

## **BOOK REVIEW:**

### ***THE NATION CITY: WHY MAYORS ARE NOW RUNNING THE WORLD,* BY RAHM EMANUEL (KNOFF, 2020)**

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Whatever else you may think, Rahm Emanuel is the consummate modern-day politician, elected official, and accomplished big-city mayor. His experience and vantage point from serving as Mayor of the City of Chicago is important, and he shares those views and experiences in this book. His city-leading terms have been characterized as uneven or mixed, but his vantage point from these years cannot be discounted. In fact, when viewed through a lens of “big-city” mayor, this book is a must-read for former, current, or aspiring leaders in municipalities of all sizes.

Make no mistake about it: Emanuel is right that our cities, large and small, are the centers of our universe and central to our democracy. Any insights, strategies, observations, or experiences in running these jurisdictions is therefore valuable and instructive to leadership throughout places in Illinois and beyond. And while politics are always a context, the management and administration of the myriad social problems facing society are on local leadership’s front steps and at the heart and soul of our cities. Navigating those issues, problems, and realities is not easy, and passing on lessons about them is essential in guiding municipal leaders forward in the balance of the 21st century.

In this context, Emanuel’s book is not the first treatment of firsthand experiences as Mayor of Chicago (see *My Chicago* by Jane Byrne, Northwestern University Press, 2000), but those personalized, descriptive, and aspirational accounts provide an important backdrop for understanding the role. Emanuel both recounts his successes and reveals his shortcomings, and along the way, he concludes that mayors today are more important than presidents or prime ministers. In essence, he outlines how cities are at the front lines of big-

picture issues and backyard problems like health crises (witness COVID-19), education challenges, rising crime and criminal justice reform, climate change, immigration challenges, deteriorating infrastructure, disparities in wealth, and, of course, the threat of terrorism. Cities are in the thick of things and are therefore often much better positioned to address and respond to these challenges than the federal government.

The book appropriately reflects on defining moments in Emanuel's life and the importance of his immigrant family roots. He also dives into the basis for his views on the importance of education and what drove his education reform efforts that varied from political battles over pre-kindergarten programs to union conflicts over the length of the school day and year to neighborhood opposition about closing schools. Whether seen as wins or losses, these events reveal the focus of Emanuel's priorities and his approach to successful leadership.

One clear thread and significant theme in Emanuel's book is found in his highlighting the dysfunction of the federal government (hard not to dismiss), the influence of special interests, overt politicization, and the seeming inability to deliver programs directly to citizens who need the help. Notwithstanding his articulation of a "progressive agenda" that he espouses, Emanuel correctly emphasizes that cities are "the only governments left in the world that are immediate, intimate, and impactful." He makes a strong case for local governance in an age of dysfunction, strongly suggesting that streamlined and efficient city governments are a practical necessity rather than a political one. It is precisely in this context that mayors matter — and they matter a lot.

Although *The Nation City* cannot be considered a policy primer, it nonetheless opens a lens for viewing cities (and mayors) in a policy context, and Emanuel offers a case-study-type approach of various cities that have successfully tackled issues ranging from building infrastructure, refinancing pension funds, downtown revitalizations, education reforms, energy-efficiency measures, shifting to a tech-oriented economy, and more. As such, this is an instructive read for current and future mayors and all city officials.

However, there are some harsh realities that seem to be glossed over in the book — significant challenges that everyday cities face. They do not have fiscal tools like the federal government, borrowing limits are real and restrictive, underfunded pensions are a huge problem, and raising revenues is a significant hurdle. And many mayors have limited statutory power. While Chicago is a

strong-mayor format, many other forms of government limit the power of their chief executives, such as council-manager systems. Also, as creatures of state government, local authorities can be preempted with state legislation.

At the same time, it should be acknowledged that Chicago's problems have existed through years of mismanagement and political gamesmanship that no two-term mayor could expect to totally address. Indeed, problems of crime, police oversight, budget shortfalls, decreasing population, traffic congestion, education disparities, and more persist — and they are not just confined to Chicago but are ongoing for cities large and small. Although there is no one fix or cure, sometimes looking back offers a lens to look forward, and that is where this book matters.

There are certainly other more exhaustive and critical biographies and treatments of big-city mayors (see *Building the City Spectacle: Mayor Richard M. Daley and the Remaking of Chicago*, Cornell University Press, 2016) and important assessments of city leadership across the globe (see *Leading Cities: A Global Review of City Leadership*, UCL Press, 2019). However, it has always been a popular adage that the best way to lead a city is to take cues from previous leaders. There will be good lessons and bad lessons. It may point to things that worked or did not work and offer strategies or directions for the future. Emanuel's book clearly plays that role. As such, it is worth adding to your library of important reads that can inform the future of municipal governance.

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