

The White House Chief of Staff in the Obama Administration: A Six Month Review*

David B. Cohen, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Political Science
Fellow, Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics
The University of Akron
Department of Political Science
201 Olin Hall
Akron, OH 44325-1904
Ofc: 330-972-6045
Cell: 330-524-5838
Fax: 330-972-8841
Email: dbcohen@uakron.edu
<http://www.uakron.edu/colleges/artsci/depts/polisci/faculty/cohen.php>

I. Obama's Chief of Staff at Six Months: Hitting the Ground Sprinting

A. The Choice: Why Rahm?

Rahm Emanuel was no stranger to Barack Obama as they emerged together from the world of Chicago politics. They had served together in Congress as part of the Illinois delegation and had a good working and personal relationship. Emanuel's experience in Washington was deep having served for seven years in the Clinton White House as a senior adviser and point person on a number of important policy initiatives including welfare reform and trade. Following a stint at a Chicago investment firm after leaving the Clinton administration, Emanuel was elected to the U.S. House in 2002 and quickly rose to the Democratic Party leadership. Emanuel chaired the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee for the 2006 election cycle and is credited with helping the Democrats take back control of the U.S. House after twelve years.¹ Because of these factors, Obama decided on Emanuel the summer before the election:

Mr. Obama had settled on his fellow Chicagoan to be his chief of staff well before he was elected. He was drawn to Mr. Emanuel's experience in both the White House and Congress and called him 'the whole package' of political acumen, policy chops and pragmatism. He is also a skilled compromiser.²

Emanuel is the first chief of staff (COS) in history to relinquish a seat in Congress to serve as COS. Only three others, Donald Rumsfeld, Howard Baker, and Leon Panetta, had previously served in Congress and only Rumsfeld and Panetta also had White House experience.

* I would like to thank Martha Joynt Kumar for her helpful comments. Any errors or admissions, however, are the sole responsibility of the author.

¹ For information on Emanuel's role in engineering the 2006 Democratic takeover of the U.S. House, see Naftali Bendavid, *The Thumpin': How Rahm Emanuel and the Democrats Learned to Be Ruthless and Ended the Republican Revolution* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).

² Mark Leibovich, "Obama's Partisan, Profane Confidant Reigns It In," *New York Times*, January 25, 2009.

Members of Congress viewed the selection of Rahm Emanuel positively. In a November 22, 2008, *National Journal Congressional Insiders Poll*, 94% of Democrats and 93% of Republicans believed that Emanuel would “be an effective White House chief of staff.”³ Praise for the selection was effusive, even from Republicans:

Rahm was a brilliant choice. He is tough enough to deal with congressional Democrats, smart enough to reach out to Republicans, pragmatic enough to keep the administration from veering too far to the left, and controversial enough to become the lightning rod that Obama needs to keep the heat off the president and on the staff.⁴

Another GOP insider said that:

Few people entering the White House have such a keen understanding of both the White House operation and Congress. Emanuel is an operative who knows when to be aggressive and when to be judicious, and he has strong working relationships with key members of the congressional leadership.⁵

Of course, not all Beltway players were keen on the selection. House Minority Leader John Boehner (R-OH) released the following statement: “This is an ironic choice for a president-elect who has promised to change Washington, make politics more civil and govern from the center.”⁶

B. Background & Personality

Emanuel came to the chief of staff job with a reputation as a take-no-prisoners Chicago pol. Nicknamed “Rahmbo,” stories of Emanuel are legendary, from his ballet training as a youngster, to dead fish being sent to a pollster, to his regular use of salty language, to his effective use of Machiavellian tactics.⁷ Emanuel, in fact, was the inspiration for Josh Lyman, the fictional deputy chief of staff, on the hit TV show *West Wing*.

