

Blue Wave? Red Tide?

by Bill Herbst

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Today, November 6th, is the date of the 2018 midterm elections in America. A much higher-than-average percentage of votes has already been cast in early voting or absentee ballots, but the majority of votes will be cast today.

Donald Trump, who poses as President but wants to be Dictator, has been stumping with non-stop campaign rallies throughout deep red states, making the election all about him. Nothing new about that. Trump has been peddling his snake oil to his cult-like base with all the usual lies, bullying, and encouragement of hatred and fear. On the other side, the Democrats have pulled out their Big Guns, the two "O's" — Obama and Oprah.

Will the election be a Blue Wave? A Red Tide? No one knows. Polling suggests that many of the contests are a virtual dead heat, as befits the extreme polarization of politics and culture in America, with razor-thin polling margins between the Democratic and Republican candidates. A few votes either way could swing the elections in numerous districts, making the outcome very much in doubt until the votes are counted and the final tally is in.

Although the election is obviously about Congress, an important dimension involves choosing state legislatures and governorships. This is meaningful not only for regional government, but also because the 2020 U.S. census will reapportion the House of Representatives, and states control how the boundaries of those revised House districts will be drawn. That matters to counter the Republican takeover of state governments over the past 20 years that led to extreme gerrymandering and serious attempts at systematic voter suppression.

Once upon a time, the Republican party stood for fiscal conservatism. That's actually a myth, of course, since Republicans complain about fiscal deficits only when they're in the minority and Democrats hold the reins of government. When Republicans are in charge, they spend relentlessly, mainly by giving money to those who are already well off. Ah, but there's a method to their madness. Deficit spending allows Republicans to justify slashing the social safety net. They want to put an end to all social welfare and any entitlements for the rest of us. Letting the bottom half die off seems to be their fervent wish.

These days Republicans are often labeled as the party of Trump, but a more apt analogy is that they've become the party of Joseph McCarthy. Fear of the Other is their new concern, but, rather than the 1950s Red Scare about Communists,

the Other that Republicans fear today is home-grown. America's increasing diversity and burgeoning percentages of minorities (i.e., people of color) scares the hell out of those on the right. Although both parties in the political duopoly are beholden to Big Money, the GOP is no longer content to be unabashedly for the rich. They are now *also* the party of White Supremacy.

Many Republican-controlled states have done everything they can to disenfranchise Black and Latino voters. Purging voter rolls and making voter registration more difficult are Republican strategies aimed intentionally and exclusively at shutting out minority voters. That's where much of the hysteria about immigration comes from. Winning back Democratic majorities in state legislatures and governorships will help, to some extent, to curtail such unfair racially-motivated practices.

More obviously, however — with the entire House and one-third of the Senate up for grabs — this midterm is a national referendum on the current administration (as is every midterm election), meaning Donald Trump and his minions.

In terms of Congress, one of three outcomes is effectively preordained:

- 1. Republicans maintain or even increase slightly their majority control of both chambers. That would be the so-called "Red Tide."*
- 2. The Democrats win back majorities in both the House and Senate, retaking full control of Congress. This would be the so-called "Blue Wave."*
- 3. Democrats achieve majority control of the House, while Republicans maintain their majority in the Senate, making for a divided Congress and quite probable gridlock, but with at least some check on Trump.*

Of the three options, #3 seems the most likely. I offer no prediction, in part because I don't pretend to know how the elections will go, but more because I believe that any of the three options will result in a similar impact on the nation.

While the party in the duopoly that controls Congress makes a difference politically, with clear and definite repercussions, I think that whichever option occurs — Democratic, Republican, or divided majorities in the two chambers of Congress — will matter much less if at all in terms of President Trump and the extreme cultural polarity that is tearing America apart.

