



# Right Brain, Left Brain

The masterminds of White House victories share the stage with **the ideas machines** of the '90s.

By James A. Barnes

When *National Journal's* Insiders were asked to identify the best strategists in their parties, Democrats and Republicans turned their attention to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

Obama White House senior adviser David Axelrod topped the Democratic Political Insiders' list. The current White House chief of staff, Rahm Emanuel, ran first among the party's Congressional Insiders and second among its Political Insiders.

Republicans, meanwhile, harked back to the strategist who played a lead role in George W. Bush's presidential campaigns, Karl Rove. For seven years, Rove served in the West Wing as a senior adviser and deputy chief of staff. He ranked first among the GOP Political Insiders, and second—behind Mississippi GOP Gov. Haley Barbour—among GOP Congressional Insiders. Barbour directed the White House Office of Political Affairs during Ronald Reagan's presidency.

"Some people think 'strategist' is a wise man, but it isn't," said former House Democratic Whip Tony Coelho, who was an early mentor to Emanuel and hired him at the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee in the mid-1980s. "A wise man can give you good counsel, but a wise man can get you in trouble: A wise man is above it and can be too detached."

During the 1989 ethics inquiry into House Speaker Jim Wright's book deal, Coelho recalls, superlawyer Clark Clifford, who had advised presidents since Harry Truman, steered Wright wrong when he advised him to stonewall. Wright ended up resigning. "Clark Clifford was a wonderful, wonderful man," Coelho said, adding that Clifford might have been wise in the ways of many things, "but he didn't know the House."

The hard-charging Emanuel, according to Coelho, is like another former White House chief of staff, James Baker, in terms of his acumen, confidence, and drive. After running Reagan's White House, Baker became his Treasury secretary and later was secretary of State under President George H.W. Bush. "To be a good strategist, you have to be tough, believe in yourself, and have enough inner strength to be wrong and not worry about it," according to Coelho, who studied Baker's style up close during negotiations with the administration. "He had this tremendous inner strength and was the individual that President Reagan and President Bush Sr. could depend on to make something happen," Coelho observed. "Ambition, for Jim, was 100 percent. And it is there

for Rahm, 100 percent. Baker would have liked to be president of the United States, and Rahm probably would like to be president."

Whether the Obama White House ringmaster's aspirations go that high is unclear, but friends say that Emanuel, who turned 50 this year, is very comfortable at the center of things. "Rahm and Jim Baker are more than willing to be leaders; in fact, they would be very unhappy if they weren't in a leadership role," noted Democratic operative Marcia Hale, who worked with Emanuel at the DCCC and in the Clinton White House. "Rahm has got at least two or three careers ahead of him."

Emanuel is "so much better of a listener than he used to be," Hale added, a change she attributed to his six years in the House, where he rose swiftly to command the party's campaign committee and helped engineer the Democratic takeover in the 2006 elections. "The best strategists are those who are confident in their own knowledge but looking to learn something," Hale said.

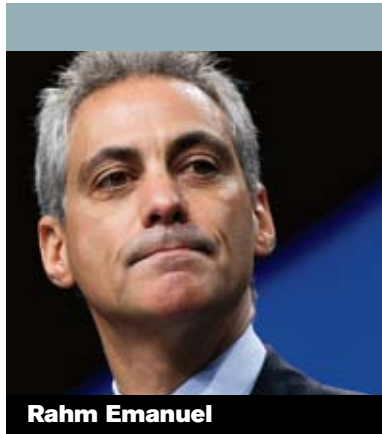
Several Insiders identified Emanuel's trademark toughness as useful in implementing strategy, but Democratic pollster Stanley Greenberg noted that toughness is also important in shaping an effective strategic approach. "You're on the offensive; you don't want to just be responding. And if you do respond, you respond in a way that puts your opponents back on [their] heels," said Greenberg, who worked with Emanuel on Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign. "When you're in a campaign with Rahm, you're in motion; it's a fight, and you're always searching for the issue that is going to dominate."

Helping to make a president usually earns the respect of one's peers, so it's no surprise that Democratic Political Insiders rank Barack Obama's closest campaign adviser, Axelrod, as their party's top strategist. But the way that Obama won earns Axelrod extra accolades.

The two previous Democratic presidential nominees, Al Gore and John Kerry, were hamstrung by campaign plans that focused almost exclusively on states that conventional wisdom said a Democrat could win. "David Axelrod and company expanded the Electoral College map beyond the inside straight predicament that we had in 2000 and 2004," Democratic media strategist Bill Carrick said. "That was a really big strategic change."

