

LETTER FROM TRUMP'S WASHINGTON

"WE'LL BE FURTHER APART AS A COUNTRY":

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MIDTERMS 2018 LIVE ELECTION
NIGHT RESULTS



By **Susan B. Glasser** November 7, 2018



A member of the White House staff reaches for the microphone held by Jim Acosta, of CNN, at a press conference with President Trump the day after the midterms.

Photograph by Jonathan Ernst / Reuters

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The results of the 2018 midterm elections were both predictable and predicted, although that wasn't necessarily how it seemed when Nancy Pelosi started Election Day by telling reporters that Democrats would absolutely win control of the House of Representatives. "One hundred per cent," she said, in what felt at the time like an act of breathtaking chutzpah. Clearly the once and likely future Speaker of the House is not the superstitious sort. The Republican gains in the Senate, given a map that

strongly favored the Party, were equally foreseeable, even if the Senate Majority Leader, Mitch McConnell, made no similar effort to brag about them in advance. Forecasts before the election suggested a Democratic pickup of between thirty and fifty seats in the House and gains of up to five seats for the G.O.P. in the Senate. As of Wednesday afternoon, Democrats appeared likely to end up with a gain of about thirty-five House seats, while Republicans added three Senate seats. In other words, what was predicted is more or less exactly what happened.

Still, two years after Donald Trump's surprise win of the Presidency, few were ready to be as publicly unequivocal as Pelosi on Tuesday morning. Many around town went into the election with a palpable sense of dread, whether out of partisan jitters or a fear that 2016 marked the death of reliable political handicapping. "Washington felt like a nervous breakdown," a foreign visitor who was here in the days before the balloting reported. The congressional expert Norman Ornstein, a vocal critic of both the President's and Republican stewardship on Capitol Hill, e-mailed me not long before the polls closed. "If Democrats do not at least win the House," he wrote, "we are done for."

The forecasts may have been dead-on this time, but that hardly means Washington is reverting to the old normal. There will be no going along to get along; no moment of national reconciliation. Americans voted for divided government, as they so often have in our history, but if what they wanted was compromise and bipartisan consensus, it is not what they will get. The last few weeks of the 2018 campaign were, by any measure, unusually contentious, angry, and worrying about the state of our democracy.

The unleashed President campaigned across the country bearing a message of hatred, division, and lies, downplaying his party's message of economic growth in favor of demonizing opponents as "evil," and sending tens of thousands of U.S. troops to the Mexican border to stop a "caravan" of would-be asylum

seekers who remained hundreds of miles away from the border. Increasing numbers of Democrats believe that the only way to stop Trump is to impeach him in the House and begin the process of trying to remove him from office, no matter how remote the prospects of a Senate conviction seem. This stalemate will not end now that the campaign is over. Washington will get worse, not better, as a result of Tuesday's results. The political scripts of the past have been destroyed. They are not coming back.

There is a time-honored Presidential playbook for how to handle such moments, but Trump will not follow it. Every President in recent times has suffered a midterm-election setback and responded by acknowledging the defeat and promising to work in a new and more bipartisan fashion. In 2006, George W. Bush conceded the "thumping" his Republicans experienced amid the unpopular Iraq War. Barack Obama took responsibility for the "shellacking" his party suffered in 2010. But not Trump, who not only ignored the Democratic takeover of the House but, on Tuesday night, tweeted about his "very Big Win." It was minutes after 7 A.M. on Wednesday when Trump made it clear that he was going to be, well, Trump, threatening a war with the House if it proceeded with investigations of him and his Administration. This was only hours after his press secretary, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, said, on Fox, that Trump was "willing to work across the aisle to get things done," a statement that didn't have much credibility at the time and underscored once again the extent to which Trump undercuts his staff and flouts political expectations.

Just before noon on Wednesday, Trump made the previous night's results official with a day-after-the-election press conference—but the only traditional part of the session, in the stately grandeur of the White House East Room, was that he held it at all. "This is not going to be a Kumbaya moment," CNN's Jim Acosta predicted right before Trump appeared. And it was not. Before it was over, Trump would nearly engage in fisticuffs with

Acosta. ("You are an enemy of the people," Trump practically shouted at the reporter, pointing his finger as he finally ended their exchange.) In the course of nearly an hour and a half, the President interspersed angry rants about what he called unfair coverage by the media with ever more inflated claims that Tuesday's election had actually been a "history-defying" victory for him. "I thought it was close to a complete victory," Trump said. "I think it was a great victory, to be honest." To the extent that he acknowledged any defeats at all, the President blamed House losses on the large number of Republican retirements there, while at the same time openly celebrating the ouster of a long list of members of his own party who had distanced themselves from him and went on to be beaten. "Mia Love gave me no love," he said, referring to the Utah Republican. "And she lost. Too bad."

As for the prospects of bipartisan legislating, Trump's rhetorical nods to compromise were few and far between. Instead, he offered a vision of bipartisanship as a form of blackmail: He would agree to work on measures such as investing in infrastructure or lowering prescription-drug costs with House Democrats only if they did not go through with threats to investigate him. Otherwise, he vowed to adopt a "war-like" posture. "We can't do both," Trump said repeatedly. Should Democrats persist in showering his executive branch with subpoenas and resurrecting the investigation of Russia's intervention in the 2016 election, Trump said, he would make sure the Republican-controlled Senate retaliated by unleashing its own investigations against House Democrats. If Pelosi and her party defied him and proceeded anyway, Trump vowed, "They will be blamed."

