An Interview with Emanuel (“Manny”) Rouvelas Regarding Excellence in Government Relations

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Interviewer: How does it feel to be the founder of one of the longest-running lobbying firms in D.C.?

Manny Rouvelas: Well, let me say for the record that I was not the first lobbyist. [Chuckling] I think that Moses was the first lobbyist, and his success getting the head of his government, the Pharaoh, to release the Israelites from Egypt, using tactics like frogs, hailstorms, and locusts, certainly makes him one of the most memorable and most successful lobbyists of all time.

THE EARLY DAYS

[Laughs] So you started in 1973. Forty-five years is a long time.

Few law firms had serious lobbying operations when we started, so we were among the early pioneers. Today, most major law firms, particularly in Washington, D.C., have lobbying components. Yes, for example, we have watched the entire U.S. Senate turn over since then. Senator Orrin Hatch, currently President Pro Tempore and the longest-serving Republican U.S. Senator, who recently announced his retirement, had not even been elected to the Senate when we opened our doors. We’ve seen so many of the giants of Congress—Ted Kennedy, Daniel Inouye, Tip O’Neill, Claiborne Pell, Scoop Jackson, Warren Magnuson, Russell Long, Bob Dole, just to name a few—come, serve their country and go. Since we started, there have been nine presidents, 22 Congresses, and many thousands of cabinet secretaries, top officials, laws, regulations, and lobbyists. The year we opened our doors in 1973, Roe v. Wade was decided, former President Lyndon Johnson died, U.S. troops left Vietnam, and the Watergate hearings began.

From the lobbying perspective, what are the biggest changes since 1973?

Well, back then there were a few individuals who dominated lobbying, people who could pick up the phone and get through to virtually everyone. Today, top-quality lobbying is a team sport. So for a firm like ours, which has been around for a long time and hopes to be around much longer, the question is, “How do you build, sustain, train, and maintain a team that can continuously compete in the major leagues of our profession?” And it’s the same for individual lobbying fights—you are always working to bring in the right talent, organize the right lineups and strategies for each game, execute, and get the best won/loss record, etc. The days of the successful solo lobbyist are pretty much gone, at least in Washington, D.C.—part of the history and mythology like the gunslingers of the old Wild West. The lobbying business has gotten much more complex.
three-dimensional chessboard” when the same issue is unfolding in all three branches of government at the same time.) The ability and flexibility to shift substantive expertise, personnel, and files seamlessly and quickly from one forum to another is a competitive advantage and cost effective. Similarly, the ability to frame and reframe arguments and present them simultaneously to Republicans and Democrats in the House and Senate requires a strong team. To extend the metaphor, an iconic old-style Western gunslinger is no match for a modern Navy Seal team. That is true in combat or lobbying.

What about technology?
Technology in our business has changed dramatically. Technology is disrupting lobbying and government affairs as it has in every other communications business—floods of information to and from officials, clients, and the public. Big data, instant communications, electronic research, and social media are transforming the process. You must not only keep up but lead.

We have tried to use the best technology to serve our clients from the outset. For example, in the early 1970s, we installed one of the first telecopiers. It transmitted at five minutes per page and is currently in a museum, but it was the fastest and the best at the time.

When C-SPAN began live coverage of the House in March 1979 and the Senate in 1986, the District of Columbia was still not wired for cable TV reception. It wasn’t easy to get a signal, and most lobby firms didn’t try. But we leased a special microwave antenna to get coverage. We defrayed much of the cost in subleases to others, and provided our clients faster, better service than most competitors.

In the mid-1990s, we created the “Bull Pen,” consisting of four tech-savvy non-lawyers to help us monitor, analyze, and provide customized information around the clock. It has been continually updated, changed, and now transformed through beta test cooperative agreements with the top 33 providers. Over the years in various contexts, we have represented cutting-edge high-tech industry leaders and a host of other high-tech and startup companies. We have also represented companies and alliances in software, nanotechnology, neurotechnology, sustainable development, commercial space, and drones. With those clients, lagging in technology would be a fast route to extinction. Excellence in technology is essential for excellent service. You can never rest.

WHAT HASN’T CHANGED IN 45 YEARS?

