. of the Chicago Public Schools, hired Duncan away from Ariel, and two years later Mayor Richard M. Daley appointed Duncan to replace Vallas. Duncan was thirty-six, and his qualifications for running the public schools did not

include experience as a teacher or a principal. What he had was a South Side education.

Duncan got along with Daley, who told me, "He doesn't have any politics. Democrat, Republican, city, suburban—he doesn't get into that nonsense. He just wants to do the job." Duncan served as C.E.O. from 2001 until 2009, a long tenure for a big-city superintendent. His record in Chicago is his main credential, a blueprint for his national agenda as Secretary of Education, and a source of continuing controversy. He opened new specialized schools, many of them charters, and increased students' range of choice; he pressed for better data, tracking, for instance, how graduates did in college; and he used Teach for America, New Leaders for New Schools, and other such programs to bring new talent into the teaching and administrative ranks. Tim Knowles, the director of the University of Chicago's Urban Education Institute, said, "He attacked the human-capital problem, and he got a lot of people and groups involved and accountable for school reform. A law firm runs one school on the West Side."

But did Chicago's schools get better? "Turning around big urbans is not something you do under the tenure of one superintendent," Knowles told me. "It's a ten-to-twenty-year phenomenon. There's good evidence that he got the aircraft carrier turned around." Melissa Roderick, an expert on urban education at the University of Chicago, said, "You do see pretty consistent improvement in test scores—everywhere except in the high schools, which he was struggling with. He did see much lower dropout rates, though, which is a significant improvement." (A report issued by the Commercial Club of Chicago, however, argued that dramatic gains in test scores "appear to be due to changes in the test" rather than to "real improvements in student learning.")

How you read Duncan's record depends to some extent on what you think of his approach to reform. His signature move as C.E.O. was the turnaround: shutting down a school that has a chronic record of poor performance and reopening it with an entirely new staff. Joel Klein told me, "Closing a school is worse than a root canal. You're disrupting people's lives," and it makes a superintendent very unpopular.

Parents tend to come around, but there are always hard feelings, especially on the part of teachers and their unions. Marilyn Stewart, the president of the Chicago Teachers Union, praised Duncan for his willingness to work with her, but she bridled at his eagerness to close schools. "There were a lot of things done to make a sound bite," she said. "You have one chance to get it—a child's education—right, and sometimes they rushed."

Kenneth Saltman, a professor of education at DePaul University who is one of Duncan's critics on the left, described him to me as "the hatchet man for Daley." Saltman saw Duncan as a militant privatizer, labelling schools in black communities as failures to justify opening new charters that could skim off the highest-achieving students, thereby widening the gap between winners and losers.

Diane Ravitch, who dismisses turn-arounds as teacher-bashing "baloney," told me that all of Duncan's dramatic school closings and his enthusiasm for opening charters had resulted in "no gains." She cited a study of charter schools in Chicago that was co-authored by Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach, of the University of Chicago's Harris School of Public Policy Studies.

Schanzenbach, who is basically in favor of Duncan's policies, gave me a somewhat different reading of her study. "These schools are serving tough-to-serve kids," she said, and it was too early to say for sure how they were doing. "I don't think there's any real evidence that people are made worse off, and there's limited evidence that they're making things better," she said. "The whole idea behind charter schools is that there's going to be change and heterogeneity," and that chartering provides a way to cut through red tape and inertia to improve the worst schools. "The upside potential is large, but we're learning how to choose which ones are most likely to succeed." Duncan closed three charters in Chicago because of their disappointing records.

Ravitch's larger point is that if the market-forces party can offer nothing better than a vague idea that their reforms should work, rather than evidence that they actually do, then the case to "take them to scale," as Duncan often puts it, is weak. "You shouldn't set the agenda if you're not sure the agenda works," she told me. "With a scorecard like that, it doesn't

seem right for the Obama agenda, and before it the No Child Left Behind agenda, to operate on the theory that they have all the answers." Ravitch would like to see Duncan devote the resources at his disposal not to free-market experimentation but to "common-sense, real-world things," like enriching curricula, decreasing class sizes, maintaining school buildings, improving (rather than closing) low-performing schools, and working with social-service agencies to make sure schoolchildren are healthy enough to learn.

Eric Hanushek, of Stanford's Hoover Institution, is one of the most outspoken senior academics in the market-forces camp. But even he describes the reforms that Duncan has pursued so aggressively in Chicago as "the best guesses for how to go forward." Hanushek told me, "The evidence is mixed on all of them because they're pretty significant changes, and the unions and others have nipped them in the bud, so there's not much evidence." Still, he said, "we think these are our best chances to make a difference." Most of the approaches Ravitch advocated had been tried for decades, he said, and they "didn't push the needle much." (One that does seem to work is decreasing class size in the lower grades—but the size has to fall by a lot, more than is practical for most school systems.)

Steven Rivkin, an economist at Amherst, has co-authored several articles with Hanushek but shares Ravitch's worry that Duncan may be pushing too hard for policies that haven't been proved effective. "The jury's still out" on charters, he told me, and merit pay for teachers is problematic. "Test scores are very noisy measures of knowledge," he said. "It's hard to come up with a model that can define the impact of the teacher separate from the community and family, and principals may assign the toughest kids to the best teachers, and they'd stop, which would be too bad."

If the Department of Education must provide incentives to the states instead of telling them what to do, Rivkin said, "they

have to get it right. Too much incentive means states will do it whether or not it works."

