Opinion

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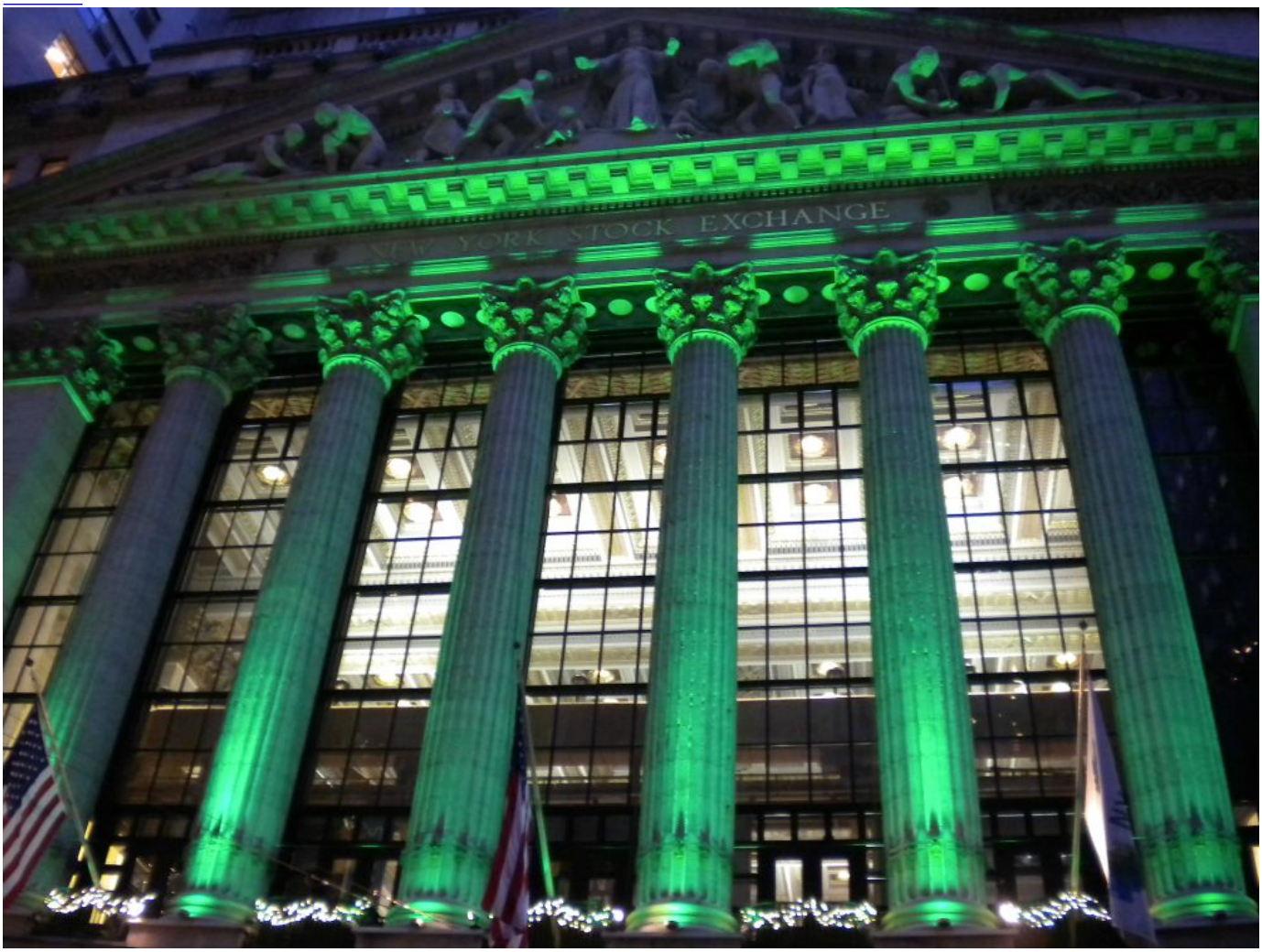

New York Stock Exchange building, March 2015 (Wikimedia Commons/Miranda90)



by Michael Sean Winters

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December 28, 2018

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Taking stock of 2018 in the political life of the nation begins, as it has the past three years, with Donald Trump. He dominates the daily news cycle and, consequently, stands astride our national consciousness the way the Colossus of Rhodes stood above the harbor: Whatever ships come and go, he is the dominant figure in the landscape.

At the beginning of 2018, I ventured this prediction: "Which leads to what is the most predictable dynamic in 2018: Whenever Trump is in trouble, he will go to his core wheelhouse, attacking immigrants, picking fights with prominent African-Americans, and making excuses for white nationalists." Sure enough, as the midterms approached and it looked like the Democrats were going to pick up control of the House, Trump and his allies at Fox News began warning about a caravan of migrants coming to our southern border. Poor, desperate people, walking the length of Mexico, were deemed a serious threat. He dispatched the U.S. military. We were warned that there were terrorists and gang members in the group. The drumbeat of dread was virtually non-stop. It didn't work. The Democrats picked up 40 seats, and Rep. Nancy Pelosi will take the speaker's gavel next week.

