CNN's *Chicagoland*: Propaganda for Mayor Emanuel

Jeff Lusanne, George Marlowe
29 May 2014

Chicagoland, the eight-part CNN documentary produced by Robert Redford, which concluded last month, was promoted as a look at the gritty reality of life in America's third most populous city. Its central figure was Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel, who is portrayed as a semi-heroic figure battling social, economic and political difficulties to do what is best for the city's population.

Recently, the *Chicago Tribune* obtained emails showing that the producers of the show exchanged more than 700 emails with Emanuel's office to coordinate the production of the series. Correspondence began when the show was just an idea and was so close-knit that CNN press releases were sent to the mayor's office for review before publishing.

The producers of *Chicagoland* strove to make the series as beneficial as possible for the mayor, with one producer, Marc Levin, stating that Emanuel should be shown "as the star that he really is." Another email suggested, "Rahm will look good making 'his' points."

The closure of 50 schools after the teachers union's betrayal of the 2012 strike was one of the most unpopular actions carried out by Emanuel, provoking an outpouring of opposition from parents, students and teachers across the city. Two days before Emanuel's hand-picked school board was set to vote on the school closings, Levin sent a pitch to the mayor's office, which stated:

"This is a real opportunity to highlight the Mayors leadership—his ability to balance the need for reform and fiscal reality with compassion for affected communities and concern for the safety of Chicago's school children."

Referring to a potential scene for the film, Levin added, "We need the mayor on the phone in his SUV, in city hall with key advisers and his kitchen cabinet and meeting with CPS (Chicago Public Schools) head BBB (Barbara Byrd-Bennett) and with CPD (Chicago Police Department Superintendent Garry) McCarthy."

That scene is exactly what appears in the first episode of the series, which aired in March.

These revelations suggest that the aim of this so-called "documentary" was nothing less than providing political propaganda for the Emanuel administration. The deeply unpopular Emanuel will be running a re-election campaign in the coming year—a not inconsequential factor in the close collaboration between CNN and the mayor's office.

The blatant collusion of a major television network with corporate-backed politicians is revealing, although not surprising. From the highest echelons on down, the media in the US is virtually integrated into the capitalist state, including the US military, and gladly offers its hand in doling out press releases for the ruling elite.

CNN and the producers responded to these revelations by attempting to cover up their tracks. "The mayor's office was never granted editorial control over the content or the press communications for *Chicagoland* ," they claimed.

There was no reason the Emanuel administration needed direct control, however. The producers and CNN began with the same perspective as the ruling Democratic Party establishment in Chicago. They embrace Emanuel's "tough" policies that place the burden of the city's budget deficit on the population, relying on cuts to pensions, education, and the privatization of services rather than taking any measures that impact the wealth of the financial elite.

Initially, when viewing the first episode, it was hard not to suspect that the production was done in close coordination with the mayor's office. The episode attempted to present an "objective" and even "critical" view of the Emanuel administration, but it ended up looking like little more than a promotional piece for various strata of the establishment.

Emanuel was presented as a little rough around the edges, but as a person that has the "guts" and "grit" to make the tough choices the city needs. We're told early on by the narrator in rather bombastic language, "He's *tough*. *Unrelenting*. His enemies called him Rahmbo."

Not surprisingly, at its premiere, executive producer Robert Redford, a long-time Democratic Party liberal stalwart, stated: "I was extremely impressed with him [Emanuel] considering what he's up against."

In another interview with CNN, titled "Telling the truth on the small screen," Redford revealed his cozy relationship with the Daley and Emanuel administrations:

"I think the most encouraging thing I've learned about Chicago going back to my personal involvement with Mayor Daley and with Rahm Emanuel, is the heart…. I have a high

© World Socialist Web Site

regard for Rahm Emanuel. It is not an easy job. To manage a city like Chicago with so many disparate parts to it is not an enviable task. I think that he is as qualified as anybody, but boy, it's like being the president of the United States."

