Rahm Emanuel, candidate for mayor of Chicago, stood before the microphone in the cavernous warehouse and in a somber voice, announced that he was finally getting a chance to publicly utter a four-letter word.

He paused a second for comic timing, then said the word: "JOBS."

"There," he said, "I already feel better."

The joke was Emanuel's nod to his reputation as 'Rahmbo,' the bad boy of the White House who has served two presidents as a tough, smart and highly effective political operative — albeit one with a blistering, back-alley vocabulary, a sometimes abrasive style and a relentless drive.

But in the mayoral race, the swagger and hard edges have given way to a calm, almost serene candidate whose voice can drop to a near whisper. He confidently talks local issues — elevated train lines, bike paths and after-school programs — refuses to be goaded and has harnessed his drive for City Hall into a $13 million juggernaut that has left rivals choking on his dust.

Emanuel heads into Tuesday's contest with a round-the-clock loop of TV and radio commercials featuring effusive praise from his two former bosses — Bill Clinton and President Barack Obama — endorsements from the city's two major newspapers and a decent shot at winning more than 50 percent of the vote, which would prevent an April 5 runoff. The winner will replace Mayor Richard M. Daley, who is not seeking a seventh term.

So is Rahm Emanuel the one-time ballet student, the amiable guy who greets el commuters with a friendly slap on the back and confesses to kids he was bullied as a boy? Or is he the foul-mouthed terminator lampooned on "Saturday Night Live," the warrior who, Obama once joked, had adapted Machiavelli's "The Prince" for dance with "a lot of kicks below the waist"?

Emanuel has a ready answer, knowing his take-no-prisoners style is what everyone talks about.

"Am I strong and determined and tough and vigorous?" he asked in a recent interview. "Yeah. I have a reputation because I have fought very tough battles against the NRA, against Wall Street, against the insurance companies, specifically on items that have delivered reform. And two presidents asked me to serve them because I've never been scared to take on tough assignments on behalf of the changes they wanted to bring."

Lest you equate tough with tyrannical, Emanuel, now 51, likes to point out he has inspired the loyalty of staff members who've followed him from one job to another — raising money for Democratic congressional candidates, serving in the House, and then as Obama's chief of staff.
"What has been never been noted is people who have worked for me have worked long periods of time because ... a. they share my passion for public service and b. (they know) the type of manager I'm going to be," he says.

"I joke about this — middle children wrote a book, "War or Peace." We can do either one," adds Emanuel, who is sandwiched between two equally successful brothers. "There are more nuances to who I am than (the media image.) Your profession has reported a caricature without really pressing, is that true?"

And yet, Emanuel can laugh about his image. He invited Andy Samberg, the "Saturday Night Live" cast member who impersonates him with finger-pointing tirades, to campaign with him. When the two recently greeted commuters at an el stop and a reporter asked if he could do a little Rahm, the comic said, "Not without cursing."

Emanuel also has inspired a fake Twitter account with 28,000 followers — more than triple the candidate's real Twitter following — offering often profane tweets that mimic life on the campaign trail.

It's that kind of celebrity that makes it tough for rivals to get even a moment in the spotlight.

Among three main opponents, Gery Chico, a lawyer with a gold-plated resume — his past jobs include Daley's chief of staff, president of the Chicago school board and the park district — has proved the strongest competitor. He's raised millions and been endorsed by several aldermen, including one of the city's most powerful, as well as police and firefighters' unions.

The two others are City Clerk Miguel del Valle, who has won support among progressives, and former U.S. Sen. Carol Moseley Braun, who made history in 1992 by being the first black woman elected to the Senate. A group of black leaders endorsed her as a unity candidate but her campaign has been marred by gaffes.

All three main rivals have tried to cut into Emanuel's whopping lead in the polls by putting him on the defensive.

They've tweaked his Hollywood fundraising (Steven Spielberg is among his contributors). They've tried to cast him as an outsider who doesn't understand Chicago's problems (Emanuel was born in the city, but attended New Trier West High School on the affluent North Shore.) And they've questioned his temperament, especially Moseley Braun, who in one forum, repeatedly tried to get him to address a crude remark he'd supposedly made to an aide. He didn't take the bait.

But in the bare-knuckle world of Chicago politics, it's been pretty tame.

Emanuel has managed to remain above the fray. When he appeared on the South Side to press the need for more fresh food groceries in the inner city and a reporter asked him to comment on a flap involving Moseley Braun and another candidate, he swatted it away:

"I will attack the problems facing the city of Chicago," he replied evenly. "I will not attack the other candidates."
Emanuel also maintained his poise when a court battle over his residency temporarily tossed him off the ballot. Challengers said he wasn't legally eligible to run because he had not lived in Chicago for a full year before the election.

The race for City Hall started taking shape immediately after Daley's stunning announcement last September that he was calling it quits. His departure will end an incredible one-family domination of the city; the mayor and his father, Richard J. Daley, the last of the big city bosses, have ruled Chicago for more than 42 of the last 56 years.

