

Aftermath

by Bill Herbst

*Version 1.4 (posted on 13 Nov 2018)
© 2018 by the author, all rights reserved*

The political results of the 2018 midterm elections contained surprises, but no SURPRISES. On the one hand, the Democrats lost every marquee race that had been played up in the media during the campaign. Senate hopeful Beto O'Rourke lost in Texas to incumbent Ted Cruz. Gubernatorial candidates Stacey Abrams in Georgia and Andrew Gillum in Florida were apparently defeated (although both states are now conducting recounts, despite scurrilous protests from the Republican side). Nonetheless, Democrats flipped the House of Representatives and reclaimed majority control by a considerable margin. Dems will soon have the power to chair House committees, conduct investigations, and issue subpoenas.

Was this the hoped-for Blue Wave? Sort of. In aggregate voting, the Democrats got *three million* more votes in House races and *ten million* more votes for Senate candidates. Sure, Republican gerrymandering of House districts and voter suppression schemes took a toll, as did Donald Trump's fear-based racist campaigning strategy. Republicans held their razor-slim majority in the Senate, and may end up increasing it by one seat when the recounts are over. That was expected, though, given the disproportionate number of red and purple state Senate seats Democrats were defending (26 versus 9 for Republicans), which put the Dems at a distinct disadvantage.

Single-party rule of all three branches of government is over, as most polls predicted. In states such as Florida and Ohio, Trump's considerable majorities from the 2016 election held firm even two years later, which says more about the American public than about Trump. Michigan and Pennsylvania, however, which put Trump over the top in 2016, both flipped blue. Along with seven victories in state governorships, Democrats had a good showing, despite their occasional disappointments.

Republicans still have the White House and the Supreme Court, but Democrats will, as of January 3rd, exert renewed power in Congress. That said, our tribal polarity as a nation remains unchanged (despite much lip service to the contrary about "unity" among both winning and losing candidates in post-election speeches). Take-no-prisoners trench warfare — both politically and socially — will no doubt continue and probably increase.

As a referendum on the Era of Trumpism, the outcome was indecisive. Voters who wanted change, meaning a check on Trump's power, came out in record numbers. Voters who wanted more of the same, meaning a continuation of Donald Trump's "leadership," also turned out in large numbers. Hope and fear made their presence and impact felt in equal proportion. I don't trust either attitude, but I recognize their power to influence attitudes and votes.

While confirmed Democratic and hard-core Republican voters each stood their ground, Independents moved toward the center by casting more ballots for Democrats in a predictable pendulum swing of reaction away from the existing Administration in power. That's been the historical tendency in midterm elections for a long time in America, and this election was no different in that regard.

Minorities and young people turned out to participate in larger percentages, but the changing demographics of American diversity that will obviously expand in the decades ahead remained only a modest factor in this election. Higher numbers of Millennials and Centennials voted, but the young are not yet truly mobilized politically. If those generations are to be our salvation from collective madness, as some youthful activists believe, they aren't close to ready yet. More Latinos voted, but they are still not a significant voting bloc.

The most obvious and significant political result of the elections (and a major cultural bellwether as well) was the "Access Hollywood" boomerang effect. President Trump's notorious, impervious, and unpunished misogyny was not merely challenged but repudiated by the victories of more than 100 women who will take seats in Congress. Many of these women were first-time candidates and Democrats. Politically, this has indeed been "the Year of the Woman."

Those gains in gender equality and shifting Congressional power do not mean that Donald Trump will soften or change. He won't. He can't. Trump lives in his own pugnacious fantasy world and cares little for reality. He will be emboldened and become even more aggressive. Trump's belligerent, bullying personality loves having an enemy to attack, and now he has Nancy Pelosi (a workable stand-in for Hillary).

Some pundits and talking heads have suggested that Trump's lack of ideology and transactional "deal-maker" pose will cause him to reach across the aisle and work with Democrats to pass bipartisan legislation about infrastructure, healthcare, and immigration. Fat chance of that happening. Trump will pretend to cooperate at times, but then do an immediate 180, turning around to nullify deals or compromises and slanderously attack his opponents. Above all, Trump will relish his enlarged role of aggrieved victim, which will promote another pendulum swing and may even improve his chances of prevailing in the 2020 Presidential election and getting a second term, especially if the Democrats nominate another stiff. (The Democratic party doesn't understand that Presidential elections are popularity contests and beauty pageants...)

For those who cling to the fantasy that Trump will be chastened, please note that he fired Attorney General Jeff Sessions less than 24 hours after the polls closed. While I'm no fan of Sessions (understatement), nor do I pin any hopes on the Mueller probe, it's clear as a bell to me that Trump will do anything he thinks he can get away with to shut down the Investigation.

A majority of the American public doesn't care about Russian meddling in our elections. The country wants productive legislation, not finger-pointing. So why has Trump been obsessed with the Mueller Investigation since Day One of his Presidency? Because the scary issue for Donald Trump isn't Russia or "collusion," nor even obstruction of justice, it's the history of the President's business scams. Trump knows that he can't allow his financial dirt to be exposed to the light of day. Also, children in his family are now at risk of indictment and prosecution, and that's where Trump's criminality is most threatening to him.

Since Democrats take the levers of power in the House on January 3rd, Trump has until then — not quite two months — to get rid of Robert Mueller, either by firing him or otherwise kneecapping the Investigation, and the President wasted no time in firing Sessions and designating Matt Whitaker, a Trump loyalist (translation: political hack and craven lackey), to be Acting Attorney General — in other words, Trump's "Roy Cohn." The slow-motion Saturday Night Massacre of Justice Department firings is now approaching its climax, and it's considerably more serious than Watergate ever was. Constitutional crisis, anyone?