No genuine exposure of the social and class issues that dominate life in Chicago and every other city in the US can come from the camp of Democratic Party liberalism, which has to conceal or ignore so much, including the filthy role of the Democrats themselves.

The only hints of real social conditions in *Chicagoland* come through the snippets of Christian Fenger Academy High School on the far south side, in a poor neighborhood where gang activity is high and the school itself receives minimal funding. The perspective on the conditions within the school largely revolves around Principal Elizabeth Dozier, who is presented as working nonstop to try and reduce violence in the school and improve its academic standing.

Certain moments showing students, the school, and a bit of the neighborhood can give a glimpse of the deteriorating social conditions with the outbursts of gang violence. But the scenes are presented in such a rapid and heavy-handed manner that the complexities of the situation do not come through.

Furthermore, the scenes at Fenger fit into the largely "law-and-order" perspective of the show. We see and rapidly hear statistics of violence, but little is done to explore the rise of poverty, the destruction of manufacturing jobs (like in many other industrialized regions in the country), or the deterioration of social conditions.

The tone and perspective of the series can largely be gleaned in the first episode. The issue of violence is removed from any concrete historical examination of the policies—especially those of the Democratic Party, from Mayor Daley to Emanuel and the Obama administration. Indeed, the Democratic Party's urban policy, both nationally and in Chicago, has consisted of dismantling public housing, promoting private takeovers of public services and city assets, and attacking public education and teachers.

Chicagoland accepts this inverted reality as "reform"—despite rising poverty, unemployment, and homelessness—and suggests that everything is boiled down to whether there are enough cops are on the street.

In this sense, the series exploits the real fear and danger of violence faced by many in the city to argue for more resources and power for the police. Since 2008, Democratic politicians have called for the National Guard to be deployed in the city, including Governors Rod Blagojevich and Pat Quinn, and Illinois State Representative Monique Davis. In 2013, following the events of the Boston bombing, military drills and urban warfare exercises were conducted in the Chicago area. Such measures are no doubt preparations for the creation of a police state, highlighting the fears of the political establishment of an emerging mass working class opposition.

Indeed, in addition to Rahm Emanuel, the series also prominently features the perspectives of the head of the Chicago Police Department, Garry McCarthy. In the first episode, viewers are presented with a tough-guy police chief grilling the supervisors of police districts on why crime numbers are up in a given week. McCarthy states in strongman fashion that he is "saving the city."

Notably, as the series was being aired, *Chicago Magazine* released an investigative report revealing that under Rahm and McCarthy, the police and city have systematically edited crime data to artificially lower the reported rate of crime and murder in the city. Through an array of administrative tricks, cases were reclassified as non-criminal to meet the public relations goals of the Emanuel administration. The "remarkable" fall in crime rates, as presented in the show, was exposed to be fraudulent.

Fittingly, the deceptive and stage-managed content of the show is presented in an equally exploitative style. The whole production consists of fast cuts, hokey effects and over-the-top narration. One producer ludicrously stated that the series "is the cutting edge of something new in the documentary world," as if a sensationalist promotional piece for powerful political and corporate figures has never been made before.

Such an approach is very understandable as they appeal to cheap emotions and simplistic conclusions instead of a genuine investigation of social life. The complexity of politics, history, and inequality is largely passed over so that the focus can be on how dedicated Emanuel and McCarthy are towards the goal of "reforming" the city.

Despite all the bombast, the series lost 48 percent of its viewers by the end of the eight-episode run.

One senses that the population has grown largely weary of attempts to present social life from a "law-and-order" perspective. An exploration of how a city like Chicago came to have widespread poverty, terrible violence, and a shimmering skyline of wealth that is out of reach for most residents is a striking topic for a documentary.

Chicagoland is clearly not that work, because an explanation of those conditions would require, first and foremost, a critical attitude towards the ruling Democratic Party, both locally and nationally. The email revelations highlight instead the close workings of the media with the political establishment responsible for overseeing these terrible social conditions.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site