Emanuel’s legendary hard-charging personality and get things done attitude was valued by Obama. The President-elect stated that “I announce this appointment first because the chief of staff is central to the ability of a president and administration to accomplish an agenda. And no one I know is better at getting things done than Rahm Emanuel.”⁸

C. Office of COS

The Obama administration continued the tradition begun in 1997 of naming two deputy chiefs of staff, and, as the Bush 43 administration had done, the titles and portfolios of the deputies were clearly delineated. Jim Messina, who had served as chief of staff for Representative Carolyn McCarthy (D-NY), Senator Byron Dorgan (D-ND), Senator Max Baucus (D-MT), and the

³ Richard E. Cohen and Peter Bell, “Congressional Insiders Poll,” *National Journal*, November 22, 2008.

⁴ Richard E. Cohen and Peter Bell, “Congressional Insiders Poll,” *National Journal*, November 22, 2008.

⁵ Richard E. Cohen and Peter Bell, “Congressional Insiders Poll,” *National Journal*, November 22, 2008.

⁶ Alexander Burns, “Two Ex-Chiefs of Staff Praise Emanuel,” *Politico.com*, November 7, 2008.

⁷ See Naftali Bendavid, *The Thumpin’: How Rahm Emanuel and the Democrats Learned to Be Ruthless and Ended the Republican Revolution* (New York: Doubleday, 2007).

⁸ *USNEWS.Com*, “In Their Own Words: President-Elect Obama and Rahm Emanuel,” November 6, 2008.

Obama campaign, was named deputy chief of staff for operations. As part of his portfolio, “Messina supervises the operational and political shops, overseeing the White House’s interactions with the Secret Service, the scheduling office, the advance teams and the public liaison.”⁹ Given his depth of experience with both houses of Congress, Congressional liaison also reports to Messina. Mona Sutphen, a foreign policy expert who had worked as a special assistant to the national security adviser in the Clinton administration, was tapped as deputy chief of staff for policy. Sutphen’s primary responsibility is overseeing and coordinating the various policy councils and the inter-agency process in the White House.¹⁰

D. Challenges & Expectations

The Obama administration inherited perhaps the toughest economic environment since Franklin Roosevelt became president in 1933 during the Great Depression. At the beginning of 2009, the administration faced a deep economic recession—the worst in decades—complete with skyrocketing unemployment and two of the three American automakers on the verge of bankruptcy. In foreign affairs, the challenges were just as great as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq continued, Iran and North Korea continued to ignore international norms, and major issues of disagreement continued with Russia.

Despite the enormous challenges facing the incoming administration, the American public had great expectations of the new president and his team. For example, in a poll conducted the week before the inauguration, 86% of the American public had moderate to high expectations of the incoming president and 71% felt he had a mandate to institute major new programs.¹¹ Even Republicans had high hopes for the president and his team as 79% of all Americans, including 56% of Republicans, were optimistic about the next four years of an Obama administration.¹²

E. Emanuel as Chief, The First Six Months

From most accounts, Rahm Emanuel is a strong chief of staff and has taken naturally to the role position, though with varying results. Shortly before taking office, Emanuel described the chief of staff’s job this way:

I served President Clinton as his senior adviser. That was to blend policy, politics and press. The chief of staff job...those are some of the skills, some of the areas that you need, has a different portfolio. You are kind of one of the final advisers... You make sure that what he wants, like he wants a wide range of views before he makes a decision. And he wants us to challenge the assumptions. I got to make sure he has that. Second, you also have to manage the White House so it serves what his purposes are. Third, there are times you will, as a chief of staff, be an ambassador. That’s one of the reasons, you know, I went up and spoke to the Senate Republican luncheon....So you have different roles in the chief of staff job....He does know I have policy background. He would want that. He

⁹ Anne E. Kornblut, “For Obama’s Political Knots, He’s the ‘Fixer’; Low-Profile Aide Jim Messina Has Tackled Tough Problems,” *Washington Post*, February 21, 2009.

¹⁰ Scott Wilson, “Another World; Policy Chief Enters a New Phase,” *Washington Post*, April 14, 2009.