So the lobbying world has changed a great deal in four-and-a-half decades. You are one of the few firms that have been around that long. So what are the enduring parts of excellence in government relations that haven’t changed over the years?

Some things have changed a lot over the years, but the core elements of excellence really have not. We have three core values in our firm, which were identified in an extended process led by our partner Mark Ruge during the 1990s. These core values nicely summarize some of the most importance characteristics for excellence in government relations.

First is absolute integrity. I’ve already mentioned it in the context of credibility and lobbying compliance, but it’s much more than just filing the proper forms and following the appropriate rules. It’s a mindset—an obligation you owe your clients, your colleagues and firm, government decision-makers, and yourself. Integrity and excellence in government relations are completely intertwined.

Next comes client service. It is our business and our fiduciary oath and obligation to serve our clients. That means first understanding them and their business.
Our clients come to us with a problem. It is our job to help them explore the various ways to solve it. That’s how we first came up with the concept of a policy group in a law firm 45 years ago. Our job is at the intersection of government, business, law, politics, and policy. That’s been our concept from the first day. We’re proud that our first client 45 years ago is still a client today.

Third is the importance of teamwork. An excellent team will beat a loose collection of “all stars” every time. We often use team analogies and urged people to read team books. My favorites are The Boys in the Boat about the University of Washington rowing crew that won the 1936 Berlin Olympics and Moneyball about baseball by Michael Lewis.

What makes me happiest is that our team has lasted so long, and it continues to thrive under a new generation of leadership. We are getting better, stronger, and more successful under new leaders, and, I believe, we are one of the few groups to have accomplished this. The secret, I think, is a focus on these consistent core values.

THE ALL IMPORTANT ROLE OF CLIENTS IN GOVERNMENT RELATIONS EXCELLENCE

How important are clients in determining the excellence of public service advocacy or lobbying?

Obviously, they are indispensable. Without the opportunities and funding they provide, nothing would happen. But beyond that, their engagement, attitudes, and actions are probably the single most significant factor in determining whether the public policy advocacy they receive is excellent or not.

What do you mean?

The best clients are open and honest about their needs, risks, and opportunities. They take the time to educate you about their business, share advice, and incorporate you in their strategic planning. Understanding our clients and their business risks and opportunities is the first essential ingredient in excellence. They can make that easy or tough; fast or slow; efficient or inefficient. Actually, I think being a law firm helps in establishing an open relationship. The clients know they can rely on confidentiality, attorney-client privilege, and other legal ethics rules that protect them.

The best clients bring you into their wheelhouse and work cooperatively. They understand they benefit by educating you. Over the years, the most important industry information and content we learned—maritime, transportation, aviation, telecommunications, science and technology, postal, consumer goods, medicine, financial services, commodities, etc., etc.—was initially provided by clients, continually augmented and refined and improved in feedback loops between them and our firm. That’s why excellence tends to increase over time and a long-term relationship.

What else?

The best clients also understand, respect, and appreciate the complexity of the policy process and the special expertise and value you bring to them: knowledge of the rules, procedures, decision-makers, personalities, interaction and relationships with and among decision-makers, etc. That expertise is different for House and Senate; committees and subcommittees; Republicans and Democrats; appropriators and authorizers—every federal agency. The best clients appreciate the “value added” you bring and work closely.
What are the characteristics that impede clients from getting excellent service?

There are lots: Among the most common I have seen over the years:

1. Failure to prioritize and to take the time and effort working with us to develop realistic objectives;

2. Having the firm’s reporting function be too low in the client organization. That can lead to slow decision-making, diffusion of energy through internal company competition, and ineffective communication. Incidentally, when we are assessing an adversary, we frequently consider the timing and complexity of their communication and decisional loop. If ours is better and faster, it’s an important tactical advantage that can be decisive.

3. Failure to assess the amounts at stake and allocate resources accordingly. There is a long history of companies looking at D.C. expenditures as overhead and trying to reduce it. More sophisticated companies are now beginning to apply the same quantitative tools to government affairs as they do to other parts of their business using return on investment and decision-tree analysis. Our firm is in the forefront of working with clients in that effort as has been written up in Bloomberg and elsewhere.

