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Hire Rendell, Not Plouffe

Michael Sean Winters | Nov. 23, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

The White House is beinning its post-midterm shake-up. Evidently presidential counselor David Axelrod is headed to Chicago even earlier than expected, and former campaign manager David Plouffe is coming on board the White House staff at the beginning of the new year. This sends the same signal as the decision by the Democratic caucus in the House to select the same leadership team for the upcoming Congress: Obama doesn't "get it" even though he says he does.

What does he not get? That more than messaging is the problem. That he has personally failed to find a way to explain the public purposes he has asked the American people to pay for. That simplicity and clarity are political values every bit as important as thoughtful decision-making and a "no drama" atmosphere. That he can talk about re-training and smart jobs till he is blue in the face, but the average manufacturing worker who plant has closed knows there is not much that is going to improve his economic prospects.

Of course, I am not sitting in on conversations in the White House and the President does not call me up and seek my advice. Maybe Obama does "get it."
Maybe he understands that he needed to be a bit pushier with the Senate so that they did not spend the entire summer of 2009 pursuing a fantasy of bipartisan cooperation on health care reform. Maybe he understands that it would have been wise to have made Sen. Olympia Snowe his new best friend when he came to Washington. Maybe he understands that he should have gotten immigration reform done, and done quickly, at the start of his term instead of pushing for climate change legislation which may be necessary but does not pay political dividends the way immigration reform would. Maybe he understands all of that.

But, I submit that his decision to continue surrounding himself only with people who are already part of the team is not a good sign. Plouffe's experience of working with Obama came from a campaign with the wind at their back, not from running the country in the middle of a maelstorm. Mr. Plouffe may be very smart but does he know what it is like to deal with state and local governments? Does he understand what makes blue collar white voters tick? Has he ever won their votes? No, no and no.

But, standing in the wings, about to be free for the taking, there is Pennsylvania Governor Ed Rendell, the straight-shooting, fast-talking former mayor of Philadelphia who knew precisely what it took to win election in the Keystone State that James Carville once memorably described as, "Philadelphia at one end, Pittsburgh at the other, and a whole lot of Alabama in between." Rendell has said the only job he would consider taking is that of White House chief-of-staff which, in the event, has a temporary incumbent since the departure of Rahm Emanuel.

It is by now clear that the professorial Obama really does not have the "common touch." Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., famously said of Franklin Roosevelt that he had a first class temperament and a second class intellect. Obama, by all accounts, has a first rate intellect and a first rate temperament, but he does not have FDR's ability to speak with and for the common man. He needs to surround himself with some advisors who do have that common touch. And, he needs to do so fast.

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