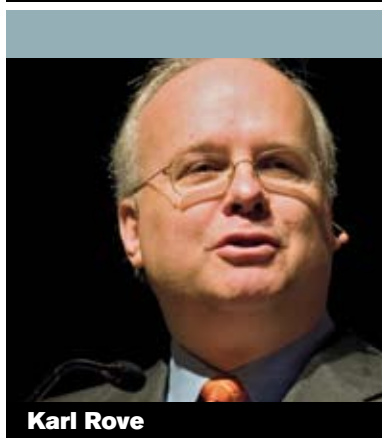
Another political adage that the Obama campaign ignored to its early benefit was that an insurgent cannot gain much ground in caucus states. Most party operatives assumed that caucuses would

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Rahm Emanuel

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Karl Rove

LIZ VINCH



## Who is your party's best political strategist?

### Democrats

#### Congressional Insiders

- 1. **Rahm Emanuel** 29%
- 2. **Nancy Pelosi** 16
- 3. **Steny Hoyer** 10
- 3. **Charles Schumer** 10
- 3. **Chris Van Hollen** 10

Total votes: 31. Other top vote-getters: No one, 6%; David Axelrod, James Carville, David Plouffe, John Podesta, Jim Webb, Anthony Weiner, 3%.

#### Political Insiders

- 1. **David Axelrod** 25%
- 2. **Rahm Emanuel** 19
- 3. **David Plouffe** 8
- 4. **Bill Clinton** 5

Total votes: 83. Other top vote-getters: Paul Begala, James Carville, J.B. Poersch, Doug Sosnik, 4%; Geoff Garin, John Podesta, Charles Schumer, 2%.

### Republicans

#### Congressional Insiders

- 1. **Haley Barbour** 17%
- 2. **Karl Rove** 13
- 3. **Eric Cantor** 8
- 3. **Tom Cole** 8
- 3. **Pete Sessions** 8
- 3. **No one** 8

Total votes: 24. Other top vote-getters: John Boehner, Glen Bolger, Steven LaTourette, Frank Luntz, Kevin McCarthy, Tom Price, John Shadegg, John Thune, Dave Winston, 4%.

#### Political Insiders

- 1. **Karl Rove** 26%
- 2. **Haley Barbour** 24
- 3. **Ed Gillespie** 12
- 4. **Mike Murphy** 7

Total votes: 84. Other top vote-getters: No one, 6%; Mitch McConnell, 4%; Terry Nelson, 2%.

**Emanuel.** "One of the most astute strategists of our time. And the president is fortunate to have him at his side."

**Axelrod.** "A brilliant campaign put together by a truly committed, kind person."

**Axelrod.** "Set the Obama campaign on a course that was different, bold, and successful against long odds and tough opponents. In the general election, he set a tone for the campaign that was distinct from the McCain campaign and also successful!"

**Axelrod.** "He may be in the White House, but he has been brilliant from the beginning of the presidential campaign right up to now."

**Axelrod.** "How many other Democratic strategists have won a presidential race lately?"

**Plouffe.** "David is very good. Perhaps he is more of a manager than a strategist, but he is very disciplined, as is Obama. And better than most similar people, he is able to keep his eye on the prize."

**Pelosi.** "She raises more money, puts the right talent in the right places, and sets goals to achieve outcomes."

**Schumer.** "Just hand him the ball, and he figures out a way to get it done. You gotta love him."

**Clinton.** "Yes, he got emotional and off track in the '08 primaries, but he still understands politics better than anyone on the planet."

**Rove.** "It has been and will continue to be Karl Rove. Demonize him all you want, but no one else understands the nexus between electoral demographics, policy, and politics like Karl!"

**Rove.** "Rove still reigns. He's the guy that people go to bounce ideas off, and he was responsible for the last big victories of the party. There is a lot of good talent in the pool, but they'll have to credential themselves with big national victories."

**Barbour.** "He is the whole package. Governors are so important in shaping and grounding a party. He will lead the GOP to a stellar year in that regard. And, by the way, he is a damn good governor as well."

**Barbour.** "He will lead the [Republican Governors Association] back into majority status in 2010. Assuming he does not run himself, he will be the most-sought-after player by the 2012 [presidential campaign] teams."

**Gillespie.** "Ed knows better than anyone how to build a message and infrastructure designed to go beyond just the base and win over Democrats and independents. Just look at his work in the Virginia governor's race."

**No one.** "Sadly, the well-known so-called strategists in the Republican Party are stuck in the past and don't represent the best interests of the party. And the new strategists have yet to make a name for themselves."

**Murphy.** "Unlike every other GOP strategist, Murphy has actually won statewide races in blue states like California, Massachusetts, and Michigan."

