

## Obama, Like Bush, Uses Crisis to Expand Presidential Power

The president and his aides are creating a more muscular presidency through a methodical approach

By [KENNETH T. WALSH](#)

March 16, 2009

It happens every Saturday. That's when White House Chief of [Staff Rahm Emanuel](#) convenes a special meeting for members of President Obama's inner circle in the historic Roosevelt Room. There are no refreshments or snacks—not even a plate of doughnuts or a pot of coffee as a welcoming gesture. It's all business.

But the weekly Emanuel event is one of the most important sessions in Obama's White House. It's there that senior advisers map out the course of action for the new administration, often for weeks at a time. It's part of a master plan to seize the moment and use the current economic crisis to remake the country in some fundamental ways.

The breadth and depth of Obama's agenda become clearer by the day. Last week, he added two more priorities to his list, lifting limits on federal funding for stem cell research and announcing a batch of education initiatives, including support for merit pay for teachers.

Behind the scenes, it all goes back to those sessions in Emanuel's office where the inner circle decides how to carry out Obama's wishes. In a telephone interview, Emanuel said he alternates between two approaches at the meetings. On one weekend, he will lead a discussion of the scheduling possibilities a week or two ahead, such as choosing the themes, places, and groups the president will address. At the next session, the focus will be longer term and more thematic, featuring prolonged debate on policy options and sometimes presentations of data about the topics under consideration. The goal of the thematic meetings, Emanuel said, is to "step back" from the day to day and take a longer view. "I try to make everybody feel they can participate," Emanuel added.

A few weeks ago, the inner circle decided that it was time for Obama to "retool" his message and emphasize not only the dire condition of the economy but also the president's belief that the nation would eventually lift itself out of the morass. Obama agreed, and within a few days he held a prime-time news conference and a town hall meeting where he made exactly those points, which were reflected in the news coverage. One of the participants says the sessions are held either in the late morning or early afternoon and often last for two hours. Among the attendees are senior adviser David Axelrod; public relations strategists such as White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs and Communications Director Ellen Moran; Vice Presidential Chief of Staff Ron Klain; domestic policy aides, including Melody Barnes, director of the Domestic Policy Council; scheduler Alyssa Mastromonaco; and national security advisers.

An example of the process: On Saturday, February 21, Emanuel and his aides put the finishing touches on the long-planned schedule for the following week—on Monday, a presidential forum to discuss the fiscal crisis; on Tuesday, the president's speech to a joint session of Congress; Thursday, the unveiling of a budget outline; and Friday, the announcement of a timetable for U.S. troop withdrawals from Iraq. At one point, Emanuel congratulated everyone on the administration's fast start and looked ahead to the priorities for the week. "It would be pretty heady to try to pull off one of these, let alone to do all of them," he said proudly. In the end, all the missions were accomplished.

These previously undisclosed Saturday meetings show not only how long the hours are in Obamaworld but also how methodical and disciplined his inner circle has been in planning Obama's first 100 days as one of the most productive presidential beginnings in history. The hectic pace is not without costs. [White House aides](#) admit that they are already getting more than a bit tired. But they remain excited and highly motivated about their work.

Gibbs says Obama has always recognized that "the beginning of the year is the most opportune time to lay out your priorities." That's when a new president, cloaked in the aura of victory, has maximum leverage.

There is also what Obama has called "the fierce urgency of now." [White House aides](#) say Obama didn't have any choice but to move quickly with the stimulus package and the bailout of the financial industry. He realized that the economic meltdown was propelling the nation into a recession and needed to be stopped.

Of course, to Obama's chagrin, the recession hasn't stopped—in some ways, the economic crisis has deepened. But Obama's loyalists say he was correct to move boldly and do what he could to contain it. "We don't have the luxury of sequencing and choreography that others might have had," Gibbs says. "But at the same time, I think we also have a unique moment in order to make a difference."

It's clear that Obama is intent on changing America's course in a dramatic way, as Ronald Reagan did in 1981. But Obama, while he admires Reagan's "transformational" approach, seeks to reverse much of what Reagan accomplished. "This is a guy who is defining a new way forward," says Will Marshall, president of the centrist Progressive Policy Institute. "This is terra incognita. People aren't used to seeing changes in government that are this dramatic."

In a way, Obama is doing what George W. Bush did in the national security sphere, using a crisis to expand presidential authority. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Bush moved to increase and exert his war-making powers. Now, amid the recession and financial meltdown, Obama is moving to increase and exert his peacetime powers. The result in both cases has been a more muscular presidency.

And Gibbs says that the Obama agenda will continue to grow. "We've still got stuff to lay out," he says.

**Tags:** [Obama administration](#), [Barack Obama](#), [Bush administration](#), [George W. Bush](#), [politics](#), [Rahm Emanuel](#), [economy](#)



Rahm Emanuel left, talks with then-Democratic presidential candidate Sen. Barack Obama in Chicago.

Copyright © 2012 U.S. News & World Report LP All rights reserved.  
Use of this Web site constitutes acceptance of our Terms and Conditions of Use and Privacy Policy.