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Rahm Emanuel, Chicago and Illinois

By Jim Nowlan

The hyperkinetic and profane Rahm Emanuel will be good for Chicago as mayor [I'm assuming his victory, even if it goes to a run-off] and, by extension, good for Illinois. Never in the city's history has it had a mayor who combined a personal rolodex of global reach, even to the world's leaders, with a big picture world view, plus intense goal orientation.

In other words, Rahm is the whole package, and what's good for Chicago is good for Illinois, much as we Downstaters rue thinking of it that way.

And Chicago today is about as strong a platform from which to operate as exists. After London, New York City, Tokyo and maybe Shanghai, Chicago operates on the next, high level of truly global cities.

Much of the credit for Chicago's emergence among the global city elite is due to present mayor Richard M. Daley. The mayor has helped build a shining central city and has strongly supported the city's financial markets, which continuously set market prices for commodities and financial instruments around the world.

And Chicago-Downstate synergy has been present since the 1850s. In his masterful history, *Nature's Metropolis*, William Cronon details vividly how Downstaters and Midwesterners supplied the corn, hogs, cattle and timber that Chicago processed and marketed to the East Coast and beyond.

Chicago is no longer Sandburg's hog butcher of the world and our grain no longer flows so much through Chicago, yet Interstates 55, 57 and 80 and numerous rail lines are the life-giving economic arteries that transport us and our goods into and out of Chicago. [NOTE re possible insertion. If you know a local company or two that serve Chicago market, you could insert here: "For example, X Company provides the Chicago area with. . . ."]

When we travel abroad, we're "from the Chicago area," not from Illinois, and the better the reputation of Chicago, the better it represents us as well to those abroad. We are within Chicago's orb for better or worse, and at present it is mostly for better.

Rahm Emanuel inherits a Chicago that certainly has its problems. The public schools continue to struggle, even as wave after wave of reforms are imposed on the schools. Chicago and its metro region must also replace its largely defunct heavy industries with lighter information, research and bio-medical enterprises. Yet Chicago suffers from a lack of venture capital, creativity and entrepreneurship relative to that on the coasts and in growing hubs such as Austin, TX. And the vital transportation infrastructure in the region is aging.

Nor are the problems solely within Chicago. Chicago was a significant population loser in the past decade; the city's minority populations are spreading to the nearby suburbs, taking their problems of poor education and limited job skills with them. Rahm will have to work the region as well as his city.

But who is Rahm Emanuel? Known too much for his brusque, profanity-laced talk, Emanuel is superbly trained in the rough-and-tumble of politics. He helped elect Bill Clinton to office twice, then served as a senior aide to Clinton before entering

Congress from the Northwest Side of Chicago, rapidly rising in the ranks. Until recently, he was President Obama's chief of staff.

A ballet dancer as a youngster, the short and fit Emanuel is over-endowed with energy, which he spews upon those who don't do his bidding to his liking. He is called "Rahmbo" by his many detractors for his "take no prisoners" attitude in politics and management.

Consciously Jewish and pro-Israel, Emanuel is liberal on social issues, although he was criticized by progressives for not pushing hard enough inside the Obama Administration on the liberal agenda, particularly on a single-payer health care system.

Emanuel thinks big though it is hard to tell if he thinks deeply, as he arguably has attention deficit disorder on the wide range of issues he confronts. Rahm has proposed, for example, a sales tax on services for Chicago, a major proposal that would need state legislative approval, something a tax averse legislature is not likely to enact, at least not soon.

The challenge for Emanuel is to take a large world-view and life with the big-shots down to a level that Chicagoans can relate to. The city's residents know the mayor's job is a tough one, and they want someone is equally tough—but not too big for his own breeches. The next four years will be lively test for both Rahm and Chicagoans.