ALM | LAW.COM

New York Law Journal

What I Wish I Knew Then: Rahm Emanuel

By Steve Cohen and Mia Generoso

November 3, 2026

Attorney-at-law is perhaps the only relevant position Rahm Emanuel has never held. But "counselor" is an absolutely apt description: he has served as a senior adviser to three presidents, assuming you include his stint as Ambassador to Japan under Joe Biden. Few people of his generation – he is currently 66 – have had greater impact on the creation of new laws of the nation over the last thirty-plus years. He served as senior advisor for policy and strategy to President Bill Clinton; chief of staff to President Barack Obama; three terms as a Congressman representing Illinois's 5th Congressional district; and two terms as Mayor of Chicago. And although he never sought a law degree, he has a BA in liberal arts (with a focus on ballet) from Sarah Lawrence College and a Masters from Northwestern in speech and communications.

We spoke with Rahm – despite the many honorifics which apply including Mr. Ambassador, Mr. Mayor, Congressman, everyone seems to call him Rahm – for a half-hour as he was being driven to a Chicago airport near his home. He was on his way to stump for candidates in the South – not Democratic strongholds – to make the case for where he thinks America should be headed. What became clear during our conversation was that he is as willing to talk about history – and the lessons learned – as to debate policy and politics. Not surprisingly, the insights shared by someone with his fingerprints are all over some of the most consequential issues, fights, and decisions in recent American politics, were fascinating.



Courtesy photo

Rahm Emanuel.

Education and Tough Calls

Rahm started the conversation by diving into a topic that addresses both the past and the future: education. When Rahm became Chicago's Mayor in May 2011, the official high school graduation rate was about 57% – and at least some of that was through the so-called generosity of social promotion. Only 46% of elementary students could read at grade level and math performance was equally dismal. Rahm did the unexpected – for a Democrat: he took on the powerful teachers' union. He lengthened the school day and the school year, gave principals more control over who they could hire, implemented full-day

kindergarten, closed failing schools, and without first informing the head of the teachers' union unilaterally killed a pay raise.

"I made a tough call by reforming our school days and school year to match national averages. Many families protested that decision, and it was difficult for the children, the teachers, and the community. I faced a lot of criticism from the teacher's union. In retrospect, should I have called Karen Lewis, the president of the union and said, 'Look, we got a mess on our hands.' Now she may have said, 'Hey, you ran for this job. You figure it out. I'm not going to help you.' But I never gave her the chance. So, did I make my problem worse politically? Yeah, I did.

But in my second term, I learned from that mistake and my first phone call after getting re-elected was to Karen. I said to her, "I'm making my first phone call to you. We can keep doing this, or we can try to find places we can work together and hit the reset button. And we ended up doing that." When Rahm left office, fully 61% of students could read at grade level and the graduation rate had reached 82%.

Lessons Learned From Former Presidents

"President Clinton and President Obama has massively different styles, and I learned many things from both. Clinton was infamous for his explosions: One minute he would explode at you about a particular issue, and the next he would ask you to play cards. Obama always remained composed, but you could tell when he was angry or disappointed."

"With Clinton, there was never a meeting that started or ended on time. His day didn't end until the early hours of the morning. One Sunday, while I was leading the effort to pass the assault weapon ban, Clinton called me at ten o'clock at night. We were within one vote of passing the ban; he wanted the names of six more Congressmen to call. I gave him six names, explained what their interests were, and offered insight on how to move them. At three o'clock in the morning, Clinton called back. He wanted six more names. I protested, explaining that everyone would be sleeping, and I would call in the morning. At that point, Amy, my wife, woke up. I put my hand over the receiver and I said, 'It's the president.' She looked at me – thinking I had been on the phone for the last five hours – and said, 'Tell him it's time to go to bed.' Obama, on the other hand, was very regimented about his schedule. He knew that having Sabbath dinner together with my family was important to me and to my family. So, he would always wait until after 7:30 – when we typically finished dinner on Friday evenings – to call. Like clockwork, he would call at 7:31."

Clinton and Obama had their similarities too. Neither one was afraid of having very smart people in their White House. In fact, both wanted to be surrounded by smart people who would disagree with them. I had many disagreements with President Obama and President Clinton on policy matters. I would warn them of the consequences of a given decision and present various alternatives at length. They encouraged me to voice a range of perspectives. But once they made a decision, I was in execution mode. When I became Mayor, I modeled the most important thing I learned from them: encourage people."