Throughout most of the year, the president claimed credit for a booming economy, citing the tax cuts passed into law at the end of 2017. Let us stipulate: If you pump the economy with loads more cash, you will get the same reaction as if you pump your brain full of cocaine: There will be an incredible high. At first. Once the high wore off, the president's constantly vacillating, childish rants spooked investors, and as people arranged to meet with their financial advisors before the end of the year, the news was decidedly grim. The president's tweets sent the stock market into the toilet, losing a record amount on Christmas Eve. And why? Because this man who thinks he knows so much has discovered, at the age of 72, that the Federal Reserve is independent? The markets bounced back on Boxing Day, but the gyrations do not instill long-term confidence. The last jobs report of the year came in with fewer new jobs than expected although the labor market remains robust. I have always thought

that we place too much blame or credit on a sitting president for the performance of the economy, but Trump was all too happy to claim credit when the economy was booming, and it will be hard to dodge the blame now that the economic picture is decidedly more ambiguous.

But try to dodge blame he will. It became one of the dominant themes of this presidency that whenever something goes wrong, it is someone else's fault. I do not know how even his most stout-hearted supporters can discern any leadership qualities in such a man. Certainly, both our nation's allies and the Republican leadership in Congress noticed that they could not count on him in any meaningful way. President Harry S. Truman famously had a sign on his desk that read "The buck stops here!" President Trump does not know what the buck is.

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At least we all could sleep through the night confident that Trump's generals would keep him from anything too disastrous. Alas, his first national security advisor, Gen. Michael Flynn only lasted 24 days and has since plead guilty to a felony count of lying to the FBI as part of a plea bargain that shielded him from additional felony charges. Gen. John Kelly came on board as chief of staff in 2017. He shared the president's ugly anti-immigrant bias, but he did his best to restrain the president's worst instincts, and the two grew apart. He is leaving at year's end. Gen. James Mattis held the crucial role of Secretary of Defense, a bulwark in the chain of command. His resignation on Dec. 21 is the stuff of nightmares. Who now will tell the president why a particular course cannot be pursued? Daughter-in-Chief Ivanka Trump? Secretary of State Mike Pompeo? Incoming interim Chief of Staff Mick Mulvaney? The latter's attempt to explain why Mexico was not paying for the border wall would be comical on the stage but was pathetic on ABC's "This Week."

The influence of the Federalist Society and the cabal of conservative legal scholars it represents is a very worrisome trend, and the November election results provided no check on Trump's ability to name conservative jurists. We will be stuck for a longtime with an ideologically driven jurisprudence that could frustrate the popular will on issues as diverse as corporate responsibility, election funding, voting rights, and government regulation of the economy.

Standing behind all these issues looms special counsel Robert Mueller. His investigation has yielded some high-profile convictions and plea bargains. It is clear that at the center of the various criminal enterprises is the president, but we do not know what evidence the special counsel has discovered implicating him. Next week, we will look at the Mueller probe in greater detail when we look ahead to the new year.

On the Democratic side of the ledger, the takeover in the House was partially offset by disappointing losses in the Senate. It now appears that no Democrat can win in a state like Missouri or Indiana, and that should worry the party, not just because it makes it harder to take control of the Senate or reach 270 electoral votes. In the post-Trump era, whenever that comes, the Democrats will have an opportunity to create a long-term governing coalition as Franklin Roosevelt was able to do, or to miss the opportunity as Democrats as far back as William Jennings Bryan did. A progressive vision that does not include rural communities is a flawed progressive vision, and as long as the Democrats prioritize liberal orthodoxy on culture-war issues instead of presenting a populist economic agenda, they may win an election but they will never create the kind of coalition needed to enact long-term reform of the neo-liberal economic structures that created an opening for Trump in the first place.

One of the principal reasons the Democrats regained the House is that their candidates ran disciplined campaigns that localized the races and focused most of their attention on health care, an issue that moves voters in the center. It will not be enough to defend the Affordable Care Act, however. They will need to propose solutions to the problems that remain. On a range of issues from the environment to immigration, the Democrats were able to run against Trump, but as we will discuss next week, going forward they will need more than opposition to win in 2020.

Much ink was spilled about the deterioration of civility in our public discourse. Some of this concern accompanied the obituaries for President George H.W. Bush, the man who made Willie Horton a household name. The issue is not entirely bosh, but it is mostly so. Plenty of American patriots hated FDR, and the 1800 election between two of our country's Founding Fathers (always upper case!) still ranks as the nastiest on record, although 2016 came close and 2020 might take the gold medal. Still, this is an issue for academics who have nothing better to fret about.

2018 was not a great year in the political life of the nation to be sure, but at its end, we can be glad at least one house of Congress flipped, and so there will be some oversight in the year ahead. We can be glad that enough seats in enough states can only be won by a candidate who is interested in more than what his or her party's base has to say. We can rejoice in the arrival of some new stars like Beto O'Rourke, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ayanna Pressley and Jahana Hayes (who has not received as much attention as the others but is a true rising star) even while we regret the departure of people like Jeff Flake, Joe Donnelly and Mike Capuano. So far, the Constitution is working, which is nothing to sneer at. Still, the year will not be mourned at its passing. The dominant fact in the nation's political life was President Trump, and when that is a nation's dominant fact, it was a bad year.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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