**Cole.** "[The GOP defeat in the special election in New York's 23rd Congressional District] wouldn't have happened if he was still [National Republican Congressional Committee] chairman."

Axelrod. "How many other Democratic strategists have won a **presidential race lately?**"

—Democratic Insider



## Who is the most creative thinker in your party?

### Democrats

#### Congressional Insiders

- 1. **Barney Frank** 13%
- 2. **Bill Clinton** 10
- 3. **Robert Andrews** 6
- 3. **Richard Durbin** 6
- 3. **Barack Obama** 6

Total votes: 31. Other top vote-getters: Authors of the Innovation Agenda, Mark Begich, Earl Blumenauer, Joe Courtney, Rosa DeLauro, Donna Edwards, Rahm Emanuel, Sam Farr, Alan Grayson, no one, Peter Orszag, David Plouffe, Robert Reich, John Tanner, Third Way, John Tierney, Chris Van Hollen, Anthony Weiner, 3%.

#### Political Insiders

- 1. **Bill Clinton** 12%
- 2. **Rahm Emanuel** 8
- 3. **David Axelrod** 7
- 3. **Barack Obama** 7
- 3. **Charles Schumer** 7

Total votes: 74. Other top vote-getters: John Podesta, 5%; Andy Stern, 4%; Joe Biden, Nancy Pelosi, David Plouffe, Bruce Reed, Third Way, 3%.

### Republicans

#### Congressional Insiders

- 1. **Newt Gingrich** 41%
- 2. **Paul Ryan** 14
- 3. **Dave Camp** 9
- 3. **Darrell Issa** 9
- 3. **Thaddeus McCotter** 9

Total votes: 22. Other top vote-getters: Lamar Alexander, Charles Boustany, Charles Krauthammer, Tom Price, 5%.

#### Political Insiders

- 1. **Newt Gingrich** 53%
- 2. **No one** 5
- 2. **Karl Rove** 5
- 4. **Alex Castellanos** 4
- 4. **Mike Murphy** 4

Total votes: 85. Other top vote-getters: Haley Barbour, Mitch Daniels, Ed Gillespie, Paul Ryan, 2%.

**Clinton.** "He has a renewed respect. His analysis is always on the mark. And people like his way of looking at solutions."

**Emanuel.** "Love him or hate him, he's highly creative."

**Obama.** "He identified a path to the presidency, followed it, and won."

**Axelrod.** "Thinks outside of the box."

**Frank.** "Barney has twice as much brainpower as anyone else in the House."

**Schumer.** "He comes up with the best marketing ideas."

**Podesta.** "A bridge builder with the foresight to see emerging issues and coalitions. His work in building the Center for American Progress has quickly catapulted it into a position of influence in Washington, D.C."

**Biden.** "I know, I know, but he's always thinking—and in the right way."

**Gingrich.** "No one does a better job of combining good politics with good policy. What other ex-speaker has remained a politically potent force with a national audience and intellectual respectability on the left as well as the right? It is an amazing achievement."

**Gingrich.** "Newt is probably the most creative and prolific. Not everything is good, but it gets people thinking."

**Gingrich.** "About 20 percent of what he dreams up or says is just way out there, but the other 80 percent is really smart, innovative stuff that the party can benefit from."

**Gingrich.** "He still has a unique way of looking at issues. It is a candid viewpoint that gets him in trouble sometimes but is badly needed in a party searching for its identity right now."

**Gingrich.** "Even if not all of his ideas are good, he just has so damn many of them. He wouldn't make a great candidate for president, but as a creative thinker he is unrivaled—in both parties."

**Ryan.** "Yeah, he's boring as heck. But if you actually read his policy stuff, you'll see how creative he is."

**No one.** "And that remains an incredible problem for the GOP. The conservative think tanks are moribund, and no person has emerged who can help the party update its base of ideas."

**Rove.** "He is still miles ahead of everyone else."

**Murphy.** "Mike is innovative and visionary, not to mention funny. If I were running, I'd have him manage my campaign."

Gingrich. "About 20 percent of what he dreams up or says is just way out there, but **the other 80 percent is really smart**, innovative stuff that the party can benefit from."

—Republican Insider

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favor the establishment candidate, Hillary Rodham Clinton, because they have tended to attract base voters, not less-engaged ones. But Obama's Internet-based organizing success and his ability to expand the universe of participants overwhelmed the Clinton forces. While Axelrod had a lot of help, Carrick said, "David was a very early adviser—going back to the [2004] Senate race. And I think people see him as having put together everything else that followed."