On Leadership

"It is important to me that people feel included and empowered to speak up. As Chief of Staff, my door was always open. People may have left my office with their heads detached, but I made clear that they had the right to come in and speak their mind. I didn't always have that quality: as Senior Advisor to President Clinton, I pushed the staff and the cabinet extremely hard. I also pushed myself extremely hard, and I probably gave people less chance to speak up. Over the years, I have shed some of that brashness and tempered out – and it showed in my improved leadership as Chief of Staff, Mayor, and Ambassador."

"I also care about keeping my team organized and razor-sharp. I adopted President Clinton's practice of "weekly reports". Every Friday by 5 p.m., staff would deliver a two-page weekly report to the President, detailing their projects and their progress. On Monday at 9 a.m., there was a response with notes waiting for them: 'Yes to this. Don't do that. Keep working on this. Come back to me with that.' I have

integrated weekly reports into all my roles since. It's a great way to keep people focused."

Qualities to Cultivate

"I want a team that has strong views. People do not make big changes when they are simply executing. I want people who will come to me and express different takes – people who care about the outcomes. I also want people who are loyal. If we have talked about a particular matter and given mutual support, I don't want to be surprised. Politics is a tough business, and loyalty is essential to risk-taking; you need a sense of security to do bold things. I am going to be loyal, but I am also going to hold other accountable. It is important to cultivate both."

"In job interviews, I like to get a sense of who someone is. I ask about their interests, the most interesting books they've read recently, movies they've seen, and the places they have traveled and why. I also respect family time first and foremost, and I expect the same in return."

"In all of the jobs I've had, Amy and I have maintained strict boundaries around our Sabbath dinners and annual family trips. When my staff needs time off for their kids or a sick family member, I never interfere. Those requests do not require further discussion. If you're not taking time to be with your kids, I'm going to be upset with you because you're not being a good parent. I believe that if we are going to have careers in public life, our families should not pay the price for it."

Priorities for the Future

Prior to our call with Rahm, Steve had heard him speak twice: first at a Common Good event, and then at a friend's home where he took questions for nearly an hour. So, having heard him give him stump speech and speak extemporaneously, it was interesting to hear what he focused on during the last few minutes of our call. His priorities for the country could be summarized as "three E's" (our shorthand, not his): ethics, education, and energy.

"First and foremost, I want to implement a significant ethics package: banning all stock trading for all three branches of government, banning all prediction market participation, mandating blind trusts, mandating retirement from government at the age of 75, and mandating a two-year post-government ban on foreign sovereign wealth investments. Right now, there is a critical lack of trust between the national government and the public. An ethics package is the first step towards restoring that trust."

"Second, I want to restructure our education system top to bottom. 50% of our children cannot read at grade level. We have become complacent with their failure. Nobody in Washington, DC or our state capitols is doing enough to combat the educational crisis. As I see it, the greatest resource of this country is not the vastness of our land; it is our people. We are paying an enormous price by not investing in their education, growth, and success. From pre-K to B.A., I have laid out a comprehensive reform agenda that focuses on investing in the American people."

"Third, I want to transform our energy policies. Whoever has reliable, cost-effective energy will win the race of the future. Texas is currently leading in the country with particularly reliable, cheap energy – and 40% of it is renewable. I want to expand their model, modernizing energy policies across the country."

Advice to Young Professionals

"Do not confuse your end with your means. Keep your goals clearly in sight but remain flexible on the route you take to achieve them. Compromise is valuable and effective along the way. And, as President Clinton used to say, 'You can't beat something with nothing.' I have adopted that principle. You can always argue against something and its merits, but it is better to be for something too. Whatever ailments you have identified, find something to fight for that addresses them."

Steve Cohen is a founding partner and Mia Generoso is a legal analyst at Pollock Cohen LLP.

Reprinted with permission from the November 3, 2026 edition of the NEW YORK LAW JOURNAL © 2026 ALM Global Properties, LLC. All rights reserved. Further duplication without permission is prohibited, contact 877-256-2472 or asset-and-logo-licensing@alm.com. # NYLJ-11032026-74192