Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

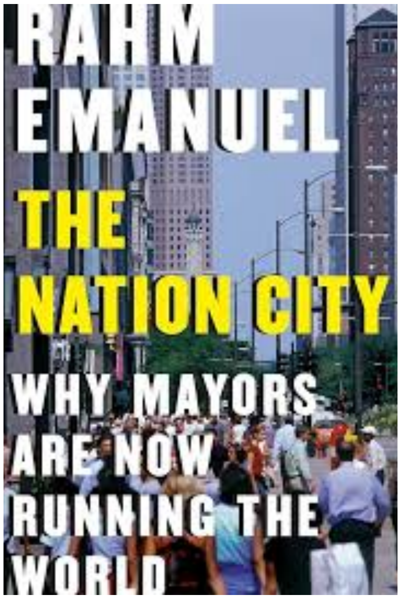
The Nation City: Why Mayors Are Now Running the World

By Rahm Emanuel

The Nation City: Why Mayors Are Now Running the World is 232 pages, with an introduction and 12 chapters. There are also acknowledgements and a bibliography.

Rahm Emanuel was a former two-term mayor of Chicago. Before that, he was a congressman and served as chief of staff for President Barack Obama. He is presently the U.S. ambassador to Japan.

This is a book about progress and political power, which Emanuel says have moved since the 1990s from the federal and state levels of government to cities. The chief beneficiaries of this “major paradigm shift,” Emanuel says, are a certain kind of mayor. They are mayors who are connected to fellow mayors in the U.S. and abroad, alert to new ideas and adept at creating collaborative ventures in their communities.



What caused this paradigm shift? A major reason, Emanuel says, was partisan gridlock in Congress and state legislatures. The result, he writes, is a federal government that has become “polarized to the point of paralysis” and of little help to cities and their residents. States, too, have lost their appetite for innovation.

But the other major reason was that cities and their mayors found their economic and political footing just as national governments lost theirs.

The economic footing was a shift in the global economy from manufacturing to technology and sophisticated services. These rising industries needed what big cities offered: research universities and the highly educated workers they produce.

Another factor, Emanuel writes, was public trust. He cites a poll showing that only 32 percent of Americans had faith in the federal government while 72 percent trusted their local government.

Why would people trust mayors today more than governors and presidents? Partly, he says, because local officials have long been less partisan and more practical in their decision making than state and federal politicians, and better at providing services people can see and appreciate. But also, he argues, mayors and their governments have grown more adept at solving problems. “Our cities,” Emanuel writes, “have become places where function has replaced dysfunction. Intimate has replaced distant, and immediate has replaced dithering.”

What this means, he says, is that some of the most difficult issues today—from education reform to social mobility, climate change to public safety reform—are being addressed by mayors, not national governments. No one is waiting for White House or Congress to show the way . . . or, for that matter, Parliament, the Bundestag or the Assemblee Nationale.

Where did mayors get the confidence to take on major global issues? It came, Emanuel says, from new forces and a new type of mayor.

One force was that cities began doing better economically and socially. There were the technology and professional service companies that moved to cities. On their heels, young people moved into urban neighborhoods, and crime began a long decline from its peak in the 1980s.

As cities improved, a different kind of mayor emerged. The mayors of the 1960s and 1970s were happy if they could hold things together. The new mayors were focused on actually improving cities with parks and trails, cleaner, stronger downtowns, improved transit and better schools. One of these new mayors, Emanuel writes, was Michael Bloomberg, mayor of New York from 2002 to 2014.

It would have been hard to imagine Bloomberg serving as a big-city mayor in an earlier era. He was the billionaire founder of a financial information company who had never held elected office. He ran as a Republican in a Democratic city and later became an independent and then a Democrat. “What this mainly demonstrates to me,” Emanuel adds, “is that party labels for mayors are largely meaningless.”

It wasn’t just that Bloomberg was a different kind of person in the mayor’s office, Emanuel says; he approached problem solving in a completely different way, with something Emanuel calls “soft power.” What it meant was that Bloomberg created progress through collaborations among businesses, civic organizations, foundations and universities, to which he added city government resources.

One example was Bloomberg's competition in 2010 to create a technology institution on an island between Manhattan and Brooklyn. A number of universities put together bids. The winner was a joint venture between Cornell University and a technology college in Israel. Since then, New York has attracted a huge number of technology jobs. It now has the second largest number of tech workers in America, behind only the combined San Francisco-Silicon Valley areas.