Dozens of people floated their names as possible mayoral contenders. But the list quickly shrunk as the hopefuls faced the reality of having to raise millions of dollars and watched many in Chicago's corporate elite put their money and prestige behind Emanuel.

The new mayor will face difficult challenges — attracting business, a deficit topping $650 million, pension liabilities, a shrinking population — and some believe those problems, in a way, boost Emanuel's chances.

"I think he reflects the mood of the city, that we need somebody pretty tough to come in and straighten things out," says Paul Green, a political scientist at Roosevelt University.

"Some really hard decisions are going to have to be made," Green adds. "The perception of Rahm Emanuel as being this hard-nose guy is working in his favor. This is not time for a conciliator. This is time for an order giver. In order to be a mayor, you have to be a policy broker and a political enforcer. The perception is he satisfies both of those."

A similar sentiment was expressed in the Chicago Tribune's editorial endorsement.

"He is among the most results-driven people to walk this Earth," the newspaper wrote. "That might mean more expletives fly and more fish corpses arrive by ground mail. (Emanuel once famously sent a dead fish to a pollster who disappointed him.) But if Chicago emerges from an Emanuel mayoralty with its finances stabilized, its job market thriving, its schools improving and its middle class intact, his successes again will have eclipsed his excesses."

Emanuel is leaving nothing to chance.

In recent days he visited all 50 wards, and throughout the campaign he's been a regular on the el stop-coffee shop circuit. He arrives for appearances promptly, or even early. He poses for photos, makes small talk, listens carefully and offers a joke or two — "When I started working for Bill Clinton I was 6-2, 250 pounds." (He's actually 5-8 and 148 pounds, having dropped eight pounds in the campaign.)

He's not a warm, fuzzy candidate, but he knows the drill. He was elected to Congress three times and likes to point to his ability to get things done. Consider the case of Coonley Elementary School, which was in his North Side district.

At a meet-and-greet at a local grocery about four years ago, a father asked for help because the enrollment was declining at his child's school and parents weren't sending their kids there. The congressman met with Katherine Kennedy-Kartheiser, the principal at the time.
She says she told Emanuel a gifted program would attract students. He arranged a conference call with then-Superintendent Arne Duncan (now head of the U.S. Department of Education) and others, she recalls, and said, "This is what this school needs."

"He was pretty relentless," says Kennedy-Kartheiser, who has since retired. "He was definitely assertive and persistent. He said, `We're going to get it done here.' After the conversation, he pretty much looked at me and said, `If I have to be the bad guy, I'll be the bad guy. You're going to be the good guy.'"

The school got its gifted program, and enrollment went up.

Emanuel's fierce determination and ambition run in his family. His older brother, Ezekiel, a doctor, heads the bioethics department at the National Institutes of Health. His younger brother, Ari, a powerful Hollywood agent, is the inspiration for the hard-charging character, Ari Gold, in HBO's series, "Entourage." (The family also includes an adopted sister, Shoshana.)

Emanuel says his drive stems, in part, from his immigrant roots: His pediatrician father, Benjamin, emigrated from Israel in the 1950s. The message, Emanuel says was that life in America is "something special not to be wasted."

His father and mother (Martha, a civil rights activist) raised their children with a lot of room "for self-reliance," he says, and "the notion of respecting authority, with the expectation that you could always challenge it."

Emanuel has been in front and behind the scenes in politics for most of his adult life — a stint as an investment banker earned him millions in a few short years — but his road to front-runner has not been smooth.

His candidacy was immediately challenged in court by Chicagoans who said he didn't meet the one-year residency requirement — he had rented out his North Side home and moved his family to Washington to work for Obama. He returned to the city last fall to prepare for the race.

In the most bizarre chapter, Emanuel sat through nearly 12 hours of a Chicago Board of Elections hearing that turned into a comic opera. Along with legitimate claims, a series of objectors — one was known as "Queen Sister" — peppered him with questions including whether he was a communist, had caused the 1993 siege at Waco, Texas, and was familiar with the term "smiling like a butcher's dog."

Emanuel never lost his cool. To stay calm, he often glanced at a photo he'd brought along that showed him with his wife, Amy, and their three children on the Truman Balcony during his last day at the White House.

At the time of the hearing, he says, his youngest daughter, Leah, was doing a play at school in which she recited the famous quotation from Thomas Paine: "These are the times that try men's souls."

When he called her that morning, he asked her to repeat it and she did — though he says with a smile, it sounded a bit different with her retainer ("These are the thimes that thy men's.").
"So every time I looked at her," he says, "I heard that phrase and I heard it in her voice."

The court fight that eventually secured his place on the ballot turned out to be another positive for Emanuel, says Alan Gitelson, a political science professor at Loyola University in Chicago. "It took away any focus on the issues and placed it on Rahm Emanuel having to get past what many people perceived as a silly barrier," he says. "People were more sympathetic."

Gitelson says he doesn't know if Emanuel will pass the 50 percent threshold on Tuesday, but says if he is elected, he has some qualities that should serve him well.

"He's a driven individual," he says. "He's incredibly bright ... and he has the capacity to sit back and listen. Those are all characteristics you'll probably really need a lot."