¹¹ *ABC News/Washington Post Poll*, January 13-16, 2009.

¹² *CBS News/New York Times Poll*, January 11-15, 2009.

wouldn't want somebody that was a clean slate on that. He would want somebody that knows the politics of an issue. He would want somebody that would also know how to work an issue from a communications standpoint. But the job is to provide him with all that...he wants, so he can make the decision, and then he can have his staff execute that decision.¹³

Emanuel's portfolio is enormous, even for a chief of staff:

Known for a willingness during his days in the House leadership to take on assignments large and small, Emanuel appears not to have slowed a step, seemingly involved in every issue of any importance that comes before the president. Whether the meeting involves high matters of state, tête-à-têtes with foreign leaders, priorities like energy or health care, or haranguing some forlorn credit card executives, Emanuel is on hand.¹⁴

Emanuel is also a trusted adviser to the President, perhaps his most trusted. He has the president's ear and confidence which gives him tremendous credibility in the Beltway:

Vice President Joseph Biden said he took the job on the condition he would be the last guy in the room when a policy is decided. And while he does appear frequently with Obama -- more so than Dick Cheney did with George W. Bush, at least publicly -- it is Emanuel who seems to be in the room not only when a policy is decided, but when it is hatched.¹⁵

Emanuel's performance as a manager of the White House process is somewhat mixed. Though the Obama White House lacks the crisp efficiency of the Bush 43 administration, it has not come close to approaching the chaos of the Clinton years. Meetings, which always started on time or early in the Bush years, now begin a few minutes late.¹⁶

Chiefs of staff are intimately involved in the recruitment of high-level personnel for the White House staff and cabinet. In this area, there have been some missteps on high-profile cabinet appointments, such as Tom Daschle for Health and Human Services and Judd Gregg for Commerce.¹⁷ There have also been public disagreements with cabinet members on lower level appointments. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's choice for ambassador to Japan, Harvard University Professor Joseph Nye who was Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs in the Clinton administration, was never seriously considered.¹⁸ Clinton's choice for the new director for the United States Agency for International Development has been delayed by a cumbersome White House vetting process leading Secretary Clinton to publicly complain at a town hall for USAID employees: "It's frustrating beyond words. I pushed very hard, when I knew I was coming here, to get permission from the White House to be able to tell

¹³ Charlie Rose, *The Charlie Rose Show*, January 16, 2009.

¹⁴ Keith Koffler, "Emanuel is Here, There, Everywhere," *Roll Call*, May 21, 2009.

¹⁵ Keith Koffler, "Emanuel is Here, There, Everywhere," *Roll Call*, May 21, 2009.

¹⁶ Keith Koffler, "Emanuel is Here, There, Everywhere," *Roll Call*, May 21, 2009.

¹⁷ Keith Koffler, "Emanuel is Here, There, Everywhere," *Roll Call*, May 21, 2009.

¹⁸ Mark Landler, "For Clinton, '09 Campaign Is for Her Turf," *New York Times*, July 15, 2009.

you that help is on the way and someone will be nominated shortly. I was unable. The message came back: ‘We’re not ready.’”¹⁹

Despite these setbacks and despite the sheer immensity of the policy agenda and brutal hours, even by White House standards, the fact that the White House continues to function with a relative lack of mistakes, leaks, and acrimony, is a credit to Emanuel’s managerial skills.²⁰

It is the *ambassador* role that Emanuel highlighted (above) on *The Charlie Rose Show* which has made him invaluable. All chiefs represent the White House on the Hill in varying degrees. However, the extent to which Emanuel works the Hill has made him unique. In the major legislative battles which have occurred in the first six months of the Obama presidency, Emanuel has taken a lead role in negotiating and moving the legislation through Congress. One journalist noted that “The White House legislative strategy blends Obama’s vision and salesmanship with Emanuel’s granular political expertise and dealmaking skills.”²¹ Emanuel’s hands-on massaging of the legislative process helped pass the economic stimulus package. Wrote Ryan Lizza of *The New Yorker*:

Nearly everyone in official Washington acknowledges that, besides Obama himself, Emanuel had done the most to coax and bully the bill out of Congress and onto the President’s desk for signing....By any measure, what Obama’s White House has achieved in passing the stimulus bill is historic. The last President to preside over a legislative victory of this magnitude so early in his Administration was Franklin Roosevelt, who on the sixth day of his Presidency persuaded Congress to enact a wholesale restructuring of the banking system. (That, too, is likely in the offing for the Obama team.) Yet praise for Obama was surprisingly grudging. Some liberal Democrats said that Emanuel and his team had made too many concessions to House Republicans, all of whom voted against the legislation. Meanwhile, conservatives complained that Obama had broken his pledge of bipartisan cooperation. Both arguments infuriated Emanuel, who spent hours on the Hill during the negotiations, arranged private meetings with Obama in the Oval Office for the Republican senators Susan Collins, Olympia Snowe, and Arlen Specter, whose votes were critical to the bill’s passage, and personally haggled over the smallest spending details during a crucial evening of bargaining that lasted until the early morning.²²

Later, with Obama’s first budget, Emanuel again took the lead in navigating the legislation through Congress:

As the House and Senate debated the budget earlier this month, Rahm Emanuel’s spacious West Wing office took on the feel of a legislative bazaar. Wavering Democrats filed in individually and in groups seeking audiences with President Obama’s pugnacious chief of staff, all bearing concerns about the 2010 fiscal blueprint. For some, the issue

¹⁹ Mark Landler, “Clinton Says Candidate for Aid Agency Is Tangled in Vetting,” *New York Times*, July 13, 2009.

²⁰ Michael D. Shear, “In West Wing: Grueling Schedules, Bleary Eyes,” *Washington Post*, July 13, 2009.

²¹ Shailagh Murray, “Give-and-Take With Emanuel Advances President’s Agenda,” *Washington Post*, April 13, 2009.

²² Ryan Lizza, “The Gatekeeper: Rahm Emanuel on the Job,” *The New Yorker*, March 2, 2009.

was farm payments. For others, veterans benefits. Fiscal conservatives balked at the \$1.2 trillion deficit. One House member wanted to discuss a new federal building in his district. Another sought an appointment with the commerce secretary. Forty-six lawmakers beat a path to the White House, and, on April 2, Emanuel's hospitality paid off. All but three of his visitors voted in the House or Senate for a \$3.5 trillion blueprint that preserved Obama's ambitious domestic policy goals. The 233 to 196 House margin represented the largest budget victory for either party in a decade.²³

Emanuel's way of coping with Congress is largely a continuation of his style when he served in the House Democratic leadership: he is ever accessible and always present. Members of Congress, from both parties, have his personal cell phone number and he talks with the Congressional leadership constantly. His morning exercise routine often involves a visit to the House gym where he can buttonhole members.²⁴ His knowledge of the legislative process and attention to detail allows him to oversee and shape legislative strategy on even the smallest of issues. Observed *Roll Call*:

Nowhere is his omnipresence more keenly felt than on Capitol Hill. By all accounts, the chief of staff has maintained his contacts in Congress and works them continuously. And, contrary to his reputation as a foul-mouthed bully, Hill Democrats describe a smooth listener and fixer seeking to make sure the Obama White House eschews the my-way-or-the-highway methods employed by the Bush administration. He talks with Members, he meets with them, he hears their concerns -- he even sweats with them. According to several sources, Emanuel still uses the White House gym several times a week.²⁵

Emanuel is very accessible to the media and has embraced the role of *media proxy* for the Obama administration. Emanuel is a frequent guest on political shows and has used these formats to announce controversial policies or tactics of the administration with a level of candor that is rare in Washington.²⁶ Emanuel is a very public face of the administration, assuming a higher profile than his immediate predecessor Josh Bolten did in the last two and one half years of the Bush 43 administration. Media critic Howard Kurtz observed that:

