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Sticking It to Rahm

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From their shared loathing of Rahm Emanuel to the insurgency led by the minority leader ("he took us by the throat"), the inside story of why not a single House Republican supported the president's stimulus package.

"Rahm, you don't waste a crisis," a senior Republican, speaking on the phone in a mock dialogue, pretended to tease White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel the day before the stimulus bill vote in the House of Representatives. "Rahm, you're making the Clinton mistake going for spending in a crisis. Reagan radically adjusted the tax code in his crisis. Rahm, all you're trying to do is scare people, like Hank Paulson did with the TARP. It won't work this time. We're wise to it. Rahm, you won't get ten votes from us. Not ten."



AP Photo

"Rahm hates us and lets us know it, and we hate him back," said a senior Republican.

It turned out that this estimate was 1,000 percent too high, because Emanuel's go-for-the-big-win style, even when mixed with the president's earnest charm, did not gain even one vote from the House GOP. The caucus held together like a stone wall when it came time to vote on the Democratic-authored \$825 billion stimulus package—all 177 members joined 11 "Blue Dog" Democrats for the 244-188 final tally. How this was done explains the sudden and surprising new discipline of the Republican Party.

"Rahm told the president that he can take care of Congress," a senior Republican reported to me. "He said, 'These guys will roll over, they're afraid of being called the party of No. Believe me, I know them. They'll be easy.'"

The day before the vote, Emanuel sent the president to the Hill to meet with the House Republicans for a generous 90-minute question-and-answer session that was well-received by the members. "He's charming," was the universal verdict, one prominent Republican told me. "The president was patient, he gave us plenty of time. But he didn't convince anyone. After he left, we looked at each other, and said, 'How can they stick him with this garbage?'"

Since the beginning of his campaign for the presidency, Barack Obama has spoken repeatedly of "post-partisanship." He promised that he would transcend the divisions of the past by uniting Democrats and Republicans alike. His actions, engineered by Emanuel, were intended to win enough Republican votes to claim not just a victory on the stimulus bill but also confirmation of his "post-partisan" leadership. The result, with not a single Republican voting in favor, despite Obama's wining and dining, joking and cajoling, reveals a Washington as polarized as it has ever been. The dream of post-partisanship did not last one vote in the Congress.

The day before the crucial vote in the House, Minority Leader John Boehner told his troops that the Republican Party is no longer a bureaucracy. "He took us by the throat and told us, 'You're no longer the majority, stop acting like it,'" a senior Republican told me about the run up to the vote. "'If you've got an idea, get it on MSNBC. This is an entrepreneurial insurgency.' He was kicking the ball around. He wants everyone involved. If there's an amendment, he told us to offer it. If you have 48 seconds for YouTube, get it up there. Get busy and resist in every instance."

Emanuel, working with his old boss and ally, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, made it easy for the Republicans to resist. Every penny in the more than 600-page bill came from a Democratic wish list of pork that dated back to the beginning of the Bush administration. "They were limited the last two years by the White House keeping firm on the cap for each bill," a congressional source reported to me, "and Nancy Pelosi told them all to send their ideas to David Obey [chairman of the House Appropriations Committee], and he just put them together in one great big earmark."

"We won the election, we wrote the bill," said Pelosi as many times as she could to an open microphone. But what was happening away from the microphone made it even easier for the Republicans to hold together. All they had to do was bring up Rahm Emanuel.

"Rahm hates us and lets us know it, and we hate him back," said a senior Republican. "If we had gotten together in a room and tried to write a bill that put the taxpayer together with the Republican Party, we could not have come up

with this thing. It is too unbelievable.”

Rahm Emanuel is the Republicans' favorite piñata. Overwound and overbearing, the Chicago congressman helped destroy the Republican majority in 2006 when he acted as chief fund raiser, candidate recruiter, and stump speaker. On the night the Democrats took the House back after 12 years of Republican rule, he praised himself for delivering a “thumpin’.” Now that he’s Obama’s chief of staff, the Republicans have him to poke at for at least four years.

After the vote, President Obama, at Emanuel’s suggestion, hosted a bipartisan reception at the White House for congressional leaders from both houses. John Boehner joked that he felt like the “snake at the garden party.” But the Republican leaders were not silent.

“We gave the president what he asked for, a temporary stimulus bill,” said a senior Republican, “at half the cost of what the Democrats wrote. He knows it. They handed him a monster of spending. Rahm did this, and now he takes this to the Senate. Does Rahm want to be an honest broker, or does he want to be the guy who socks Republicans in the face? He isn’t helping with the Democrats, and he’s hurting with the Republicans.”

“Polling showed us that when we took the vote, independent support for the bill was collapsing,” a senior Republican said. “Democratic support was climbing while the independents ran away.”

“What does Rahm do? Is he going to go to the Democrats and say ‘no’ to this? Or is he going to make his president sign it?”

Emanuel’s answer to the Republican shutout is to announce that the Democratic Party will target Republicans by running campaigns in their districts to tell the voters that their representative “voted against 4 million jobs.”

Eight days after Obama’s inauguration, the partisan battles are at full tilt.

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