WHAT IS AND ISN’T EXCELLENCE?

What’s the hardest part of trying to sustain excellence in lobbying for forty-five years?

Knowing when to say “NO” and stick with it—to clients, potential clients, questionable short cuts, the lure of a huge payday, etc. The strategy for excellence and for survival sometimes requires saying “NO” to shortcuts and questionable practices. It can be very expensive to say “no.” Some of our best long-term clients were companies that realized that our saying “no” to them meant putting their interests ahead of our own financial interests. Saying “no” can be expensive and hard. If the issue is strategy and tactics, not ethics, you can usually find another way to accomplish what the client wants—and that’s our job!

Sometimes lobbyists get a bad wrap . . .

Well they do, but sometimes they deserve it. We are no different than any other profession. The majority of lobbyists are decent and honorable. But the few rotten apples get most of the attention. The same is true of politicians, public officials, and even teachers, coaches, and priests. Like those professions, lobbyists are essential to civil society. They go right to the heart of democracy, right up front in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution—the right to petition the government for a redress of grievances. It is an essential part by our system of government maintaining liberty. People also tend to forget all the lobbyists who work full time for undeniably noble causes, nonprofits, etc.

In 2013, you and your firm received the inaugural award of the American League of Lobbyists/Association of Government Professionals for ethics, integrity, and engagement on civic and pro bono work. Do you think lobbyists have special ethical obligations to engage in civic and pro bono work?

Sure! All lawyers have ethical pro bono obligations. I think most or all our people engage actively as individuals and in groups participating in a wide variety of nonprofit, charitable activities and organizations. Many of our people also volunteer or participate in political campaigns. Their activities, their knowledge, and experience in public policy and government affairs
provide real value and expertise to these organizations. So do their networks of contacts. In addition to the pro bono beneficiaries, this networking and continuous building of relations and expertise indirectly serves our clients too. Some of the best, long-term friendships I have had with both clients and government officials began as a shared interest or passion in doing nonprofit pro bono work.

**What do you think excellence in public policy law means?**

It certainly means excellence in representing your client. But I think it also includes broader obligations to your colleagues, community, and country. As lawyers, we undertake an oath, are officers of the law, and also undertake pro bono obligations. Excellence requires you take those obligations seriously. Being public policy lawyers puts us in an extraordinary position to do so.

**What do you mean by extraordinary position?**

Ours is a government of, by, and under the law. Ours is the first government in history to be created, organized, and operated pursuant to written legal documents. A majority of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were lawyers. So were the drafters of the Constitution and five of our first six presidents. By modern legal standards, many would today be considered lobbyists. Abraham Lincoln definitely was!

**So how does all that translate to the modern day?**

Well, I certainly would not compare us to the Founding Fathers or Lincoln. But I do think that working at the intersection of law, business, government, politics, and policy, we have an obligation to try making them function as well as possible. That goes beyond a constitutional right to petition government to an obligation of sorts. We are like maintenance engineers. When it all comes together well, our clients and the government work together better and the country benefits.

**How does the group sustain and inspire that part of excellence?**

Well, our group includes the inspiration and involvement of Dick Thornburgh, an iconic Governor of Pennsylvania, U.S. Attorney General, and Deputy Secretary General of the United Nations, who had historic achievements in each of those roles. And of course, Senator Slade Gorton, who had an exceptional Senate career, argued numerous cases in the U.S. Supreme Court, and served on presidential commissions. Our three former members of Congress, all retired voluntarily after exceptional service: Jim Walsh (R-NY), who chaired four appropriations subcommittees; Bart Gordon (D-TN), who chaired the Science and Technology Committee and was senior on the Energy Committee; [and] John McHugh (R-NY), who joined us in 2016 after also being the second longest serving Secretary of the Army. You simply can’t meet and work on teams with these people every day without feeling the inspiration and spirit of public obligation that has permeated their lives and careers.

