Defying the Odds: 2018 Epilogue

November 16

In the 2018 election, a favorable map enabled Republicans to make a small net gain in the Senate, but they lost their majority in the House of Representatives. Although the president’s party typically sheds House seats during midterms, the scale of this defeat was noteworthy. The loss was the party’s biggest since the Watergate election of 1974. Moreover, this outcome took place during conditions that would ordinarily clad the in-party with some body armor. The economic expansion that had started in 2009 was continuing. Even with some turbulence on Wall Street, August marked the longest stock market rally since World War II, with indices up more than 300 percent since their Great Recession bottom. Job creation was strong, and unemployment was at record lows. Moreover, Americans saw their nation at peace. Troops were serving in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, but in relatively small numbers that got only occasional media attention. Peace and prosperity are supposed to benefit the party in power, so what happened?

The answer is Donald J. Trump. It would be a comical understatement to say that he stirred strong feelings. Supporters welcomed his disregard of political norms and cheered his harsh attacks against the media and partisan opponents. Opponents saw him as a destructive force, even a menace to democracy. Public opinion surveys showed that ordinary Americans tended to side with his foes. He took office with the highest disapproval rating of any newly elected president in 64 years of surveys.[[1]](#endnote-1) Attitudes stayed negative. Between the spring of 2017 and the fall of 2018, the RealClearPolitics average of polls always showed majority disapproval. Nevertheless, congressional Republicans embraced the president and his agenda, and the midterm election became a Trump referendum. In hindsight, that embrace may look like an obvious blunder, but Republican politicians had their reasons. Their party’s voters zealously supported Trump, so lawmakers who defied him would run the risk of losing in primary elections. What is more, national polls masked wide variation. Trump was popular in some states, especially those with large rural populations. In such places, the president was an asset to the GOP. By and large, though, Republican politicians discovered what so many contractors, creditors, and vendors had learned over the years: bargains with Trump carry a steep price.

The Base President

Notwithstanding his unusual and contentious presidential campaign, it was not clear to everyone at the start that Trump’s first two years would turn out as they did. On the night of the surprising 2016 election, he gave a conventional victory speech in which he praised his opponent and preached bipartisanship. “I pledge to every citizen of our land that I will be president for all of Americans, and this is so important to me. For those who have chosen not to support me in the past, of which there were a few people, I'm reaching out to you for your guidance and your help so that we can work together and unify our great country.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Pondering his record as a New York developer who worked with all kinds of associates, many observers thought that he could be a practical dealmaker who would focus on popular bread-and-butter issues such as public works. “I don't think he is ideological,” said President Obama in a post-election press conference. “I think ultimately, he's pragmatic in that way. And that can serve him well, as long as he's got good people around him and he has a clear sense of direction.”[[3]](#endnote-3) Some of his early personnel choices seemed to support this viewpoint. As his chief of staff, he chose Reince Priebus, a mainstream figure who had been an effective chair of the Republican National Committee. Exxon CEO Rex Tillerson would be Secretary of State. Tillerson had no government experience, but he did have the backing of GOP national-security icons such as Dick Cheney and James Baker. Trump even nodded toward demographic and political diversity when he gave the post of United Nations ambassador to Nikki Haley, an Indian American woman who had promoted racial reconciliation as Governor of South Carolina and who had supported Marco Rubio in the 2016 GOP presidential primaries.

Other picks pointed in a different direction. Stephen K. Bannon, who had served as CEO of the Trump campaign, would serve as “chief strategist” and have coequal rank with Priebus. Stephen Miller would serve as a senior adviser. Like Bannon, Miller was a prominent figure in the “alt-right,” a diffuse movement that was hostile to immigration, internationalism, and free trade. Critics called them “white nationalists” but they declined to apply the term to themselves.

Trump’s inaugural address -- reportedly drafted by Bannon and Miller -- gave a strong hint of where his heart was. He spoke of the “American carnage” of crime, drugs, and rusted-out factories. He blamed political leaders for enriching other countries at the expense of our own. In promising a bright future, he used phrases with dark historical connotations. “From this day forward, a new vision will govern our land. From this this day forward, it's going to be only America first. America first.”[[4]](#endnote-4) The phrase “America first,” which Trump had used during the campaign, was the slogan of the isolationists who had tried to keep the United States out of the fight against Nazi Germany. On trade, he seemed to endorse protectionism, an approach that nearly all mainsteam economists had long denounced. “We must protect our borders from the ravages of other countries making our products, stealing our companies, and destroying our jobs. Protection will lead to great prosperity and strength.” Establishment figures were baffled. According to a press report, former President George W. Bush gave this appraisal after leaving the inaugural dais: “That was some weird shit.”[[5]](#endnote-5)

The following day confirmed that this administration would be like no other. Trump visited the headquarters of the Central Intelligence Agency and stood before a memorial to CIA employees who had died in the line of duty. Instead of dwelling on their sacrifice, he gave a rambling discourse on his own success, including the false claim that at least a million people had attended his inauguration. (The actual figure was closer to 600,000.) Meanwhile, millions around the world joined the Women’s March to protest Trump and his policies – an extraordinary rebuke of a president who had just taken office. And on the same day, he named retired Lieutenant General Michael Flynn as his national security adviser. Just 24 days later, Flynn had to resign because he had made improper contacts with the Russian ambassador during the transition and misled administration officials what he had done. He would later plead guilty to lying to the FBI – an ironic outcome for someone who had encouraged the crowd at the Republican National Convention to chant “Lock her up!”