The technology campus—and the way it was done through a competition—was, Emanuel writes, “a 12 on a scale of 1 to 10. Understanding the role of an engineering and tech center in the middle of a big city and the kinds of jobs and economic growth that come from it was a giant, forward-thinking leap. It pushed the impetus for much of our country’s research and development in computer science, information technology, software and artificial intelligence, for instance—which, by the way, used to be driven by the federal government but is no longer—right into the heart of a big city. This type of thing is emerging in cities all over the globe—these partnerships among local governments, universities and philanthropies, which are stepping in where national governments have stepped back.”

There was a final contributing force to the rise of mayors, Emanuel says. Mayors began connecting with one another, seeing what worked in other cities and bringing ideas home with them. The result of these “horizontal networks,” as Emanuel calls them, is “ideas now move around the world horizontally and not vertically, as they once did, from the group up to national governments. Cities now adopt and adapt ideas and copy and borrow from each other. They also do it with a touch of healthy competitiveness.”

Some of those borrowed ideas found a way into his administration's building of the Chicago Riverwalk, which opened the long-neglected Chicago River to residents and new developments. Ideas for the Riverwalk came from trips Emanuel made to Paris and Berlin. And because he saw such interest in waterfront development in cities around the world, he convened an international meeting of mayors in 2017. Seventeen mayors from 11 countries traveled to Chicago to trade ideas about improving access to rivers, lakefronts and shores.

When he wasn't borrowing ideas from abroad, Emanuel practiced Bloomberg's "soft power" collaborative approach to problem solving. One example was the Chicago Star Scholarship, which used the city's community college network to guarantee two years of college education to every public school student who graduated with a B average—at no tuition. To make it happen, Emanuel had to get the public schools and community colleges to work together. And more: He got the public transit system to offer free transportation for Star Scholars to and from the colleges.

Chicago's four-year colleges saw what was happening and asked if they could join. This became a program called Star Plus, where colleges offered the final two years at greatly reduced tuition to Star Scholars who maintained a B average in community college. By 2018 every college in the city (and some beyond, like the University of Illinois in Urbana) offered reduced tuition to these mostly first-generation college students—with one exception. Northwestern University offered *free* tuition for Star Scholars.

This collaborative approach, seasoned with ideas from cities elsewhere, became a template for Emanuel as he launched project after project aimed at making the city more appealing, efficient and affordable. The projects ranged from transit modernization efforts and major improvements to O'Hare Airport to new programs for expanding tourism and public school reforms.

One intriguing Emanuel program was the Neighborhood Opportunity Fund, which used taxes on downtown commercial properties to generate funding for neighborhood commercial areas. The fund helped reduce the resentments that neighborhoods feel toward downtowns by linking the two parts of the city. Today in Chicago when a new office tower goes up downtown, "it sparks neighborhood retail and commercial success as well," Emanuel writes. It also helps with income inequality, since many of these neighborhood businesses hire workers who live close by.

The Nation City has a sobering message for urbanists, though. Progress isn't inevitable. It depends on who is elected mayor (and to the city council), and there are plenty of bad mayors around. What do they look like? They are the ones who "don't stretch themselves, don't address challenges, lose their nerve, deny that the challenges exist." He adds: "A failed mayor is one who doesn't honestly confront problems and reach out and hold the hands of the public as they march down the road of change."

Footnote: Emanuel had successes and partial successes. Where did he think he came up short? Addressing inequality and displacement. "I have studied (displacement) for decades now, and I have yet to see an effective policy," he writes. "But it's essential that all mayors continue that search and try new approaches until a suitable answer is found. In the end the solution will be a combination of zoning reforms, new housing with additional affordability goals, tax incentives, tax relief and mixed use and co-locations with community benefits."

When the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group meets, we'll discuss Rahm Emanuel's book about the rise of mayors as problem solvers. And we'll look for ideas in this book that could make Urban Atlanta better.

Our meeting will be **Jan. 8, 6:30 to 8:30 p.m.** at **1788 Ponce de Leon Ave. NE, Atlanta GA 30307**.

There's more information about this discussion at the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group website.

How to get your copy of *Nation City*:

Preparing for the discussion

Here are some questions we'll consider in our discussion:

1. What are "big ideas" in this book that you think could work in Urban Atlanta (that is, Atlanta and its suburban cities)?
2. If these big ideas were adopted, how could they make Urban Atlanta better?
3. What are some obstacles that might prevent these big ideas being adopted in Urban Atlanta?
4. Are there things government officials, civic leaders, neighborhood leaders or citizens could do—collectively or individually—to overcome these obstacles?

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