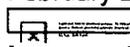


RELEASE IN PART  
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**From:** sbwhoep [redacted]  
**Sent:** Monday, February 22, 2010 5:40 PM  
**To:** H  
**Subject:** H: Just fyi. What's going around...Les Gelb... Sid

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 Rumbling Over Rahm  
 by Leslie H. Gelb  
 February 22, 2010 | 3:26pm

 Alex Brandon / AP Photo **Leslie H. Gelb's call for White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel to be reassigned spurred a circle-the-wagons reaction from pro- (or perhaps even anti-) Rahm forces. Gelb siffs the fallout for clues.**

When you write that the president of the United States should replace his chief of staff, someone will fire back. So it was that Rahm Emanuel *apparently* struck back at my piece last week on the Daily Beast through a column in Sunday's Washington Post. Only this time, the return fire had a rare twist, one that could produce Washington convulsions. It was seemingly aimed at me (and others who published suggestions of Emanuel's limitations as chief). But whether it was intentional or not, the volley actually struck the president himself.

Here is the story, a very Washington tale of stretching permissible criticism of power holders, of pungent media leaks, of labyrinthine speculation as to who is doing what to whom.

Maybe the leaker thought the way to get rid of Rahm completely was to brand him as a "traitor" to the boss. With a headline "Replace Rahm," I wrote last Tuesday that Emanuel lacked the managerial skills, discipline, and strategic ability to get things done as chief of staff. I argued he should be moved over to a political adviser slot, where his considerable, can-do talents would better serve his boss. I targeted others as well, mostly in Mr. Obama's Chicago crowd. Several writers also blasted this crowd, mostly with unsigned bullets, but never crossed the red line calling for their removal. I wrote the piece because it essentially reflected the waves of anti-White House staff critiques breaking over Washington, but rarely heard outside its drawing rooms. I did it because I believed the president was running out of chances to succeed and needed better and tougher staffers. I did it because if he failed, the nation failed. Then came the inevitable blast back, a devastating leak, in a piece by Dana Milbank, a respected Washington journalist. Interesting that the leaker selected Milbank. He's sort of a half-reporter, half-columnist who roams the entire capital city, not just the White House. The leaker must have felt safe because Milbank has so many sources all over town, making the leakers harder to trace.

The Milbank headline read: "Why Obama needs Rahm at the top." It began: "Let us now praise Rahm Emanuel. No, seriously." Then, he lists me and a couple others who also criticized Rahm. "But," he continued, "sacking Emanuel is the last thing the president should do."

Then, Milbank (and presumably the leaker) delivered the surprise and wounding blow – to the president himself. "Obama's first year fell apart in large part because he didn't follow his chief of staff's advice on crucial matters. Arguably, Emanuel is the only person keeping Obama from becoming Jimmy Carter."

Then, Milbank (and the leaker) took his first shot, not at me, but at congressional liberals and everyone in the Chicago crowd except Rahm. "Obama's problem," Milbank continued, "is that his other confidants—particularly Valerie Jarrett and Robert Gibbs, and, to a lesser extent, David Axelrod—are part of the Cult of Obama. In love with the president, they believe he is a transformational figure who needn't dirty his hands in politics."

So, it was "their" fault—until you see the real blow landed beyond them and on the President himself. "The president would have been better off heeding Emanuel's counsel," but instead "overruled" him on several key Rahm recommendations: not rushing to close Guantanamo and bringing terrorists to U.S. prisons, not trying Khalid Sheikh Mohammed in New York, and going for a smaller health care bill focused on popular items with Republican support. "The result was," Milbank wrote, "as the world now knows, disastrous." In other words, Mr. Obama could have thrived and saved himself on key issues had he only listened to Rahm.

It sure looks like Rahm (or someone near and dear to him) trying to save himself at the president's expense. This is an incredibly unusual leak, seemingly a chief of staff undermining his own boss, the president. Worse, it details specific advice Rahm personally gave Mr. Obama in the absolute privacy of the Oval Office. Presidents go crazy at such breaches of confidence.

Which is why another possibility has to be considered: that Rahm was not the leaker. The leak was so egregious, so anti-Chicago crowd minus Rahm, so devastating to the president, that Emanuel couldn't have been stupid enough to leak a story where he was the sole, surviving hero. Remember, too, that my piece did not recommend kicking Rahm out of the White House, just sliding him over into a political adviser job where he could practice small-bite pragmatism. Maybe

someone didn't want Rahm around the White House at all, in any position. Maybe the leaker thought the way to get rid of Rahm completely was to brand him as a "traitor" to the boss. Maybe the leaker belonged to that contingent of self-mutilating liberal Democrats who have always viewed Rahm as too centrist and pragmatic.

Of course, I don't know what's afoot. And of course, Milbank put his own views into his own article. But someone gave him the specifics, the precious ammunition about Rahm's private advice to Mr. Obama. The story is not over.

*Leslie H. Gelb, a former New York Times columnist and senior government official, is author of Power Rules: How Common Sense Can Rescue American Foreign Policy (HarperCollins 2009), a book that shows how to think about and use power in the 21st century. He is president emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations.*

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