January 21 was merely the start. The early months of his administration provided a slurry of botches, glitches, and gaffes. On January 27, he abruptly signed an executive order halting refugees from Syria and temporarily banning entry to people from several Muslim-majority countries. Amid turmoil and confusion at airports, courts soon blocked the move. Acting Attorney General Sally Yates, an Obama holdover, refused to defend the ban, so Trump fired her. His nominee for secretary of labor had to withdraw after it came out that he had employed an undocumented immigrant and that his ex-wife had once appeared on Oprah Winfrey’s show in disguise to make accusations of domestic abuse. When an African American reporter asked Trump if he planned to meet with the Congressional Black Caucus, he replied: “Are they friends of yours?”[[6]](#endnote-6) Additional odd comments came in the form of tweets, such as this one: “How low has President Obama gone to tapp [sic] my phones during the very sacred election process. This is Nixon/Watergate. Bad (or sick) guy!”[[7]](#endnote-7) The incorrect assertion that his predecessor had tapped his phone was part of a pattern. According to a count in *The Washington Post*, he made 1,318 false or misleading statements during his first nine months in office.[[8]](#endnote-8)

All presidents try to appeal to their political base. Trump was unusual in that he made little effort to appeal to anyone else. His tweets, which his press secretary declared to be “official statements,”[[9]](#endnote-9)

I. The Base President

2. “American Carnage” inaugural and the 2017 Women’s March

3. Botched immigration ban  
4. Credibility gaps

6. Gaffes: “very fine people” and “both sides”

7. [Trump hits majority disapproval by springtime of his first year](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/other/president_trump_job_approval-6179.html).

C. Trump Support: Not Wide, But Deep

1. Outsiderism appeal

a. Mobilization of resentment against elites: “You're the elite. We're the elite.”

b. [Political animosity](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/03/29/why-do-people-belong-to-a-party-negative-views-of-the-opposing-party-are-a-major-factor/) and [negative partisanship](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/01/opinion/negative-partisanship-democrats-republicans.html)

2. Supreme issue for evangelicals: The Supreme Court

3. The Trump Ecosystem: Rejecting Fake News

a. Tweets and rallies

b. Fox News

II. Issues

A. Immigration

1. Repeated efforts at the “Muslim ban”

2. “Build the Wall!”

3. DACA and DAPA

4. The crisis of the unaccompanied minors

5. The “caravan”

B. Trade

1. Campaign rhetoric

2. [“Trade wars are good and easy to win.”](https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/969525362580484098)

3. Tariffs and retaliation: not so easy to win

C. Health

1. Initial unpopularity of the troubled Affordable Care Act

2. “Repeal and Replace”

a. GOP opposition to ACA

b. Trump’s attitude

c. “Replace” is the hard part: harsh tradeoff of cost, access, quality

3. Legislative frustrations and the McCain thumbs-down

4. Backlash

a. Pushback from interest groups

b. [Abrupt shift in public opinion in favor of Obamacare](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/other/obama_and_democrats_health_care_plan-1130.html)

D Taxes

1. Tax cuts as central GOP doctrine

2. [In 2017, GOP goes for “the candy option”](https://www.axios.com/the-candy-option-for-tax-reform-1513301634-ed598983-9345-4db5-bc5f-0f7f4b3857f3.html) -- big tax cuts largely without offsetting spending cuts or loophole closures.

3. Mostly unnoticed political problem: in part because of Reagan, [44 percent of households already owed no income tax at all](https://www.taxpolicycenter.org/taxvox/most-americans-pay-more-payroll-tax-income-tax) -- so a large chunk of the electorate would see no direct benefit.

4. [GOP loses the messaging battle](http://www.epicjourney2008.com/2018/09/republicans-lose-tax-messaging-battle.html).

E. Foreign Policy

1. The Korean mood swing -- from “fire and fury” to “love”

2. The UN General Assembly laughs in his face

III. Russia

A. The public face of the issue in the 2016 election

1. “[Russia, if you’re listening](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/13/us/politics/trump-russia-clinton-emails.html)”

2. [“No puppet, you’re the puppet!”](https://www.cbsnews.com/news/the-internet-cant-get-over-donald-trumps-response-to-being-called-a-puppet/)

B. Post-election revelations

1. [Intelligence community report in January 2017](https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf)

2. Flynn

C. Investigation

1. Sessions recusal

2. Comey firing  
3. Mueller appointment

4. Indictments, guilty pleas, and convictions

D. Trump and Putin

E. [Public opinion: a deep partisan divide](https://www.prri.org/research/americans-react-to-russia-and-the-mueller-investigation/)

IV. The 2018 Election: The Runup

A. Context

1. [Customary pattern of in-party losses in midterms](https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/statistics/data/number-presidential-requests-congress-state-the-union-addresses)

2. [Republicans lag in generic ballot](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/other/2018_generic_congressional_vote-6185.html):

3. Shift in party bases

a. [Demographic shift: Democrats become the upstairs-downstairs party: noncollege whites make up only one-third of Democrats and leaners, whereas they account for 59% of Republicans and leaners](http://www.people-press.org/2018/03/20/changing-composition-of-the-electorate-and-partisan-coalitions/). Gender and age gaps also come into play

b. Geographic shift: suburbs move to the Dems, rural areas to the GOP.

