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Replace Rahm

by Leslie H. Gelb

February 15, 2010 | 10:48pm

BS Top - Gelb Get Rid of Rahm <http://www.tdbimg.com/files/2010/02/15/img-bs-top---gelb-get-rid-of-rahm_135707996825.jpg> Kristoffer Tripplaar / SIPA President Obama desperately needs a sweeping staff shakeup to save his presidency. Leslie H. Gelb on why he must reassign Rahm, dump Larry Summers, and get rid of National Security adviser Jim Jones.

The negative, even dismissive, talk about the Obama White House has reached a critical point. The president must change key personnel now. Unless he speedily sets up a new team, he will be reduced to a speechmaker. It's mostly a matter of relocating the Chicago and campaign crowd who surround the Oval Office and inserting people with proven records of getting things done in Washington and the world.

To be fair, it's not clear whether the bad judgments on priorities, practicalities, and steadiness come from Mr. Obama or his White House team. Maybe he overpowers them in discussions, or maybe he gives them a role in policymaking far beyond their experience in that realm. Unless you're there, you don't know. But Mr. Obama is the president, and except for the right-wing crazies, most Americans still recognize his great talents and promise. It is he who's got to be helped. So it is they who've got to go.

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One may quarrel with my sense of urgency here. But it's hard to have a conversation with opinion leaders anywhere—and especially in Washington—that doesn't descend into ripping Obama's White House team. The refrain of complaints is always the same:

- Obama is forever taking strong stances only to backfill and trim. Most recently, he said he did not "begrudge" Wall Streeters their big earnings because that was part of the market system. This, in the face of his saying only a couple of weeks ago that such big bonuses were "shameful."
- Obama doesn't know what's really going on. Regarding the Middle East, he recently said that "I think it is absolutely true that what we did this year didn't produce the kind of breakthrough that we wanted, and if we had anticipated some of these political problems on both sides earlier, we might not have raised expectations as high." He had to be totally out of it not to realize that the Palestinians and Israelis were nowhere close to sitting down with each other and dealing.
- Obama wants to get along with everyone so badly he doesn't recognize real opposition when he sees it—let alone know how to deal with it. He emerges from a meeting with congressional Republican leaders on health-care reform and says he is "an eternal optimist"—when those very same Republican leaders just told the press that they don't see any common ground and believe the administration has to "scrap the bill and start over."
- It's even hard to follow his latest Afghan policy. He calls Afghanistan a "war of necessity" and orders more than 30,000 new troops there, coupled with an announcement that he'll begin withdrawing some of them in a year plus, only to see some of his advisers say he will start withdrawals and some say he won't.

I've scribbled similar points in recent months in The Daily Beast. And last week in The Financial Times, Edward Luce provided <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/b6b4700a-10fb-11df-9a9e-00144feab49a.html> a thunderclap on Washington's negative consensus about the incompetence of Obama's Chicago-laden team. Luce named names in the White House, and a number of journalists and bloggers strikingly failed to link to the Luce story. They were said to fear the wrath of the Chicagoans. Steve Clemons, author of The Washington Note, essentially endorsed http://www.thewashingtonnote.com/archives/2010/02/core_chicago_te/ the Luce finding and slapped his fellow bloggers' wrists for hiding from this issue. The situation is as serious as it was during the Carter administration. There, two very capable political campaigners—Hamilton Jordan and Jody Powell—moved into critical White House positions without knowing very much about doing business in Washington. And they were, quite naturally, too busy to learn. They also added to the "them" versus "us" (Washington insiders and bureaucrats versus the regular guys from Georgia) mentality that plagues most administrations.