**What was Lloyd Meeds’s role in establishing excellence and a tradition of public service in the firm?**

It was crucial. Lloyd was one of our earliest D.C. partners starting in 1979. He was our first former member of Congress and has had a continuing influence until and after his death in 2005. Lloyd was straight-talking, Montana born, and served as a prosecutor and U.S. Attorney in Washington State before being elected to 14 years in Congress. He was also one of the few members of Congress to leave voluntarily on an issue of conscience. He was widely
recognized as the hardest working, most effective former member of Congress afterwards in his years with us. He and his wife, Mary, continually hosted clients, and he mentored more than a generation of our lawyers and staff. One of our conference rooms is named after Lloyd, contains high points in his career, and his legacy continues through the Lloyd Meeds Fellowships, where students work for us as paid interns.

How does that sense of public obligation affect your interaction with government officials?

Most of them—the best of them—are committed to the same thing, so it builds a bond and credibility. In turn, that re-enforces the excellence in advocacy.

HOW ABOUT EXCELLENCE IN GOVERNANCE?

So, in that regard, how do you feel it’s going? How is the government today doing?

Unfortunately, terribly. The worst I have ever seen in my life. So far, the 21st century has not been kind to America or our system of government. Whether measured in public opinion polls, attitudes toward government, legislative accomplishments, budget deficits, or anything else, our political institutions are struggling and failing.

For example, since 2000, we have had eight “change elections” in which the White House, House, or Senate has changed parties. That may be a historically unprecedented level of public dissatisfaction and meshes with the polls that show anger and division in our country. Partisan rancor, suspicion, corruption, and the popular culture make it worse than ever.

If you view yourself as a maintenance engineer at the intersection, that must be pretty discouraging?

Yes, I just looked at a government report issued December 28, 2000, showing a government budget surplus of $237 billion, the fourth consecutive year of surpluses and projecting that the entire national debt could be paid off by 2009. Then, you contrast that with the current flood of red ink and debt crisis. In the 21st century, the vision of a debt-free country rebuilding its infrastructure, education, science, and medical systems and improving everyone’s economic situation evaporated.

So what do you think happened?

Several books have already been written on it. It would require at least a semester-long seminar to discuss.

LOOKING AHEAD

But do you think as public policy lawyers and government relations specialists who value excellence we have an obligation to try to make it better?

Absolutely! What’s the alternative?

Looking back, how do you view a career in lobbying?

I feel very fortunate. How many jobs give you the chance to work on new, exciting, and important issues and challenges every day? And with acknowledged leaders in thought and action in government, business, science, education, [and] international relations, I still have trouble believing how lucky I have been and having had the chance to work with so many amazing people.
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About Manny Rouvelas:

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Manny Rouvelas engages in a wide-ranging federal practice representing leading companies and trade associations in the transportation, telecommunications, high technology, hospitality, and manufacturing industries regarding their Washington, D.C. activities and strategies. He has served as lead government affairs counsel for major companies in transnational acquisitions, mergers, and corporate reorganizations.

He is a recognized authority in Maritime law and for more than three decades has traveled globally to advise the CEOs of many of the world’s leading shipping companies. His practice has taken him to more than thirty countries, and he often works with the executive branch, Congress, and foreign embassies and governments on international trade and transport matters. He founded the Washington, D.C. office of Preston Gates and guided its growth to more than 140 partners and employees at the time it was merged into K&L Gates on January 1, 2007. In 2013 he was the recipient of the most prestigious award conveyed on U.S. Maritime industry leaders, the Admiral of the Ocean Sea Award, presented by the United Seaman’s Service, becoming the only practicing lawyer in its 44-year history to have received this award. Also in 2013, he was the inaugural recipient of the Association of Government Relations Professionals (AGRP) career achievement award for exemplary service to the profession, demonstrated integrity and ethical standards, engagement in civic and pro-bono work and mentoring.

He is and has been consistently ranked as one of the country’s top lawyers in both maritime law and in government affairs, including Chambers USA, Best Lawyers in America, Super Lawyers and similar publications. In its 30th year anniversary edition, the Legal Times recognized him as “one of the greatest Washington Lawyers of the past 30 years”, a “legal visionary”, who helped turn Washington, D.C.’s legal and lobbying community into an international powerhouse. Eleven times, from 2005-2016 he was named one of the 50 “Top Lobbyists” (out of 12,000) by The Hill newspaper based on surveys of Members of Congress and staff.
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