Perhaps no White House chief of staff in modern history has worked the media as aggressively and relentlessly as Emanuel. Drawing on his long-standing relationships with journalists, Emanuel serves up on-the-record quotes, background spin and the sort of capital gossip that lubricates relationships. The former Chicago congressman also seeks their take on events and floats possible administration tactics. And Emanuel is brusquely efficient.²⁷

James Baker, Ronald Reagan's first chief of staff, was also renowned for courting the press.²⁸

²³ Shailagh Murray, "Give-and-Take With Emanuel Advances President's Agenda," *Washington Post*, April 13, 2009.

²⁴ Mark Leibovich, "Obama's Partisan, Profane Confidant Reigns It In," *New York Times*, January 25, 2009.

²⁵ Keith Koffler, "Emanuel is Here, There, Everywhere," *Roll Call*, May 21, 2009.

²⁶ Dana Milbank, "At Breakfast, A Side of Political Sausage-Making," *Washington Post*, June 26, 2009.

²⁷ Howard Kurtz, "Emanuel's Mastery of Reading Reporters," *Washington Post*, June 23, 2009.

²⁸ Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (PublicAffairs, 2000).

However, a large difference between Baker and Emanuel is the extent to which Emanuel is willing to be on the record and comment on almost every issue. Baker preferred to work in the shadows; Emanuel is out front and something of a media celebrity.²⁹

Emanuel's high profile salesmanship of policy has, at times, led to intense criticism from both wings of the political spectrum. Just such an episode occurred with the health care reform debate when Emanuel suggested that a lack of a public health insurance option in the bill was not necessarily a deal breaker. Many liberal groups like Moveon.org and progressives in the House were apoplectic at the suggestion.³⁰ However, his statement was applauded by conservative members of Congress, particularly Blue Dog Democrats representing swing districts whose constituents are uncomfortable with the legislation's purported hefty price tag.³¹

Emanuel has also launched some trial balloons which never got off the ground. The controversy which erupted in April over the "torture memos," for example, left Emanuel and White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs on the wrong side of administration policy. In an effort to have the administration take a centrist position by releasing the controversial memos which provided legal rationales for the Bush administration to authorize enhanced interrogation techniques of prisoners, Emanuel publicly rejected efforts to prosecute the authors of those same memos. The suggestion was condemned by the Democratic base and walked back later by the President.³²

Overall, however, Rahm Emanuel's first six months as White House chief of staff have been largely successful. Given the enormity of the agenda and the stiff challenges facing the new administration, Emanuel's skills have been tested. The most notable observation is that there has been a relative lack of mistakes made by the new administration. Just a cursory comparison with the last two Democratic administrations reveals a superior performance for the Obama administration with regards to both internal White House management issues and general success in the legislative and policy arenas. Emanuel's resume and career background no doubt helped smooth the transition for the White House. The mix of Emanuel's previous White House and Hill experience is invaluable, and it shows.

II. Chief of Staff Beginnings

Though unelected and serving solely at the pleasure of the president, the White House chief of staff is perhaps the most powerful individual in American government save for their boss. In general, no other individual has the access and influence as the chief of staff and no other person spends as much time with the president. It is not an overstatement to say that the position of chief of staff is vital to the performance of the presidential administration and because of that, the president-elect's choice of the individual to serve in that position is perhaps the most important personnel decision that will be made during the transition.

²⁹ Dana Milbank, "At Breakfast, A Side of Political Sausage-Making," *Washington Post*, June 26, 2009.

³⁰ Perry Bacon, Jr. and Paul Kane, "Senate Democrats Still Seeking GOP Support," *Washington Post*, July 9, 2009.

³¹ Steven T. Dennis and Keith Koffler, "Hill Liberals Steamed by Emanuel Remarks," *Roll Call*, July 8, 2009.