The Chicagoans and others "guarding" the president create their own "us versus them" world. It's hard to imagine a policy conversation between the president and the Chicago crowd, since none of them, except Rahm Emanuel, has Washington or policy experience. And there isn't much evidence that they bring in strong-minded outsiders to challenge the president on a regular basis either. The result is an inexperienced president advised by an inexperienced team. Here are the personnel changes being bruited about in political and policy circles: First, remove Rahm Emanuel as chief of staff and move him to a senior political adviser slot. No one I've talked to believes he has the management skills and discipline to run the White House. But he is a terrific political mind and a fighter and should be given the new job and the time to do his thing. Proven pros who could step right in include the following: Erskine Bowles, president of the University of North Carolina and former Clinton chief of staff; Leon Panetta, now CIA director and formerly White House chief as well under Clinton; Sylvia Mathews, a former deputy chief of staff also under Clinton; and John Podesta, another former Clinton chief who now heads the Center for American Progress. All four are tough and know how to manage. Replace Lawrence Summers, director of the White House's National Economic Council, with Paul Volcker, the former chairman of the Federal Reserve. Summers is brilliant and highly controversial; he's been beaten up and is said to want out anyway. Volcker has unmatched stature, practical experience, and the courage of a lion. He is the only one now in a position to get down to step-by-step brass tacks on the economy and stop Mr. Obama's weekly gyrations. Others with proven track records who can help as inside or outside advisers are: Stephen Robert, formerly head of Oppenheimer, Vincent Mai, former leader of AEA Investors, and Tom Hill of Blackstone. There are also two economic stars in Washington who'd improve both policymaking and public combat: Sheila Bair, chairwoman of the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, and Elizabeth Warren, chair of the Congressional Oversight Panel. One outside adviser above all would help the president see the economic hard choices ahead: Peter G. Peterson, accomplished businessman and policy head.

David Axelrod, the senior political adviser to the president, needs to concentrate on the next presidential campaign, wherein his expertise lies, and not on domestic and foreign policy, where he is just another smart unknowledgeable voice. Good replacements who do know the politics of Washington would be the aforementioned Podesta; and Tom Daschle, the former Democratic Senate Majority Leader. As for David Plouffe, another senior campaign aide, now in unofficial residence at the White House, he should be lodged in the nearby Executive Office Building. Senior adviser and Chicago buddy Valerie Jarrett is too much a part of the inner circle to move, but she should be given a more limited role in making policy.

Mr. Obama's crowd appears to think that getting things done means his giving another speech. It's nice, but not nearly enough.

Robert Gibbs needs a rest from being press secretary. Let's put it this way: He wasn't born for daily jousts with pithy Republicans. His job calls for memorable and pointed phrases and attacks, not circle-the-wagon circumlocutions. Possible successors? Try Doyle McManus of the L.A. Times, Jake Tapper of ABC News, or Helene Cooper of The New York Times.

Last but not least, James Jones, the National Security Adviser, has to move on. The career Marine was greatly admired and respected as Commandant of the Corps and as NATO's military chief. He handled those duties with great skill. But by wide acclamation inside and outside the White House, he has not emerged as a strategist—perhaps the key requirement of this key position. The person in that job has to pull everything together—laying out achievable objectives and precise plans to dispense carefully packaged carrots and sticks. One Democrat who could step in now, despite his age, is Zbigniew Brzezinski, Jimmy Carter's national-security adviser. He has a first-rate strategic mind—a rare quality—and knows how to deliver results. Obama will need to iron out Zbig's lack of sympathy toward Israel and Russia.

Also available are a boatload of first-class retired diplomats with the judgment and background needed to perform the National Security Council job effectively. They would be greeted with applause both at home and abroad. Try former ambassadors Thomas Pickering, Morton Abramowitz, Frank Wisner, Reginald Bartholomew, and Winston Lord. They have it all. At a minimum, they and others like them should form the core of a group that meets regularly with Obama on strategy.

Yes, many of the pros suggested above have reached their golden years. But 70 and even 80 are the new 60. They all possess the necessary energy, experience and rare skill in delivering results. They are also shovel-ready. As a critical bonus, they could and would mentor the next generation down, a very talented one indeed, to succeed them in two or three years. To lead America and the world, Obama has to grow far beyond his present propensity to treat problems as intellectual puzzles—to collect facts and hear the arguments. The great tasks of governing demand proven intuition in sensing what's achievable, which buttons to push when, how to buy the time for power to take hold, how to make adjustments without flagrantly foolish rhetoric, how to avoid failures that only diminish power, and how to succeed in small as well as large ways. With a team versed in such arts and skills, President Obama and America would succeed.

Leslie H. Gelb, a former New York Times columnist and senior government official, is author of *Power Rules: How Common Sense Can Rescue American Foreign Policy*

<<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0061714542/thedaibea-20>> (HarperCollins 2009), a book that shows how to think about and use power in the 21st century. He is president emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations.

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