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Rahm Emanuel: Where is the Golden Boy Chicago was Promised?

by Samantha Wilson

(English 1102)

Rahm Emanuel, Mayor of Chicago, is a politician with two conflicting sets of principles when it comes to running the city. On paper and in theory, Rahm Emanuel appears to be the ideal Democratic Mayor, even referred to as a “Golden Boy”: born into a family of first and second generation immigrants who prospered in Chicago and its suburbs, an expert fundraiser, Senior Advisor for Policy and Strategy to President Bill Clinton from 1993 to 1998, three terms in the U.S. House of Representatives as Congressman from Illinois’ 5<sup>th</sup> district, Chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee while serving those terms, and finally, White House Chief of Staff for another political gem of Illinois, President Barack Obama for the first year of his first term (“About the Mayor” np). In 2006, Rahm Emanuel and Bruce Reed, another former advisor to Bill Clinton, joined together to write *The Plan: Big Ideas for America*, to refocus the goals of the Democratic Party and offer up an image of what America could achieve as a nation (ix-198). *The Plan* calls for the government to make a new social contract with its citizens, in which citizens participate in rebuilding their communities, the government returns to fiscal responsibility, corporate welfare ends, tax reform benefits all people, and enhances and provides social programs such as universal access to public higher education and universal retirement savings (Emanuel and Reed 54-57). These progressive goals for the nation would surely be a catalyst to vote for Emanuel, as he seems to have the best interest of the people at heart. In practice, however, Emanuel has failed to implement these progressive ideals in the City of Chicago. Instead of a progressive politician, Emanuel has proven himself to be a neoliberal Democrat, choosing to run the city like a business instead of a metropolis, and treating his constituents like consumers instead of people who chose Emanuel to represent their interests (Monbiot np). Despite the progressive rhetoric put forth by Rahm Emanuel in *The Plan*, and his years of experience in governance, his failing to stand by his own plan and his constituents has resulted in scandal in the city’s police department, the closure of forty-nine Chicago Public Schools and counting, a city teetering on the brink of bankruptcy, and repetitive calls from the public for the newly named “Mayor 1%” to step down from office as he continues to ignore the demands of teachers and other union workers of Chicago affected by budget, pension, and salary cuts.

In 2006, then Illinois 5th District Congressman and Chairman of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee Rahm Emanuel led the fight to regain Democratic control of the House of Representatives (Lydersen 30). After a victorious mid-term election cycle, Emanuel and Reed penned *The Plan*, which largely called for a new social contract, encouraging citizens to become more involved in restoring trust in our neighbors, those who protect us, such as police, and encouraging community organization in their neighborhoods (54). However, as Mayor, Emanuel has incurred the distrust of many of his constituents, especially when it comes to the issue of the racist and violent tactics of the Chicago Police Department, and Emanuel’s involvement in the Laquan McDonald murder tape cover-up of 2014 and 2015. Laquan McDonald was an unarmed black male youth, shot sixteen times by white Officer Jason Van Dyke in October 2014 while McDonald was walking away from the officer. A majority of those shots fired were while McDonald was already down on the ground, and possibly dead (Pearson and Ruthhart np). Emanuel and his administration fought against having the tape of the murder released to the public throughout 2015, claiming that it would interfere with state and federal investigations into the shooting. Some speculate Emanuel

fought the release to increase his chances of winning reelection of the April 2015 mayoral race (Pearson and Ruthhart np). Thirteen months after the shooting, Emanuel was forced to finally release the video by Cook County Judge Franklin Valderrama in November of 2015. Once released, the public outcry in Chicago was national news, as protestors flooded the streets calling for his resignation (Pearson and Ruthhart np).