³² R. Jeffrey Smith, "Emanuel Rejects Trial for Memos Author," *Washington Post*, April 20, 2009; Keith Koffler, *Roll Call*, April 27, 2009.

The position of chief of staff is a relatively modern invention. Although glimpses of the position can be seen all the way back to George Washington's administration, Dwight Eisenhower is the first president to utilize a White House management system with a strong chief of staff in charge. Drawing on his extensive military experience, Eisenhower grafted a military-style organization onto the White House management structure and tapped Sherman Adams, Governor of New Hampshire, to be his first chief. For the next four decades, Republican administrations would follow Eisenhower's lead and appoint a chief of staff at the outset of the administration. Since midway through the Carter administration with the elevation of Hamilton Jordan to that position in 1979, every White House has had a chief of staff. However, it is not until 1993 that Democratic administrations would appoint a chief at the beginning of the first term.

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III. Core Roles of the Modern Chief of Staff

As the position of chief of staff has become institutionalized over time, so have the core roles and responsibilities a chief is expected to take on. First, chiefs are expected to be the *administrator* of the White House. Presidents depend upon their chiefs of staff to ensure that the policy and political processes in the White House run smoothly with a minimal amount of error. Much of this role depends upon gate-keeping by the chief of staff—managing the president's time by overseeing the paper and people going into the Oval Office. It is a delicate balance. Restricting access too narrowly creates an unhealthy bottleneck, cutting off the president from valuable information and advice; too little gate-keeping results in chaos and poor use of the president's limited time.

As a trusted and valuable part of the president's inner circle, chiefs are expected to take on the role of *adviser* to the president. As *primus inter pares* or first among equals, no individual has more potential access to the president, no one is in the company of the president more than the chief, and the chief is usually the first senior aide to see the president in the morning and last to see him in the evening. Even in areas where they do not possess technical expertise, chiefs are often expected by their boss to weigh in and give their unvarnished advice.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, chiefs are a *guardian* of the president. Their job is to protect the political interests of the president, even if it means sacrificing themselves. Success for the administration means success for the president; failure is to be deflected and the chief of staff is often held accountable. Chiefs need to protect their boss from a variety of potentially hostile constituencies and situations including the White House press corps, Congress, the other party, organized interests, members of the executive branch and White House staff, and even the president himself when he is about to make a faulty decision. It is the chief's job to be the "bad cop" of the White House—a crucial role because the White House needs to portray the president in as positive a light as possible.³³

³³ For more information on the roles of the chief of staff, see David B. Cohen, "From the Fabulous Baker Boys to the Master of Disaster: The White House Chief of Staff in the Reagan and G.H.W. Bush Administrations," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol.32, #3, September 2002, pp.463-83; David B. Cohen, Charles E. Walcott, Shirley Anne Warshaw, and Stephen J. Wayne, "The Chief of Staff," *White House Transition Project*, Report 2009-21; <http://whitehousetransitionproject.org/resources/briefing/WHTP-2009-21-Chief%20of%20Staff.pdf>. Terry

IV. Office of Chief of Staff

Over time, an office and staff that support the chief has developed and become institutionalized. Since 1987, every chief of staff has had at least one deputy chief of staff serving under them. During the Reagan and Bush 41 administrations, that deputy chief of staff was a generalist that assisted the COS in overseeing both the administrative and policy processes in the White House.

Beginning with the Clinton administration in May of 1993, there have been two deputy chiefs of staff, though the responsibilities of the deputies in the Clinton years were often in flux. During the Bush 43 White House, the roles and responsibilities of the chief's subordinate staff were formally codified. Upon his arrival as chief in 2001, Andrew Card instituted a clear organizational structure by splitting operations/administrative duties and policy responsibilities between his two deputies and adding "policy" or "operations" to the deputies' formal titles.³⁴

V. Successful First Chiefs, A Common Denominator

The job of chief of staff is immensely difficult and many chiefs have fallen far short of the expectations of their boss and other observers. When things go poorly in the White House, the chief is often held accountable even if the responsibility rests elsewhere. Burnout happens frequently: the average tenure of a White House chief of staff is about two and one-half years.