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By Susan B. Glasser

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By Susan B. Glasser

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These were hardly the words of a chastened President. No matter that he was clobbered across the states of the Midwest that brought him the Presidency just two years ago. Never mind that he lost the House despite a strong economy that truly deserves some of the bragging he engages in about it. Trump acted as if he actually believed his own overblown claims of a grand victory.

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As if to underscore the point of a President who refuses to be constrained by Congress or anyone else, a little more than an hour after his jaw-dropping press conference, Trump, at 2:44 p.m., tweeted that he had finally decided to force out the Attorney General, Jeff Sessions, whose decision to allow the Russia investigation to proceed had infuriated him. For more than a year, Trump has belittled and taunted Sessions as “very weak” and “disgraceful,” an “idiot” who betrayed him. In firing Sessions, Trump effectively barred Sessions’s deputy, Rod Rosenstein, from overseeing the Russia investigation, since he was only supervising it due to Sessions’s recusal.

For months, this was precisely the brewing crisis that Trump’s opponents warned about. But he did not act until the day after the midterms, when it was finally clear that Democrats had not captured the Senate and could not remove him from office. Trump will have his victory, House subpoenas or even impeachment be damned. He has dared Pelosi and her Democrats to act, and, sure enough, they soon tweeted their own demands for answers from Trump. “We will be holding people accountable,” Representative Jerry Nadler, the incoming chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, wrote. “We will protect the rule of law,” Representative Adam Schiff, the incoming chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, said. The fight is not over; it is just beginning.

Shortly after 7 p.m. on Election Night, I spoke with Doug Sosnik, a political strategist who served as President Bill Clinton’s White House adviser in 1994, when Republicans won the House of Representatives in a fifty-two-seat pickup. A few days earlier, Sosnik had written a column in the *Post* predicting just the kind of response that Trump delivered on Wednesday, and warning that Democrats will invariably oblige the President by engaging in a spiral of partisan escalation. “This will look like a period of relative calm and tranquility,” Sosnik wrote, observing that today’s politics leaves little choice but “for both Trump and the Democrats to heighten their differences.

The result will be that an already toxic political environment will become even more poisonous.”

Not a single close race had yet been called, but Sosnik was already quite sure by the time we talked that the outcome of the night would be exactly the sort of heightened toxicity he had predicted. The working-with-the-opposition that Sosnik proposed to Clinton after the elections in 1994 is not really an option for Trump. The President knows only one strategy, and that is to escalate. “He’s not going to pivot and even if he wanted to pivot it would be hard for Democrats to work with him,” Sosnik said. How could it be otherwise? “The political self interests of Democrats and Republicans,” he added, practically guarantee it.

For two years, of course, Democrats had dreamed of something different from last night’s results. They ended up, as the *Washington Post’s* conservative apostate columnist Max Boot put it, with a “rebuke” and not a “repudiation” of the President they abhor. In that sense, Trump was not entirely wrong in his claims of victory: Republicans correctly understood that the President had emerged far less damaged than he could have been. “Six months ago, I would’ve bet things would be worse for the G.O.P. I thought there was a Trump downdraft brewing. That didn’t happen,” Ed Rogers, a Republican lobbyist and a veteran of campaigns going back to the Reagan Administration, told me. “By any measure, Trump was not repudiated.”

The reason is that Republicans stuck with Trump. Never mind the divisive 2016 Republican Presidential primaries: Trump is truly his party’s leader now, and the new Republican makeup of the Senate and House, with moderates who questioned him largely purged, will only exacerbate the situation. Democrats, it seems, have yet to fully accept that this has happened. Will they finally get it now? No matter how flagrant his lies or how damaging the revelation, Trump’s popularity with the American public has remained around

forty per cent. This is as true today as it was two years ago. Almost everyone has made up his mind about Trump, leaving elections to hinge on turnout and the dwindling number of fence-sitting independents left in America. Middle-class suburbanites may be one such group that made the difference between the Democratic House of 2018 and the Republican one of two years ago; Democrats, as the CNN political director David Chalian pointed out, won the suburbs by four points on Tuesday after losing them by twelve in 2016.

But there is a smaller and smaller battleground in a country where minds are ever more permanently made up; red America and blue America are increasingly separate countries. With Tuesday's results, only seven of the hundred U.S. senators will represent states that voted for the other party in the most recent Presidential election; a decade ago, Sosnik pointed out, that was the case for a third of the Senate. Back in the eighties, fully half of the Senate consisted of members who had won despite their state's Presidential preference.

Trump has mastered the art of politics in such a situation. He didn't create this dynamic, but he has figured out how to exploit it, and is far more willing to do so than other modern politicians. He is a polarizing President for a polarized country. There was only one outcome that was likely on Tuesday night, and it happened. "We'll be further apart as a country," Sosnik told me, as the polls were closing. And, of course, he was right. Trump waited not even a day before provoking an enormous political crisis. That, too, was utterly predictable.



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Video

*How the Midterms Will Shape the Next Two Years
Here's how the mixed outcome of the 2018 midterm elections will influence the
Trump Presidency.*

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