

Rahm confounds Chicago media

Is he a hyper-efficient reformer using corporate management techniques to shape up a city grown lazy and weak from decades of old-fashioned patronage politics? Or is Chicago's Mayor Rahm Emanuel a calculating maestro of Beltway spin and the dark art of "controlling the narrative" ... if not the reality?

News media here in the Midwest's largest city agonize daily over those two questions. Nobody wants to be too cynical, or, worse in the journalism profession, even a bit naïve. But after a half-year of covering this wiry whirlwind of a mayor, the answer for some is turning out to be "yes" on both counts.

Yes, he is backing down labor unions, for instance, by adding 90 minutes to the school day without a commensurate pay-raise for teachers; or by pitting city garbage crews in "managed competition" against private-sector waste haulers to see who wins the job. Managed competition – it doesn't get more corporate than that.

But Mayor Emanuel also is an accomplished spin-*meister*. His daily schedule often tracks more like a carefully plotted campaign than a day of routine governance. Most weekdays the press corps is treated to at least one conference or "availability" at which the mayor is flanked by business leaders with expansion plans or neighborhood leaders hailing a new program to cut down on gang shootings or home foreclosures.

Last June, to mark his first 30 days in office, Emanuel staged a press conference to boast how many items on his 100-day "to do" list had been accomplished. Behind him was a super-sized status board with huge checks in front of "early completion" items. TV always gets a snappy visual ... just as they do it in Washington. And each new announcement is none-too-subtly fitted into a larger narrative arc – the story of an energetic

young reformer out to move an inefficient and frequently corrupt city into the 21st Century.

“The story line he’s promoting,” observed Sun-Times reporter Fran Spielman in her analysis of Emanuel’s first 100 days, “is turning the page from Chicago’s corrupt, mismanaged, deficit-spending past to a refreshing, energetic new era of ‘transparency’ and reform.”

The Tribune’s 100-day piece described “a keen and cocksure strategist with sharp elbows and intense personal discipline.”

On a typical weekday, by the time most morning-paper reporters straggle into their newsroom, the mayor they call “Rahmbo” has already swum dozens of laps at a college pool, eaten a heart-healthy breakfast at a neighborhood café and met with corporate executives about bringing more jobs to Chicago. Mayor Emanuel, observed Spielman, “considers ‘rest’ a four-letter word.”

This same mayor, of course, also has a reputation for using saltier four-letter words, according to those who worked for President Bill Clinton’s chief-of-staff or negotiated with Emanuel during his years in Congress. So far his notorious temper has been held in check, an exception being a snippy exchange with NBC-TV reporter Mary Ann Ahern when she pressed him about sending his kids to a private school while presenting himself as an advocate for better public schools.

There is wide suspicion, however, that the other Rahm still lurks beneath the cool and controlled persona. Teachers’ union chief Karen Lewis complained after a closed-door meeting over longer school days that the mayor clobbered her with F-bombs. “My father never talked to me like that,” Lewis debriefed to reporters about what she called “enormous disrespect.” “My husband’s never talked to me like that.”

On substantive matters, however, Emanuel has encountered little second-guessing from the media. As might be expected,

the conservative Tribune's editorial page has cheered the mayor's efforts to reign in "abuses" by public-sector labor unions. "Let the competition begin," headlined a recent Tribune news analysis of Emanuel's plan to rationalize sanitation services. There would be a handful of computer-generated service zones instead of 50 separate ward operations. And Waste Management will handle one or two zones to determine whether or not their one-man recycling trucks are more efficient than are city crews.

So far union leaders – aside from Lewis – have taken a wait-and-see stance, perhaps because the rank-and-file have been surprisingly mum on Emanuel's moves. Many city workers, including police and fire, have bridled under City Hall's informal system of political sponsorship. If a person wanted to get light duty, or go on disability leave, or even get promoted to lieutenant, it helped to have a sponsor with clout in one of the Regular Democratic Organization's favored wards, especially one of the Southwest Side wards led by a Daley, Burke or Madigan.

Former Mayor Richard M. Daley didn't invent this system – it even predates his father, Richard J. – nor did Alderman Edward Burke or Illinois House Speaker Michael Madigan. But it's there, and hundreds, if not thousands, of city workers with lesser sponsorship are tired of working short-handed or getting passed over for promotion. Emanuel's pronouncements about "right-sizing" are pointedly accompanied by statistics showing that, for instance, about a third of the city's unionized workforce is "missing" on Mondays and Fridays, for one reason or another, be it a "sick day" or an extended disability leave. Taxpayers get mad. But city workers who do show up on Mondays and Fridays are even madder.

So has Emanuel been able to work similar magic on the media? That depends.

John Kass, the Tribune's Mike Royko-styled news columnist,

regularly scalded Mayor Daley and started out skeptical of the man he called Daley's "handpicked" successor. But in recent months Kass has avoided direct criticism, and even delivered a compliment or two. "Finally, a mayor who gets it," Kass exuded about Emanuel's bid to lengthen the school day.

Mark Brown, Kass's counterpart at the Sun-Times, started out neutral, but lately has shown uneasiness with Emanuel's pre-packaged news-as-narrative. Recently Brown chastised Emanuel for claiming to put another 1,000 police "on the street" when half the new beat cops are transferring from disbanded tactical units that already were "on the street." Brown complained Emanuel sometimes puts out "just a little too much b.s. to have to swallow whole."

But in general, and with the city staring at an impending \$635 million budget shortfall, Emanuel-the-Efficient seems to have tamed a press corps that, during the Daley years, was known for its cynicism. Ben Joravsky, political writer for the weekly Chicago Reader, probably goes too far in asserting: "I haven't seen as much love between the mainstream media and a political boss since Mayor Daley tried to bring the Olympics to town."

All honeymoons inevitably end, though. And sooner or later one suspects Chicago's news media will live up to their skeptical reputation by jumping from Mayor Rahm Emanuel's narrative arc.

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