The chief of staff position is particularly daunting at the start of a new presidential administration where high-level executive branch and White House staff jobs remain vacant for extended periods of time while people are recruited and vetted, expectations are unreasonably high, and White House staff are still adjusting to their new jobs and schedules. If a presidential administration stumbles initially, it can be difficult to change the perception that the White House is disorganized and chaotic.

Successful chiefs of staff in the modern era (Nixon to the present) share one basic trait in common: *prior experience in Washington that helped inform them once they became COS*. If that experience included working at the highest levels of the White House, even better. Particularly helpful is a prior stint as deputy chief of staff, the ultimate apprenticeship for any future chief. Josh Bolten, who served as George W. Bush's second and last chief of staff, called his experience as deputy chief of staff "an invaluable training ground" for his later years as chief.³⁵ Prior to Rahm Emanuel, every chief of staff after Leon Panetta had served previously as deputy chief of staff.

Since 1981, there have been four party changeovers in the White House: Reagan 1981, Clinton 1993, G.W. Bush 2001, and Obama 2009. A change in party means a massive turnover in the

Sullivan, ed., *The Nerve Center: Lessons in Governing from the White House Chiefs of Staff*, College Station, TX: Texas A&M Univ. Press, 2004; Charles E. Walcott, Shirley Anne Warshaw, and Stephen J. Wayne, "The Chief of Staff." *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 31, #3, September 2001, pp.464-89.

³⁴ For more information on the Office of Chief of Staff, see David B. Cohen and Charles E. Walcott, "The Evolution and Institutionalization of the Office of Chief of Staff in the Modern White House," Paper Prepared for Delivery at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, August 28-31, 2008, Boston, Massachusetts.

³⁵ Interview with Joshua B. Bolten, conducted by David B. Cohen, October 19, 2007.

executive branch and within the White House. The new chief of staff is tasked with helping bring order to the chaos of the transition. A change in party makes this task even more difficult as there will be few, if any, holdovers remaining from the highest reaches of the previous administration.

In 1981, the Reagan White House assumed power at the height of an economic crisis. Reagan's first chief of staff, James Baker, was no stranger to politics or Washington having run numerous campaigns, including President Gerald Ford's reelection campaign in 1976 and George H.W. Bush's presidential nomination campaign for the GOP in 1980. He also served as Undersecretary of Commerce in 1975. Reagan's selection of Baker as his chief of staff took many by surprise and outraged some including many of his close friends and advisers from his days as California governor.³⁶ Baker's first six months as chief of staff were quite successful. The administration started on a high note as after 444 days in captivity, U.S. Embassy personnel were released by Iranian militants as Reagan was sworn-in. Perhaps the biggest crisis in the first six months of the Reagan administration was the near-mortal wounding of Reagan by John Hinckley Jr. on March 30. Reagan barely survived the gun shot wound but recovered quickly. Riding a wave of public approval hovering near 70% post-shooting, Reagan's first budget, the controversial centerpiece of his economic program, passed both houses of a Democratically-controlled Congress at the end of July. Baker served the entire first term as Reagan's chief of staff and became Secretary of the Treasury for the remaining four years. His performance as chief of staff is well-regarded by his peers.³⁷

The initial period of Bill Clinton's presidency did not go as smoothly. Clinton tapped Thomas "Mack" McLarty to be his chief of staff. A friend since boyhood and an executive in the utility industry, McLarty lacked Washington credentials. The first year and a half of the Clinton presidency were perceived by most observers as chaotic—some even called it a "madhouse."³⁸ Numerous unnecessary errors were made at the outset of the Clinton administration by an inexperienced staff from the ill-fated Zoe Baird nomination, to the gays in the military fiasco. McLarty lasted until June 1994 and was replaced by OMB Director Leon Panetta who brought more order and discipline to a White House lacking both. Though well-liked by his colleagues, McLarty's peers were critical of his performance as chief of staff.³⁹

Following the protracted 2000 election, the George W. Bush transition team had 36 less days to work with than normal. Bush had decided upon his chief, Andrew Card, early on in the process and asked him to be chief of staff well before the *Bush v. Gore* Supreme Court ruling which decided the election.⁴⁰ Card, a veteran of the Reagan and Bush 41 White Houses, had the kind of

³⁶ Lou Cannon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (PublicAffairs, 2000).