4. Fundraising

a. Democratic and Republican billionaires

b. The educated professionals fuel small-money surge to Democrats.

5. Internal GOP turmoil

a. [White House political shop puts Trump ahead of congressional GOP](http://www.epicjourney2008.com/2017/12/wh-political-shop-and-rnc-turmoil.html)

b. Trump steps on his own message

6. [The out-party edge: with no responsibility for governing, Dems could focus on messaging](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/07/us/politics/democrats-republicans-house.html).

B. Specials and Off-Year Elections

1. Body slam: Gianforte in MT

2. Ossoff comes close in GA

3. Roy Moore (AL): embarrassment and loss

4. Virginia and the Northam Effect

5. Conor Lamb (PA)

6. Balderson’s very narrow win in OH

7. Early signs of high turnout

V. The House

A. Maps

1. Partisan gerrymanders and court-ordered changes

2. Partisan clustering: Democrats jam into cities

B. The field

1. GOP retirements

2. Democratic recruitment successes: women and veterans

3. Democratic funding successes

C. The campaign

1. Democratic messaging emphasizes health care and economy,

Less on Trump and Russia

2. GOP tax message fizzles

D. Dems win 30+ seats

1. Western wipeout: only three districts touching the Pacific (AK, WA3 and CA45 go to the GOP)

2. Suburbs go Democratic

VI. The Senate

A. The Map Favored the GOP

1. Democratic successes in 2006 and 2012 meant that Democrats

had to defend *three-fourths* of the seats up in 2018.

2. [Senate elections increasingly align with presidential results](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/06/26/more-and-more-senate-elections-reflect-states-presidential-votes/).

B. A Kavanaugh Effect?

C. Key Senate races

1. Florida: tick-tight again

2. Texas: Beto almost overtakes Cruz

3. Red wavelet: McCaskill, Donnelly, Heitkamp all go down in Trump states. (The 2012 victories of McCaskill and Donnelly hinged on awful GOP candidates).

4. But Tester and Manchin hang.

5. Desert battles: Arizona and Nevada

VII. Governors and Legislatures

A. Gillum and Abrams

B. Scott Walker

C. Kansas and Kobach

D. California and the impact of Top Two

VIII. The Future

A. The Known Known: the Senate map is not quite as daunting for Democrats in 2020, but still a challenge. In the House, Democrats will have an incumbency edge.

B. The Known Unknown

1. The state of the economy. In mid-2019, the current expansion will be the longest peacetime expansion in history. The current bull market is already the longest since WWII. All good things end -- but when? Will the trade wars and the debt hasten a slowdown?

2. The Mueller investigation and congressional probes into the Trump administration. They are looking, but what will they find?

3. The identity of the Democratic candidate. There will be a ticket, but we do not know who will be on it.

C. The Unknown Unknowns. *The Perfect Tie* could not have predicted 9/11*. Red Over Blue* could not have predicted the rise of Obama or the crash of 2008. Surprises lurk in the future.

1. Lydia Saad, “Trump Sets New Low Point for Inaugural Approval Rating,” Gallup, January 23, 2017, https://news.gallup.com/poll/202811/trump-sets-new-low-point-inaugural-approval-rating.aspx. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Donald J. Trump, victory speech, November 9, 2016, https://www.cnn.com/2016/11/09/politics/donald-trump-victory-speech/index.html. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Barack Obama, The President's News Conference, November 16, 2016. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/319671. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Donald J. Trump, Inaugural Address, January 20, 2017. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/320188 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Yashar Ali, “What George W. Bush Really Thought of Donald Trump’s Inauguration,” *New York*, March 29, 2017, http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/03/what-george-w-bush-really-thought-of-trumps-inauguration.html. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Donald J. Trump, The President's News Conference, February 17, 2017. Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/323569 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Donald J. Trump, tweet, March 4, 2017, https://twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/837996746236182529. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Michelle Ye Hee Lee. Glenn Kessler and Meg Kelly, “President Trump Has Made 1,318 False or Misleading Claims over 263 Days,” *Washington Post*, October 10, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2017/10/10/president-trump-has-made-1318-false-or-misleading-claims-over-263-days [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Ali Vitali, “Trump's Tweets 'Official Statements,' Spicer Says,” NBC News, June 6, 2017, https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/white-house/trump-s-tweets-official-statements-spicer-says-n768931. Sarah Sanders, who succeeded Sean Spicer as press secretary, later reaffirmed that characterization. Sarah Sanders, Press Briefing by Press Secretary Sarah Sanders Online, December 5, 2017, by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/332019 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)