Most of the stimulus money for education has been parcelled out proportionally to all fifty states in an effort to close budget gaps and save jobs, but five billion dollars is in discretionary funds; Duncan can more or less dispense it as he pleases. Michael Petrilli, of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, has described the largest pot of discretionary money, the Race to the Top fund, as "the carrot that feels like a stick." In April, Duncan intends to begin awarding it to states whose reform agendas most closely approximate his own, anointing them as a vanguard.

According to the rules of the competition, released in November, states' applications are awarded points: fifty-eight points (out of a possible five hundred) for improving principal and teacher effectiveness; fifty points for turning around lowest-achieving schools; twenty-four points for fully implementing a statewide longitudinal data system. The higher a state's score, the more likely it is to win a grant. Orchestrating this kind of high-stakes competition is a departure for the Department of Education. "When we have a lot more losers than winners, and my popularity plummets, they'll know we're for real and this is not education politics as usual," Duncan told me.

The Race to the Top represents more money dedicated to systemic reform than the funds commanded by all of Duncan's predecessors combined (the modern Department of Education was created by Jimmy Carter, in 1979), but it's still less than one per cent of the approximately six hundred and fifty billion dollars spent on K-12 public education every year. So the competition is an exercise in political leverage—or "a chemistry problem," as Vice-President Biden described Duncan's task to me. Duncan said, "It's amazing how much change has already happened without a Race to the Top dollar being spent yet." Four states have raised legal limits on charter schools; forty-eight states have signed on to an initiative to develop common standards in language arts and math (Texas and Alaska are the hold-outs); and California and Wisconsin have changed their laws to eliminate "firewalls" that prevent schools from using student-achievement data to evaluate teachers' performance. Jack O'Connell, the Super-



intendent of Education for California, told me, "We're trying to qualify. I lobbied the Governor to sign the bill once we got the nod from the feds that it went far enough."

The unions, which have fought many of these measures for years but have also been accustomed to supporting Democrats, have declared themselves willing to meet Duncan partway. Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, told me, "Everything's on the table, as long as it's great for kids and fair to teachers." In a recent speech, she signalled a new openness to merit pay by conceding that the system of evaluating teachers by means of classroom visits, which her union has long defended, "was never adequate." Dennis van Roekel, the president of the N.E.A., said that, while he and Duncan may disagree on tactics, "I don't believe we'll ever disagree on fundamental goals and purposes. And I couldn't say that in the past. I don't believe that the Department of Education in the Bush Administration did want to go where we wanted to go."

For the unions, No Child Left Behind exemplified everything that was wrong with the Bush approach—allowing states to lower their standards so that schools appeared to be improving, for example, and making schools meet federal guidelines without providing additional resources. N.C.L.B. is up for reauthorization by Congress, probably in the next few months. Duncan hopes to preserve what he regards as N.C.I.B.'s one important contribution—breaking down data to identify and address gaps between white and nonwhite students—but he says that he intends to drastically rewrite the law. "N.C.L.B. had loose standards and tight prescriptions on what you have to do, and we want to flip that so instead we have very clear goals and a high bar but flexibility on how to get there," he told me. He believes that N.C.I.B. should rely on a broader range of benchmarks than absolute test scores—by looking at graduation rates, for example—and respond to "a real concern that N.C.I.B. narrowed the curriculum. If all you test is math and reading, then that's all that will be taught, but there's a lot of evidence that a well-rounded education, everything from science to art to recess, is helpful."

N.C.I.B., which was technically a reauthorization of the Elementary and Sec-

ondary Education Act of 1965, will almost certainly be renamed. Duncan has called it a "toxic brand," and his Republican supporters seem ready to bow to the inevitable. Gingrich dismissed a name change as trivial; John Kline, the Minnesota Republican, said, "Somebody will think of a cute name."

Duncan has supported the unions on certain issues—such as devoting more resources to early-childhood education and pressing for more rigorous national teacher-certification standards—and moved closer to them on touchier ones. He still calls for an annual purging of "the bottom one per cent of the nation's portfolio," about a thousand schools a year, but he talks more about variations that would keep teachers in place, mitigating the shock. Still, the market-forces reformers have most of the momentum. Many people who voted for Obama are finding out that on education, as on other issues, he is more of a centrist than they ever imagined. They are realizing, too, that Duncan, for all his idealism, is also the guy who got along just fine with Mayor Daley.

Duncan likes talking about how pickup basketball reveals character, an article of cultic faith in Obama's inner circle. (When I asked Axelrod about that, though, he said, "I hope that's not entirely true of me on the court.") He also believes that basketball teaches lessons in practical politics. Thinking back to his teens, Duncan said, "A bunch of places where I played were extraordinarily dangerous. I couldn't fight. There were times when I was really scared, but that's where the best basketball was." And so "I learned to read people's character. I learned to trust certain people completely."

During the course of his career, Duncan has relied on strong allies—Rogers, Vallas, Daley, Obama—to cover his political flank, allowing him to preserve his image as a practical idealist. "Now, there are people I have to trust, and others I have to be wary of," he told me. He made a face that his mother makes all the time, a downward twist of the mouth. "It's about understanding people's motivation. You learn to spot a phony a mile away. It goes back to why I visit schools. It's how I learn, trying to get a sense of who people are, what their values and motivations are. Numbers don't lie, but they don't tell the whole truth." ♦

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