If the Republicans increase their majorities in Congress, Trump will regard that — perhaps justifiably — as confirmation of his Presidency. He will be emboldened to continue wielding the wrecking ball to American government and policy. Regardless of the outcome of the elections, however, President Trump will continue his lying and divisive rhetoric, and his proposed or attempted policies will grow more extreme. This is Trump's nature, and he knows no other

approach. The second two years of his term in the White House will almost certainly foster greater chaos. If, as is likely, the Democrats win a majority in the House, Trump will use that to set up his 2020 Presidential campaign, increasing his Enemies List and accusing Democrats of every imaginable evil.

What worries me even more than Trump, since he is hopeless and incorrigible, is the result of the elections within the overall population of Americans. Supporters of whichever party suffers more losses will not surrender gracefully. They will not acknowledge that "the people have spoken" and be moved toward greater cooperation or harmony. Instead, those who support the side that takes a hit will double down in their angry resistance, increasing their abhorrence of those who do not share their beliefs.

I see no chance at all for greater harmony or civility in our politics. No reconciliation. No compromise. No "reaching across the aisle" to work with the other side. Perhaps certain politicians will attempt that, but the public won't. I expect more division, more hatred, and probably more incidences of murderous violence. The profoundly serious issues we face as a nation will not be resolved by this election, nor by the 2020 Presidential election on the horizon. That list of issues includes numerous vexing problems, none of which are new or particularly surprising:

- Catastrophic climate change is not going away, no matter what we do. Nothing currently being discussed to ameliorate planetary heating is likely to succeed, even if implemented, and no practical conversion away from our dependence on fossil fuels is underway. Forget sustainability. The discussion now is about survival-based resilience in the face of withering adversity through extreme weather, drought, famine, and rising ocean levels. The biosphere is under assault, and we caused it. Our astonishing success as a species made that inevitable.
- Empty consumerism and an unrealistic belief in "progress" are certain to remain central illusions of the American Dream, as long as we manage to keep that game going. They are baked into the cake, and seven billion people now want their share too. The simple fact is that our planet cannot support so many human beings in the style of American civilization. The "solution" being set up is a dramatic decrease in humanity's numbers, and the most obvious means to achieve that are right here in this list.
- The dramatic increase in wealth inequality produced by late-stage predatory capitalism is not turning around. By and large, Americans still regard saner distribution of wealth as Demonic Socialism (even though we currently provide socialism for the wealthy with few complaints).
- Infinite economic growth will continue to be the mantra of American business and government, and that lunacy is a guaranteed loser. Given our massive debt and the unrestrained racketeering of the financial sector, another economic meltdown is obviously in our future. The questions are when that might happen, how much suffering it will cause, whether we can recover, and if we decide (or are forced) to implement some measure of sanity in how we deal with money.

- War, militarism, and the sad devotion of our country to arming the world has no realistic chance of lessening.

Defeating the Republicans in this 2018 midterm election won't insure that they don't come back and be given command again by American voters in 2020. Today's elections are only the first challenge of many different types that we need to win to survive. And the tests coming in the decades ahead will get much harder, not easier. Very likely, those future crises will be provoked and accompanied by great suffering.

As I've written before, I don't relish my role as a lonely, unwelcome Cassandra. Penning this commentary doesn't please me. I would love to be proven wrong about some or all of it, and I'd be happy to later admit that I was far too pessimistic or guilty of bad faith in humanity. If the better angels of our nature show up, I'll rejoice.

In the meantime, if you're reading this on election day, haven't yet voted, and the polls are still open, please do. Go out and cast a ballot. Yes, the system is corrupt. Yes, too many politicians are self-serving hacks. Yes, choosing between the lesser of two evils sucks. And no, voting alone won't be enough to save us. The problem is that the alternative — *not* voting — allows other people to determine who makes policy and law, even though much power is invisible and hides beneath the shiny surface of Congress. Still, those laws and policies affect us all.

Remember: love and power go together. Power without love is chaos, but love without power is impotent. For love to actually reduce needless suffering, for love to matter and succeed, the correct exercise of power is essential.

So, if you can, go vote. If you're reading this after the election, vote in the next one. For the bulk of Americans, voting is the best we can do today.