³⁷ David B. Cohen, "From the Fabulous Baker Boys to the Master of Disaster: The White House Chief of Staff in the Reagan and G.H.W. Bush Administrations," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol.32, #3, September 2002, pp.463-83.

³⁸ Jeffrey H. Birnbaum, *Madhouse: The Private Turmoil of Working for the President* (New York: Times Books, 1996).

³⁹ David B. Cohen and Charles E. Walcott, "From the Arkansas Outsider to the Washington Insiders: The White House Chiefs of Staff During the Clinton Years," Paper Prepared for Delivery at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, September 1-4, 2005, Washington, DC.

⁴⁰ George W. Bush publicly announced Card's selection as COS on November 26, 2000. Martha Joynt Kumar, "Recruiting and Organizing the White House Staff," in Martha Joynt Kumar and Terry Sullivan, eds., *The White House World: Transitions, Organization, and Office Operations*, College Station, TX, Texas A&M University Press, 2003.

resume one would want for a chief of staff: he had spent an apprenticeship as deputy chief of staff under Chief of Staff John Sununu in the Bush 41 administration before becoming Secretary of Transportation in 1992. Card's first six months on the job, especially considering the abbreviated transition, were marked by steady accomplishments and a lack of drama. The entire political environment changed a few months later with the 9/11 terrorist attacks and ensuing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Card remained chief until 2006 overseeing a successful reelection campaign in 2004.

Rahm Emanuel's extensive resume includes stints on both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue. Given the recent job performance of chiefs of staff who have a bevy of Washington experience compared with those that are lacking, Emanuel's background bodes well for his future success. Those chiefs of staff who oversaw a smooth transition, initiated a new administration, and were successful in the first six months also tended to carry that success throughout the first term. Although clearly not politically popular with the public, being a "Washington insider" does seem to be a distinct advantage when one is serving as chief of staff.

**TABLE 1:
WHITE HOUSE CHIEFS OF STAFF IN THE MODERN ERA, 1969-PRESENT**

CHIEF OF STAFF	TENURE	PRESIDENT	PARTY
Harry Robbins Haldeman	1969-73	Nixon	Republican
Alexander M. Haig, Jr.	1973-74	Nixon	Republican
Donald H. Rumsfeld	1974-75	Ford	Republican
Richard M. Cheney	1975-77	Ford	Republican
William Hamilton M. Jordan	1979-80	Carter	Democrat
Jack H. Watson, Jr.	1980-81	Carter	Democrat
James A. Baker III	1981-85	Reagan	Republican
Donald T. Regan	1985-87	Reagan	Republican
Howard H. Baker, Jr.	1987-88	Reagan	Republican
Kenneth M. Duberstein	1988-89	Reagan	Republican
John H. Sununu	1989-91	G.H.W. Bush	Republican
Samuel K. Skinner	1991-92	G.H.W. Bush	Republican
James A. Baker III	1992-93	G.H.W. Bush	Republican
Thomas F. McLarty III	1993-94	Clinton	Democrat
Leon E. Panetta	1994-97	Clinton	Democrat
Erskine B. Bowles	1997-98	Clinton	Democrat
John D. Podesta	1998-01	Clinton	Democrat
Andrew H. Card, Jr.	2001-06	G.W. Bush	Republican
Joshua B. Bolten	2006-09	G.W. Bush	Republican
Rahm I. Emanuel	2009-p	Obama	Democrat

Source: Compiled By Author