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Rahm's long goodbye

By: Glenn Thrush

June 22, 2010 04:34 AM EDT

For all the talk about Rahm Emanuel reaching for the “eject” button, the fiery White House chief of staff isn’t leaving in the immediate future — and could serve well into 2011, according to people close to him.

“It’s the opinion in the top levels of the White House that Rahm is going to be here longer than many people think,” said a senior administration official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Speculation about Emanuel’s departure has been a favorite parlor game for nearly a year — stoked by Emanuel’s admission that he’d love to run for Chicago mayor (should current Mayor Richard Daley retire, of course), his own kvetching about the rigors of the job, withering attacks on him from the left and the right and the fact that the average expiration date on a chief of staff is 18 months.

Emanuel is leaving, but his departure date has proved to be profoundly elastic. Friends and co-workers said he vacillates from day to day, sometimes minute to minute. He might leave in December after the midterms; or he might stay until next summer, depending on whether Daley runs or President Barack Obama asks him to stick around, they said.

And even as he pines for his native Chicago, Emanuel continues to put down real roots in D.C., recently writing the check to enroll his children in the exclusive Maret School in Washington through the 2011 school year, according to a person close to Emanuel.

He’s shown few signs of loosening his grip on the tiller — bombarding White House staffers with long-distance calls during the first days of the Gulf oil spill even as he traveled in Israel for his son’s bar mitzvah.

And in a broader sense, it’s hard to imagine Emanuel’s huge personality extracted from the political, journalistic and bar stool life of Obama’s Washington.

Take the last game of last week’s NBA Finals, when any American voter could wander into Tunnichiff’s Tavern on Capitol Hill and witness one of the most powerful men in the nation egging on the Boston Celtics — screaming at the flat-screen TV, actually — joined

by a merry band that included Sen. Max Baucus (D-Mont.); Sen. Chris Dodd (D-Conn.); Jim Manley, spokesman for Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.); and a pair of favorite reporters from The New York Times and The Washington Post.

Despite a British tabloid story asserting that Emanuel is sick of Obama's "idealism" and is racing for the exit, the former Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee chairman still loves the attention and power of his current job and hasn't made up his mind when he's leaving, people who know him said.

"This is BS. And if you need it for translation, it is baseless," Emanuel said in a statement pushing back against a story in the U.K.'s Daily Telegraph portraying Emanuel as restless and fed up.

Replacing Emanuel, when he eventually goes, will be no easy task for Obama and the small clique of close advisers led by Pete Rouse, David Axelrod and Valerie Jarrett.

For one thing, Obama and company need to know what the post-November political landscape looks like before picking a successor: If Republicans take back one or more house of Congress, the new chief of staff will need to know how to leverage executive power against a hostile Hill; if Democrats retain their majorities, Emanuel's successor will need some of his legislative skills.

Barring a major course correction, Obama, who prizes loyalty and familiarity, isn't likely to reach too far outside his inner circle, advisers said.

Still, the president is increasingly cognizant of his reputation for insularity and would quite likely give a serious look at respected former Clinton chiefs of staff Leon Panetta, currently head of the CIA, or John Podesta, who runs the Center for American Progress, a major liberal think tank with close ties to the administration.

Rouse, a senior adviser who served as Obama's Senate chief of staff, is considered the best pure manager in the White House and a logical choice to replace Emanuel, according to a half-dozen administration officials and consultants.

But Rouse's colleagues say the quiet 60-year-old insider loves his work, the Grateful Dead and his cats — but despises the spotlight and would most likely turn down the job unless Obama insisted.

"The key thing about Pete is that the president trusts him and would feel very, very comfortable with him in charge," said a Democratic consultant who knows both men well. "But he probably won't take it."

One possible candidate — deputy chief of staff Jim Messina, Emanuel's political go-to guy — is likely to play a major role in Obama's 2012 reelection campaign and is expected to move to Chicago sometime next year.

In Messina's absence, another Emanuel favorite — Deputy National Security Adviser Tom Donilon — has emerged as a possible successor, according to people close to the situation.

Obama has been impressed by Donilon's presentations at the President's Daily Briefing, and the Rhode Island native has a wide variety of political and governmental experience, serving as a congressional liaison under President Jimmy Carter, chief State Department

spokesman under President Bill Clinton and a campaign adviser who helped Obama prepare for debates against John McCain.

One major Donilon drawback: He served as an executive vice president for Fannie Mae, the bailed-out mortgage giant, and reportedly lobbied against stronger regulatory oversight.

David Plouffe, Obama's 2008 campaign manager, is another contender, with a reputation for discipline, team building and solid management skills. But Plouffe has been reluctant to settle down in Washington, is earning a stellar living as a consultant and hates the press.

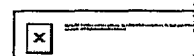
Former Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle is also a possible successor, even though his nomination for Health and Human Services secretary was scuttled by revelations he failed to report limo rides paid for by a corporate client.

Another White House aide, Phil Schiliro, is a favorite of Obama's for his legislative savvy and political instincts. But critics said he lacks the range of policy and political experience that other candidates possess, and that his mastery of the Hill won't mean much if Democrats surrender their majorities in either house.

Then there's Ron Klain, 49, Vice President Joe Biden's brainy and politically astute chief of staff, who is said to be intensely interested in making the move from the Eisenhower Executive Office Building to the West Wing.

Klain — who also served as Al Gore's chief of staff — is well-regarded inside the White House. Plus, he's got a touch of star power: Kevin Spacey played him in the HBO movie "Recount," about his role in guiding the Gore campaign through the 2000 Florida recount.

Klain's downside: He's essentially an outsider who has yet to develop a serious rapport with the president, according to insiders.



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