In a poll conducted by the *Chicago Tribune* in January of 2016, only two months after the video was released, the poll found that Emanuel's approval rating dropped to its lowest number of 27%, and that 59% of Chicago voters said they view Emanuel as not honest and trustworthy (Pearson and Ruthhart np). In order to combat this intense disapproval, Emanuel has since fired former police Superintendent Garry McCarthy, installed a twenty-seven year veteran of the force Eddie Johnson as new Superintendent, and commissioned a task force to investigate the wrong-doings of the Chicago Police Department (Andrusewicz np). Recently, the Mayor's Office sent out a press release on April 22, 2016 stating that Emanuel was calling on Congress to support a bipartisan bill that would funnel money and other resources into the cities who need it most, curbing violence, growing the economy, and providing better education for children ("Mayor Emanuel Calls on Congress" np). However, many criticize Emanuel, stating these actions are too little, and too late. Some refuse to believe Emanuel was not aware of the problems within the Police Department after being in office for four years, and that the McDonald murder was the first incident of improper use of force brought before his administration. If the McDonald tapes had not surfaced, Emanuel's call for reform may not have been implemented (Pearson and Ruthhart np). Emanuel wishes for citizens to encourage trust in one other, and work with government officials and each other in times of crisis. However, if the constituents of Chicago do not trust their mayor or their policemen in the first place, it is very difficult for people to make that leap of faith.

Even before the economic collapse of 2008 made the ability for the younger generations of America to afford college much more difficult, Emanuel called for universal college access, stating in *The Plan*, "we must make a college degree as universal as a high school diploma" (54). In *The Plan*, Emanuel lauds the importance of access to a good education, and highlights the limitations placed on those who do not receive one (75-79). Emanuel has made some improvements to the public school system in Chicago, lengthening the school day for elementary and secondary schools to be on par with the rest of the nation, and organizing the community colleges to emphasize job-skills training (Von Drehle np). According to University of Chicago professor, Timothy Knowles, "Chicago is on track to improve high-school graduation rates by 30 points in under a decade. That's extraordinary and unparalleled" due to Emanuel's changes (Green np). However, since his tenure in office began in 2011, Emanuel has shut down forty-nine of Chicago Public Elementary Schools, and encouraged the calming environment of charter schools, leading to the growth of these schools in the City of Chicago (Admed-Ullah, Chase, and Sector np). The CPS school closings have been met with resistance in the communities the shut downs have affected for multiple reasons. In her book, *Mayor 1%: Rahm Emanuel and the Rise of Chicago's 99%*, journalist and author Kari Lydersen states, "switching schools can be emotionally traumatic as well as highly problematic for working parents and even dangerous for students" (167). There have been instances of students being bullied or otherwise abused by their peers in their new school, and the lack of a Chicago Public School bus service significantly increases the chance that these young students might encounter a dangerous situation using the public transit of Chicago to get to school, or walking the streets in troubled neighborhoods (Lydersen 167-168). In June 2015, when questioned whether it was necessary for the education system itself to be reformed, Emanuel responded, "I am not an education reformer. My job as Mayor is to make sure you have quality" (Green np). Although underperforming schools are being closed in favor of keeping higher performing ones open, families are struggling with that transition, especially the children and teachers of those schools. As more schools close, classroom sizes increase, one-on-one instruction becomes severely limited, and previously high performance rates

can drop due to a large influx of new students.

While more public school closings have been proposed for upcoming years, the charter schools of the city have been largely unaffected by the closures. Kari Lydersen, author of the book *Mayor 1%*, suggests that Emanuel's link with the United Neighborhood Organization's CEO Juan Rangel may have direct correlations as to why more schools are being privatized and avoiding closure. UNO ran thirteen of the ninety-six charter schools in Chicago for the 2012-13 school year, and Rangel was Emanuel's mayoral campaign co-chair for his 2011 bid, continuing to advise Emanuel after his initial run for office (164). Emanuel also has ties to Noble Street, another chain of charter schools in Chicago, making a short film with the group in 2012 entitled, *A Tale of Two Missions*, promoting the peaceful and successful atmosphere of charter schools, and painting the Chicago Teachers Union as a power-hungry group looking out for its own self-interest instead of those of the children they educate (Lydersen 164-166). The film was produced by the Michigan-based Education Action Group, headed by former blogger for the right-wing website Breitbart.com, Kyle Olson (Lydersen 165). These conservative connections are considered to be highly suspicious for a Democratic mayor, and Emanuel's resistance to closing some of the underperforming charter schools in the city could be linked to ties to these men and organizations.

