

Rahm Emanuel's Legacy

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Rahm Emanuel's departure from the White House is the beginning of a remaking of the Obama administration which will continue after the election as the administration will need to reposition itself in a new political environment in which, in a best case scenario, the Democratic Party will have slim majorities in both houses of congress. The easiest interpretation of Emanuel's is that, with a lower profile and less controversial Pete Rouse as White House Chief of Staff, the administration will be better positioned to work with a congress with a more powerful Republican presence.

This interpretation, however, would be wrong. Emanuel, to the extent he has been tough at all, has been tough on Obama's most natural and important allies, the liberal Democratic leadership of congress. These people were more often the targets of Emanuel's hostility and contempt than the Republicans who were in most cases responsible for stalling or stopping the president's agenda. The toughness of Rahm Emanuel was always something of a myth embraced by a somewhat unquestioning media who happily mistook bluster and machismo for toughness and strength, and mistook a proclivity for colorful profanity for dedication and brilliance.

The appointment of Rahm Emanuel as White House Chief of Staff was nonetheless a key moment for the Obama administration, which at the time was still the Obama transition. Emanuel immediately became the first Obama staff person who had a media presence that, while certainly not as big as Obama's, was nonetheless quite significant. There were far more stories about Emanuel following his appointment than there had been about David Plouffe, David Axelrod or any of the other people who had played instrumental roles in Obama's extraordinary election campaign. A staff member should never generate more publicity than the person for whom he or she works. While it was all but impossible for anybody to generate more publicity than Barack Obama in late 2008, Emanuel came far closer to achieving this than anybody else around the President elect.

Emanuel's appointment also sent a very clear message, one of the first of many, that the Obama administration was going to temper whatever aspirations it once had for change with a heavy dose of politics as usual. By 2008, Emanuel was something of a caricature of a Washington insider with an impressive background as a presidential aide, member of congress and party strategist. He had been around the leadership of the Democratic Party for years, and as a former Clinton staffer from Chicago had strong ties to both Obama and his chief rival for the Democratic nomination, Hillary Clinton.

The signals sent by the appointment of Emanuel to the Chief of Staff position were not only that change might be a little less fundamental than promised during the campaign, but that the Obama administration was not going to break too much from the previous Democratic administration, that of President Bill Clinton. The appointment of many former Clinton administration officials, and of course, the appointment of Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State reinforced these signals.

These appointments were significant not because these people were not competent or qualified—they were. Many of them, not least Hillary Clinton, have done quite well in their positions. However, these strong ties to the Clinton period almost immediately limited the ability of the Obama administration to address some of the fundamental problems facing the country.

One of the reasons why the Obama candidacy was so refreshing was because it created the potential for a Democratic president who could recognize the limits and problems of the Clinton presidency. This was particularly important with regards to the economic crisis where understanding that the roots of the dreadful state of the economy when Obama came into office were in the economic policies of both Clinton and Bush, although the latter to a greater degree, was necessary if real reform was going to occur. Without embracing this reality, the possibility of fundamental change was inevitably very slim. The appointment of Emanuel was the beginning of the end of this possibility.

Emanuel also brought an approach to governance that had served the previous Democratic president very well. Unfortunately, Obama came into office in a very different circumstance than Clinton had. The economy was beginning to recover, and the US was not engaged in any real shooting wars when Clinton took office in 1993. This was not the case in January of 2009. The Clinton era approach of cautiousness, compromise and small steps which Emanuel seemed to advocate as Chief of Staff was a very poor fit for the crises and need for far reaching legislation which has characterized the Obama years.

The first two years of any administration are an intense time because that is when most legislation gets passed and most reforms are made. As an integral member of the administration during these first two years, Emanuel certainly should share in the credit for the achievements of the Obama administration, which most would identify as passing TARP and health care reform. However, Emanuel also deserves a fair share of the blame of the modest, relatively unambitious and insufficiently visionary nature of both of these bills and of the Obama administration in general.