Opinion
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by Michael Sean Winters

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You do not need to be a fortune teller to see that the year ahead, like the one just concluded, is going to be dominated by President Donald Trump. Any president has the power to take center stage in the political life of the nation, but this president has the ability to drive the news cycle from his early morning twitter rants, through his off-the-cuff remarks to his disruptive policies.

In 2018, the Mueller investigation into Russian interference loomed in the background of this presidency, but as early as February, that investigation could take center stage. None of us knows what Mueller has. For the good of the country, I hope that if the investigation uncovers impeachable offences, Mr. Mueller has uncovered a smoking cannon, not a smoking gun. Just as the Oval Office tapes proved President Richard Nixon was lying, and had been all along, I hope the evidence Mueller presents to Congress and the public is so compelling, leading Republicans are the first to call for impeachment proceedings.

What if it isn't? What if Sean Hannity and Laura Ingraham can still spin some alternate version of reality? Will the Democrats have the discipline to refuse to commence impeachment proceedings without the support of a significant number of Republicans in Congress supporting the effort? I doubt it. The Democratic base has been chomping at the bit although Speaker Nancy Pelosi should be forewarned: If she proceeds to permit impeachment proceedings along party lines, she will forevermore be compared with former Cong. Tom Delay, who insisted the Republicans impeach President Bill Clinton even though the country did not seek it and the Senate was never going to convict. Pelosi rightly refused to accept the base's demand that George W. Bush be impeached, rightly concluding the procedure should never be used because of policy differences or because someone made a mistake. Impeachment should be used once a century, not every twenty years, and only for criminal activity. Mueller may or may not reveal evidence of criminal activity, but Pelosi should insist on Republican support or let the voters decide, voters who will also be deciding the fate of those congressional Republicans.

Nor is it clear the Democrats in Congress, most of whom are lawyers, will understand how they should approach the findings of the special counsel. For example, New

York Attorney General Barbara Underwood announced the closing of Trump's charity last month. She said her investigation unearthed "a shocking pattern of illegality involving the Trump Foundation — including unlawful coordination with the Trump presidential campaign, repeated and willful self-dealing, and much more." But, Democrats should not focus on Trump's spreading cash around Iowa and New Hampshire in violation of campaign finance laws. Most people have not run campaigns and so such laws are opaque to them. Instead, of all the unlawful deeds the Trump Foundation allegedly committed, the one Democrats should focus on is the $7 paid to the Boy Scouts to enroll Don Jr. Really? Trump the billionaire couldn't pay seven bucks out of his own pocket? Even that had to be illegal? This is a level of venality that everyone can grasp.

Whatever Mueller delivers, I anticipate that someone in the Republican Party, perhaps newly retired Sen. Jeff Flake or Ohio Gov, John Kasich, will mount a primary challenge to the president. It is the most important thing to ensure a Democratic win in 2020. In my lifetime, every incumbent president who faced a challenge from within his own party withdrew or lost his re-election effort: Lyndon Johnson pulled out in 1968 after Sen. Gene McCarthy beat expectations in New Hampshire's primary, Jimmy Carter's campaign was mortally wounded by Sen. Ted Kennedy's challenge which went all the way to the convention, and in 1992 George H.W. Bush was pulled to the right by the primary campaign of Pat Buchanan and never regained his footing. Conversely, Nixon in 1972, Ronald Reagan in 1984, Bill Clinton in 1996, George W. Bush in 2004 and Barack Obama in 2012, men of different parties and running in very different political climates, did not face a primary challenge and all went on to win reelection.

With a divided Congress, it is not likely there will be much legislation passed. Perhaps the president and the Democrats will agree to an infrastructure plan, but I doubt it. The Senate will continue to confirm conservative judges and to place a check on the president's foreign policy. Mostly, we can expect stalemate.

Chaos, fast-moving and largely impossible to analyze, will characterize the Democratic presidential sweepstakes in 2019. Already, national polls are being conducted although, at this point, name recognition is the only thing being accurately measured. It appears that Joe Biden, Sen. Kamala Harris, and former Cong. Beto O'Rourke will be running as neo-liberals, while Sens. Elizabeth Warren, Bernie Sanders and Sherrod Brown will fight to carry the reformist, anti-Wall Street banner. There may be another half a dozen candidates as well, but these would be

the six with real potential. I won't handicap the race: All six viable candidates would have to improve to be able to win the presidency, but many candidates have improved over the course of a campaign, most notably Barack Obama and Bill Clinton. Still, there are indelible hurdles for each of these six. I suspect the voters want someone younger than Biden or Sanders, and maybe not as young as O'Rourke. I am not sure Brown has the fire in the belly. Warren and Harris will both have to begin by walking the tightrope of comparisons to Hillary Clinton, from whom they will need to distance themselves but in a way that does not appear disrespectful. Maybe someone else, like Montana Gov. Steve Bullock, will enter the race and catch a wave. Remember that Obama was a distant third in national polls before his upset win in Iowa in 2008. Only when the voters began making choices will a field this large start to shake out.

In addition to the struggle between the neo-liberal wing and the populists, the Democrats will likely continue to suffer from self-inflicted wounds. How many times do we have to hear a political opponent characterized by the Stalinist phrase "on the wrong side of history"? Look at this past weekend's editorials in the New York Times on the subject of abortion. Not a single word evidenced any concern that, whatever else it is, abortion is a violent thing, and the authors seemed to presume a hostility between mother and child understandable only to ideologues and their lawyers, not to normal human beings. Sen. Claire McCaskill is now a former senator in part because the Democratic Party continues to insist on rigid adherence to the most extreme pro-choice positions. So long as pro-life Democrats are told we are not welcome, states like Missouri and Indiana will be out of reach. Whomever the Democrats nominate will need to have a "Sister Souljah" moment, and it had better be about challenging this idea that there is no room for us pro-lifers in the Democratic Party.

Finally, I will offer a name that will become as well known as that of Robert Mueller in the course of 2019: Letitia James, the incoming Attorney General of the great state of New York. The president's power to pardon does not extend to state crimes, and in New York, with its long history as a financial capital, many crimes violate state laws as well as federal ones. If the president enters negotiations for a plea bargain, it is likely he will be facing Ms. James across the table.

One thing everyone can agree on as we begin 2019 is that we should pray for our country and for our president. How to pray for President Trump, however, is a source of disagreement, even bewilderment. Richard Brown, emeritus professor of history

at the University of Connecticut, shared a tale with me that should resolve the bewilderment, at least on the left. "Nearly 200 years ago, followers of President Jackson invited a Federalist pastor to offer a prayer for their Democratic hero," Brown explained to me. "The preacher, Lemuel Haynes, himself an evangelical Christian famed for rebutting liberal Universalists — who believed God was too kind to send anyone to Hell — was not prepared to endorse Jackson. Yet, the minister was unwilling to refuse the Democrats outright. So Haynes, the nation's first African American pastor ordained by a mainstream Protestant church, offered a brief biblical appeal: 'Andrew Jackson — Psalm 109, verse 8.'"

I will spare you the need to Google it: "Let his days be few; and let another take his office." Pastor Haynes, to say nothing of the psalmist, lived in a more brutal time than ours, so we should modify the prayer to say, "Let his days *as president* be few; and let another take his office." Amen.

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

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