Republican Insiders' pick of Rove as their best strategist is not without some controversy. As the mastermind behind President Bush's 2004 re-election bid, he emphasized turning out the party base more than attracting independents. Some GOP operatives now argue that Rove's strategy led to many of the shortcomings and controversies of the 43rd president's second term and to the party's losses in 2006 and 2008.

Even though Bush left office as one of the most unpopular presidents, Rove's defenders say that he should not be blamed for Bush's or the GOP's failings. Republican pollster Whit Ayres pointed to Hurricane Katrina, the war in Iraq, excessive government spending, and scandals as the four key factors in the party's Bush-era collapse. "I don't think anyone believes Karl was the primary mover behind any of those four," Ayres said.

Moreover, Rove's media presence as a regular contributor to *The Wall Street Journal* and as a Fox News analyst, regularly critiquing President Obama, allows him to continue to influence his party's strategy even though he is not expected to return to the presidential campaign trenches.

"Once you've done that twice, it's not something you do again," Ed Gillespie said. He worked with Rove in the Bush White House and more recently was chairman of Republican Bob McDonnell's successful gubernatorial bid in Virginia, a feat that earned Gillespie a place in the GOP Political Insiders' strategist rankings. Rove's "public commentary and private conversations will help shape how people think about the party going forward," Gillespie said. "And since I don't think he'll have a dog in the [GOP presidential] primary fight in '12, people in all the camps will probably be following closely what he's saying."

Speaking of 2012, the person that the Republican Insiders tapped as their party's "most creative thinker," former House Speaker Newt Gingrich, is often mentioned as a potential presidential candidate. Gingrich, who has toyed with White House runs in the past, secured a place in the Republican pantheon 15 years ago as the principal architect of the party's House coup. He is the author of 20 books, including 11 *New York Times* bestsellers, and has never stopped generating ideas for the GOP. Gingrich is a senior fellow at the conservative American Enterprise Institute and general chairman of American Solutions for Winning the Future, an advocacy group that promotes "tri-partisan" public policy ideas.

"Newt isn't the sort of standard, slow-paced academic," said AEI senior fellow Karlyn Bowman. "He's an ideas guy. You can see it sitting

around the lunch table here. He's always asking probing questions."

Admiration for Gingrich is widespread, but some Republicans wonder what the perception of him as their guiding intellectual force says about the GOP. "Newt is still seen by the political community as a creative and interesting guy," said lobbyist Ed Kutler, who

was a top House aide to Gingrich. "Maybe it also says there's a dearth of thinkers in the party." But it makes sense that Republicans see figures from the past, Gingrich and Rove, as their top thinker and strategist, Gillespie contended, because just five years ago Republicans ran everything in Washington. "It's no surprise that the [people] who kicked off our run of control of Congress, Newt Gingrich, and the White House, Karl Rove, are at the top of these lists," he said. "The baton will pass, but it hasn't happened yet. But it also hasn't been that long."

It also hasn't been long since Bill Clinton dominated the Democratic Party's landscape. And Democratic Political Insiders still regard him as their most creative thinker. When Clinton regained the White House for Democrats after 12 years of Republican rule, he did so by staking himself and his party to a "Third Way" in politics. In his autobiography, Clinton asserts that the strategy "helped to modernize the Democratic Party and later would be adopted by resurgent center-right parties all over the world."

And although looking backward strikes some Democrats as odd, others see the roots of Clintonism in their party's current success. "It's still a 'new Democratic Party' that won in 2006 and 2008, even though he was not able to take that personally through the next threshold," said Greenberg, referring to Hillary Clinton's unsuccessful presidential bid last year.

Bill Clinton still actively participates in the public policy arena through his foundation, which promotes new ideas on several fronts. "He continues to be so active in so many policy areas. And when we talk about President Clinton, we're not talking about a guy who just sits around and refights the old battles," Greenberg said. "Newt, too, is engaged with what's happening and not just reliving old battles. It's an interesting parallel."

Democratic Congressional Insiders saluted one of their own, Rep. Barney Frank of Massachusetts, as their party's most creative thinker. Despite his brusque manner, Frank earns widespread kudos for his sheer brainpower. As chairman of the House Financial Services Committee at a time when Wall Street and the nation's banking system teetered on the precipice, he made the most of his opportunity to shine. Frank is now shepherding through his chamber complex legislation designed to avoid a repeat of last year's near-meltdown in the markets.

"The complexity of the crisis elevates him," Carrick said. "I think another factor is not only the creativity of his thinking but his willingness to constantly look at everything and try to come up with the smartest approach rather than just the political approach to regulation and oversight." ■

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