Look for all this to get much worse. It's war, kids — Trump against the Rule of Law, and Americans against Americans.

Another of my takeaways from this election is that both parties in the American political duopoly are zombies — essentially the walking dead. Republicans will continue to win some elections well into the next decade, but their wholesale acquiescence to Trumpism is the equivalent of fatal Russian Roulette. The Republican party has put a gun to its head and keeps spinning the chamber and pulling the trigger. They've been lucky so far, but the eventual result will be inevitable suicide. The Democratic Party has been comatose for quite awhile, surviving on the life-support of Big Money donors. Democrats consistently win majorities but lose elections. I expect that by the late 2020s, both parties will be extinct or, at the very least, seriously endangered species. In the years ahead as our collective troubles increase, they will try to reinvent themselves, of course, but either or both could quite possibly go the way of the dodo.

While I am saddened to witness the extreme polarization that divides Americans into tribal conflict, which is unlikely to change any time soon, my deeper concern about the election is not with the beliefs and issues that pit us against each other, but those about which the bulk of Americans are apparently in agreement.

As I see it, the real problem with the election was the predictable confirmation that Americans — whether red or blue — are not close to ready to even discuss, much less deal with, the looming crises of our times. For me, three interlocking issues stand out: economics/finance, climate change, and militarism. These three represent the most dire threats to our future.

My identifying economics/finance as an issue is not about small business or the need-based exchange of goods and services. Commerce is the vascular system of society, pumping and distributing the life-blood of the body politic. We don't live together in towns and cities because we love our neighbors. We do so because living together facilitates easier day-to-day fulfillment of our wants and needs. I'm referring instead to the extreme concentration of Big Money into the pockets of a select few, as well as the attitude that money is all that matters.

Climate change is not just about more intense storms and unpredictable weather. As disruptive as such increasingly frequent events are proving to be, accelerating planetary warming of the atmosphere and oceans carries potentially dire repercussions for civilization and the future of humanity.

When I refer to militarism, I'm not talking about actual soldiers. I have no beef with people who serve in the military or law enforcement (well, not in general, anyway). Some of us are naturally warriors, and the disciplines of military life provide such people with a life-path of courage and duty. Others among us choose to be soldiers because it is a means to achieve some measure of personal security, whether economically or through group identity and participation in a larger cause. No, my reference to militarism is aimed at the entire national security apparatus — armaments production, data collection, and perpetual war.

Yes, health care is without question a meaningful, important concern, and economics is always on the ballot. Yes, we need a more comprehensive and sane policy on immigration, and racism is already center stage. Our educational system begs for reform and renewal. Gun control is not yet considered, but sooner or later it will be.

However, the mantra of America, from the elites in charge to the masses of the hoi polloi, hasn't budged an inch away from capitalism's dependence on endless and infinite economic growth and soul-killing consumerism. Dramatic income inequality worsens, yet only platitudes are offered about "helping the middle class."

On the issue of climate change, Americans by and large seem to believe in fake kindergarten environmentalism, where recycling aluminum cans, glass bottles, plastic, and paper will supposedly be enough to save us. I'm not sure that we are wise enough to actually do *anything* to prevent the planet's overheating, but serious discussion seems warranted.

The Military-Industrial Complex is not just a catchphrase. War and Big Business are joined at the hip, with government as their handmaiden. Apparently Americans are fine with spending what now approaches a trillion dollars a year on the military. Our government supports organized violence in various countries around the world, overtly and covertly, but the public apparently doesn't notice or care much about the suffering caused. Out of sight, out of mind. Also, and even more frightening, Americans seem content to live with the possibility of nuclear annihilation, even to the point of allowing hundreds of billions of dollars we don't have to be spent on renewing and expanding our nuclear arsenal.

Consideration of these three issues is ongoing in various sectors of society, but not in the mainstream, and sure as hell not in last week's election. They have not gained any real or serious traction in our politics or national discourse. I guess that's expecting way too much of the American people. Or perhaps these problems are simply too huge for the public to swallow. I ask myself over and over whether I might be wrong about my concerns, but I'm certain that millions of Americans share them.

Sadly, I conclude that the only way these three related and potentially catastrophic problems will gain a seat at the table of national discussion, much less be addressed through policy, is through either or both of two developments: The first way would be if we win the political and cultural civil war that's already underway and will intensify over the coming years (by "we," I mean everyone who's not hypnotized or bat-shit crazy). The other way is through larger, more encompassing disasters that produce widespread suffering and cannot be ignored as isolated incidents that affect only other people.

The first possibility may or may not occur. The second is, if not inevitable, certainly very probable.

Last week's election was the equivalent of Round Two of a 10-round title fight. In the first round (the 2016 Presidential election), Trumpism and the Republicans scored an unexpected knockdown, but their Democratic opponent got up after an eight-count and came back to win the second round. So, in the 10-point mandatory scoring that boxing uses, it's now Trump and the Republicans 19, Democrats 18.

For the next round (the 2020 Presidential election), the gloves are coming off. No more Marquis of Queensbury rules. From now on, it'll be bare knuckles and no holds barred. The referee might even flee the ring. Whether the fight will eventually end in a stoppage of the action for head butts, a clear knockout, or a slugfest to the finish is unknown. If the fight goes the distance, we can be pretty sure that both contestants will be bloodied and exhausted by the final bell.