Due to budget cuts to the Chicago Public School system, not only are schools being shut down, but teachers are fighting cuts to their salary, loss of jobs, and impairment to their pensions. The Chicago teachers are amongst the leaders in criticizing the job Rahm Emanuel is doing in office, striking for the first time since 1987 in Chicago. On September 10, 2012, the teachers took to the streets for the first of five days of striking, with the majority of public support. The teachers were fighting for new contract negotiations that included laid off teachers getting priority status for new hiring positions, eliminated the potential for a merit-based pay scale, which rewards teachers unfairly if their students test better, and a slight increase in their pay, starting at 3% for the first year, then decreasing to 2% for the two years after that (Lydersen 178-182). However, once the contract was agreed upon, Emanuel stated that the city would have to shut down the aforementioned public schools in order to cover the costs put forth by the agreement. The teachers and other community leaders staged sit-ins, speeches, and other protests to combat the closures. Ultimately, the schools closed, and many more teachers were laid off (Lydersen 185-187). The battle between the Chicago Teachers Union and Mayor Emanuel continues as contract negotiations have once again given rise to a possible strike in May 2016.

Not only has Emanuel incurred the wrath of the Chicago Teachers Union, but other union workers as well. Emanuel has allowed the management contracts of the unionized janitorial workers of the city to be sold to the highest bidder. In December 2012, Emanuel accepted a \$99.4 million bid for the management of custodial workers at O'Hare airport made by United Maintenance Company instead of the more modest bid presented by the union favored Scrubs, Inc, which was \$11 million less (Lydersen 231). The new managerial company, UMC, slashed their employee's wages from an average of \$15.45 an hour with decent benefits previously offered by Scrubs, Inc., to \$11.90, if workers were lucky enough to be re-hired with United Maintenance (Lydersen 231-234). Many were not. A survey of 178 of the 320 workers laid off by UMC by the Service Employees International Union Local 1 in early 2013 showed that only thirty-five had been rehired by UMC, and five had been wait listed (Lydersen 239). Many of the former workers were unemployed, collecting unemployment or aide from other social services, and some feared losing their homes or not being able to provide for their children (Lydersen 239-240). On January 15, 2013, the *Sun-Times* reported on UMC's possible violation of city bidding requirements by not disclosing that they had sold a portion of their company to Invision Capital, whose managing partner, Robert Castillo, had links to Emanuel through a company called Valor Equity Partners. Antonio Gracias, leader of Valor Equity Partners, serves on Emanuel's World Business Chicago Board (Lydersen 239). Once again, while direct links cannot be made as to this being the reason Emanuel took the bid, it directly conflicts with

Emanuel's own words in *The Plan*, in which he and Reed state, "we need to stop the money chase that takes public officials away from the job they're supposed to do" (128). Perhaps the best way to do that would be to consider the opinions of the city's unions, the worker's ability to provide for their families, and care about the general welfare of constituents. By paying citizens a livable wage, the need for additional funding from social programs decreases or ends for families, the increase in pay fuels the economy as workers are able to purchase more, and increases worker morale, all of which are desperately needed for the unspecialized workers of Chicago.

