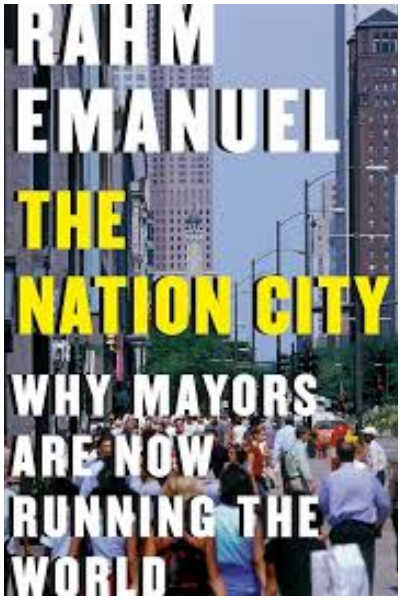
Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

The Nation City: Why Mayors Are Now Running the World

By Rahm Emanuel

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group met on Jan. 8, 2025 to discuss *The Nation City: Why Mayors Are Now Running the World*. Rahm Emanuel was the two-term mayor of Chicago.



This book is about progress and power, which Emanuel says have moved since the 1990s from federal and state levels of government to cities. The ones who have benefited most from this "major paradigm shift," he says, are mayors who are connected to other mayors in the U.S. and abroad, alert to new ideas and ways of solving problems, and adept at creating collaborative ventures in their cities.

The book offers examples from Emanuel's years as mayor, from improving O'Hare Airport to turning the Chicago River from eyesore into amenity. He took a lead in helping students move easily from public schools to local colleges and in developing neighborhood commercial areas. In these efforts, he often borrowed ideas from other cities and worked with many partners, including businesses, universities, foundations and the state of Illinois.

In our discussion, we focused on the opportunities that may come if power continues moving to localities, what Urban Atlanta could do with greater autonomy, and the challenges it may pose for leaders. We also looked for lessons for our region in what Emanuel accomplished in Chicago.

Note: This book was published in 2020 at the end of the first Trump administration. As a second Trump administration takes office in 2025, we think the forces Emanuel describes—with progress and power increasingly in the hands of cities—may accelerate.

Five Big Ideas

The Atlanta Urbanist Book Group highlights ideas from books that we think could make Urban Atlanta better. Here are five big ideas drawn from *The Nation City* that we think Urban Atlanta could benefit from:

1. It is a good time for mayors and other local leaders to work on things they can influence, like city services, school performance, economic development, downtowns and neighborhoods. They should not look to Washington or the state government for direction or even much assistance.
2. Success in these things depends on a new approach, one that aims high, offers clear visions and benefits, involves many interests and builds public support. We have many willing partners in Urban Atlanta who could help, from universities and foundations to a strong business community and engaged citizens.
3. What could be a project as transformative in Urban Atlanta as the restoration of the Chicago River? Two possibilities: a new approach to redeveloping underused and abandoned properties and revitalizing public spaces, including turning long-buried waterways into parks.
4. Emanuel's Chicago Star Scholarship program, which offered two years of tuition-free college education to Chicago public school students with good grades, could be a model for Urban Atlanta. It would build social mobility as it keeps talented first-generation college students in the Atlanta area.
5. Similarly, Emanuel's Neighborhood Opportunity Fund could be a model for Urban Atlanta by linking development in highly successful parts of the city with commercial areas in struggling neighborhoods. These neighborhood commercial districts could encourage entrepreneurship and aid social mobility as they build walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods.

Why Do These Things?

Should local leaders take responsibility for problems they once looked to federal and state governments to solve? If successful, would the benefits outweigh the costs? We think so. Here's why:

- Setting our own course—and succeeding—would make Urban Atlanta better.
- Atlanta could become a model, a region that leaders from other places come to learn how power and progress works in the second quarter of the 21st century.
- Emanuel's book offers not just good projects but a new way of getting things done, one that depends on partnerships. We have many willing partners in Urban Atlanta.
- If cities, school systems and colleges began working together in one area, such as creating a local version of the Chicago Star Scholarships, who knows what other issues they could find to work on?
- Success would improve local government and politics.

What Are the Obstacles?

Even the most worthwhile efforts create opposition. So our members discussed some of the obstacles or barriers the big ideas might face in Urban Atlanta. Here are some:

- We need leaders committed to making things better. And not just mayors but other elected officials and government leaders. If there isn't broad support in local governments for ambitious projects, they will not succeed.
- And beyond government, if the public and other institutions, like universities, business organizations, foundations and nonprofits, mistrust local government—or doubt cities' ability to make progress—it won't work.
- The premise of this book is that cities can no longer depend on the federal government for answers. They must figure things out on their own. In Georgia, we have a second problem: We've never been able to look to state government for answers or even a helping hand.

- At the end of the day, we will have to depend on local leaders not only for good ideas and worthwhile projects, but for figuring out how to make these projects succeed. That's a lot of burden to put on mayors, council members, school board members, superintendents and city managers.

Ways Around the Obstacles

These are difficult obstacles. Here are some ideas our members offered for overcoming these barriers:

- Mayors in Urban Atlanta meet regularly, through the Georgia Municipal Association and the Metro Atlanta Mayors Association. So the framework for sharing and support among local governments is in place.
- Atlanta's current mayor, Andre Dickens, is far more involved with others in Urban Atlanta than his immediate predecessors were. In fact, Mayor Dickens chairs the Atlanta Regional Commission's board. So we now have a degree of cooperation today between the city and the suburbs that's remarkable.
- We shouldn't give up on state government. What may be lacking is a way of communicating with leaders from around the state about what Atlanta and its suburbs contribute to the state's overall economy. This would involve showing leaders from Dalton, Dublin and Dahlonega how their cities benefit from having a successful big city in Georgia, and how they could benefit even more if state government were a partner in Atlanta's success.
- The best way of building public support for transformational projects is getting people involved at the neighborhood level. We have not done a good job in Urban Atlanta of building neighborhood identity or involvement. If we could increase volunteerism at the neighborhood level, it would not only make neighborhoods stronger, it would build an army for civic progress in general.
- Progress begets progress. The more we accomplish, the more we can accomplish.
- We need to be better at telling citizens and potential partners what is possible. Before it took place, it was hard to imagine the polluted, neglected Chicago River as a major urban asset. One of the tasks of leadership, then, is helping people see what is possible. We could be better at this.

A Synopsis of *The Nation City*

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. Until 2025, he was the U.S. ambassador to Japan.

As mentioned above, this is a book about how progress and political power have moved since the 1990s from federal and state governments to cities.

What caused this 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.

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 highly educated workers.

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 that 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. Technology, finance and professional service companies moved to cities. On their heels came young people, who moved into urban neighborhoods and helped start a long decline in violent crime 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 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.”

About the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group

Our mission at the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group is to introduce new ideas to Urban Atlanta by reading recent books about cities, identifying the ideas we think would work in Atlanta, and offering civic leaders a guide to these ideas.

We define “urbanism” broadly. We are reading books about transportation, land use, housing, public safety, government reform, neighborhoods, social infrastructure, education, economic development, regionalism, diversity, politics, arts and culture, volunteerism, and more.

Our aim isn’t to review books but to **show how their ideas apply to Atlanta today** and suggest ways of moving from good ideas to good actions.

You can learn more about the Atlanta Urbanist Book Group at atlantaurbanist.com.