At the heart of Emanuel's problems is the City of Chicago's financial crisis. It is often the excuse given when choosing to close schools, the reason for laying off public employees, and the reason for not having the proper funds for pensions. The financial situation cannot be placed entirely at the feet of Emanuel of course, as he inherited a majority of it from former Mayor Richard M. Daley in 2011. However, due to the crisis, one area that has been hotly contested is funding the city employee's pensions. In *The Plan*, Emanuel and Reed call for the need for universal retirement savings for all workers, and pushes for automatic enrollment in a 401 (k) program with every job (90). Emanuel has spoken with various unions to compromise on the issue several times, attempted twice to reform funding into pensions, and has been denied by the Illinois State Supreme Court both times. The first came in July 2015, when Judge Rita Novak overturned a 2014 law that scaled back cost-of-living benefits to retirees, while increasing employee contribution into pensions, declaring the law unconstitutional (Bosman np). Emanuel appealed the decision, and recently, in March 2016, the Illinois Supreme Court upheld the position, with the court stating, "the plan was a violation of the rights of employees, who are protected by the Illinois Constitution under a clause that states pension benefits 'shall not be diminished or impaired'" (Bosman np). Due to the initial 2015 ruling, the City of Chicago and Chicago Public Schools had their credit ratings lowered to junk level by Moody's Investor Service, forcing the taxpayers to pay \$70 million on penalty interest rates on a \$674 million bond offering (Bhatti 30).

While the city is not currently bankrupt, improper funding and spending, not just on pensions, but many other ventures of the city, could lead Chicago down the path of financial destruction. Detroit, Michigan recently declared bankruptcy, citing pension funding as one of the main contributors to the financial crisis. However, Saqib Bhatti, a journalist with *In These Times*, claims that Detroit "filed bankruptcy so that it could cut pensions", and this decision was made by state officials in order accomplish two goals, "slashing pensions and regionalizing the Detroit Water and Sewer Department" (28). Bhatti suggests that Emanuel might just use the same political tactics in the future, instead of truly attempting to balance the budget, or going after predatory banks that sold high interest rate swaps to CPS, or asking those with means in the city's most affluent neighborhoods to pay a bit more in property taxes (28-31). If Emanuel cannot find a plan that works to fund these pensions, his dream of automatic 401 (k) enrollment presented in *The Plan* seems unattainable, and far-fetched. The working people of Chicago cannot have "more ownership and more security" if they cannot find a job, continue to experience wage cuts, and do not have funded pensions (Emanuel and Reed 83). A good, secure job is the foundation of ownership, security, and retirement savings, and when those elements are lacking, the American Dream of home ownership, a thriving savings account, and being able to prepare and provide for children is completely annihilated. Chicago is crying out for a social stability network, and thus far, it seems Emanuel is reluctant to provide it.

Currently, with the lowest approval rating during his time in office, police department scandal, a very serious budget crisis, and union strikes resting on his shoulders, Rahm Emanuel has quite a bit of work to do to become the idealist featured in the pages of *The Plan* from 2006. Emanuel must start listening to the needs of all his constituents, have a day in their shoes, and really understand their struggles. Just like Emanuel's voters had to look past his resume to truly understand the type of politician he is, Emanuel must look beyond the budget deficits and corporate-linked boards of advisors in order to understand the kind of city Chicago is, and what the people of the city

truly want from Emanuel. In order to succeed in Chicago, Emanuel must stop treating the city like a business, and instead work to transform it into the metropolis of opportunity it could be. Instead of closing public schools and allowing private property holders to collect money from charter schools, invest in public schools and education, and create the ladder to universal college access desired in *The Plan*. Emanuel must not allow pro-union management companies to be ousted by those who seek to destroy strong unions and cut employment, benefits, and salaries. While Emanuel has taken the beginning steps towards police reform, he must continue to follow through with that reform in order to prove trustworthy. Emanuel must also be willing to fight against the corporate interests of Chicago, and make deals that will help the average, everyday citizens of Chicago, not continue to hurt them by forcing them to pay for the city officials' mistakes through taxes and increased fines and fees, or eliminating their jobs due to new management. Ten years have passed since Emanuel and Reed attempted to establish the future of the Democratic Party platform in *The Plan*, and Emanuel has very little to show for it. Instead of bringing much needed reform to Chicago, he has only increased the people's distrust of him and the system of neoliberal government in which the City of Chicago operates. Rahm Emanuel will need to change the people of Chicago's opinion of him by the next election cycle, or his tenure as Mayor may be limited to a short eight years.

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