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THEY SAID IT

Over? Did you say "over?" Nothing is over until we decide it is!
Was it over when the Germans bombed Pearl Harbor? Hell no!...
And it ain't over now. 'Cause when the goin' gets tough...the tough
get goin'!

--Bluto Blutarsky (John Belushi), National Lampoon's *Animal House*, 1978. (Hat Tip: *NRO's* James Robbins.)

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MORE THOUGHTS ON THE ELECTION.

Try as we may to put a happy face on the election results, we just can't do it. Last night was a bad night for Republicans, a very bad night. The only solace they (and by extension we) may take is that it could have been worse, hard as that is to believe. The only bright spot for the GOP was that it managed to hold one Senate and a few House seats that might otherwise have flipped. And when that's what passes for good news, you know things are pretty bad.

Over the next several days and weeks we will all be subjected to an awful lot of analysis and commentary about the race. And to judge by what we've already seen, much of it will be trite and superficial, suggesting that this was a "referendum on Bush," and that he lost. On the left, they will argue that their victory is a repudiation of Iraq. On the right, they'll blame their loss on immigration or Harriet Miers or the Farm Bill or some such. All of this is well and good, and certainly these issues played a role in yesterday's contests. But none of these really addresses the results completely and none offers much guidance for what the new Congress will bring.

We are not going to pretend that we have all the answers, but we have some thoughts on what happened and some further thoughts about what might come next.

First, this was not a realignment. This was a bad sixth-year election. Period. Though we may have been too optimistic regarding Republicans' chances, the realignment/wave crowd (e.g. Charlie Cook, Stuart Rothenberg) were equally over-optimistic about the Democrats' chances. Democrats did better than most serious analysts expected, but only slightly. And mercifully, the 40-50 seat wave never reached the shore. As things stand right now, it looks as if the Democrats will pickup 29 seats in the House, essentially reversing the partisan split (from 232-203 GOP to 232-203 Dem.). In the Senate, Democrats picked up six seats and now hold a razor thin 51-49 margin. That's all good for the Democrats. But it is not the mark of political realignment.

We haven't seen his analysis yet, but based on experience, we'd guess that Michael Barone's take will be among the most useful. He has long claimed that the nation is almost perfectly divided between red and blue and that this means that a few votes here or there can make a big difference in elections. Republicans won the presidential contest in 2000 by a few hundred votes (in Florida). They won again in '04 by a few thousand votes (in Ohio). And they lost last night by a few thousand votes scattered around Virginia, Montana, Missouri, and a handful of other places. Even where Republicans lost seats, they did so narrowly. That's small consolation at this point for the party, but it is valuable information in analyzing the effects of the election.

Some random thoughts:

Though Republicans lost yesterday, no one should shed too many tears either for the incumbents who were defeated or for the party leaders who will now lose their positions of power. With one or two exceptions (see below), those Republicans who were beaten deserved to be beaten. And the party leaders deserved to be beaten as well. The GOP in Congress has been a mess for some time and voters cleared out some of the dregs. That the voters chose to throw the bums out should neither surprise anyone nor be cause for much consternation among the Republican faithful. It's not like the GOP lost a Reagan or a Lincoln last night. They lost a handful of George Allens, Bob Neys, and J.D. Hayworths. So be it.

Republicans are done, done, done in the Northeast. They were beaten badly in a variety of venues, including New York, Connecticut, and New Hampshire. It is unlikely that they will be able to get these seats back. They were holdouts in an increasingly blue area, and now they're gone, probably for good. Looking to the future, New Hampshire has two Republican Senators (Gregg and Sununu). Neither can be feeling too comfortable right now.

This is, we believe, part and parcel of the Democrats' ongoing transformation into the party of privilege. As Michael Barone has noted, in 2004 the Democrats

won the most affluent areas in the country and officially became the party of country clubbers and inherited wealth. This trend continued yesterday, as Democrats did much, much better among those who are well off or very well off, i.e. those in the affluent areas of the Northeast and in wealthy suburbs.

Democrats also made some gains yesterday among rural and less well off voters, but those gains are, perhaps, a bit deceiving. Diehard liberal Nancy Pelosi may be the new Speaker of the House, but her caucus just became considerably more conservative. Democrats gained a great many seats in the heartland by running conservative candidates, who are likely to back Pelosi for Speaker, but highly unlikely to back her entire agenda. To be honest, many of the new Democrats could have run as Republicans without altering their positions notably.

In the Senate, conservatives will also figure prominently in the new Democratic caucus. In Virginia, conservatives won roughly 99% of the vote. A slim majority of that went to the conservative who will vote for Reid for Majority Leader, but no one should pretend that Jim Webb is now a real Democrat. He is a brash, bold, brilliant Washington insider who will almost certainly be a pain in nether-regions for his new party-mates. From a policy standpoint, we'd rather Allen have won. But from an entertainment standpoint, we couldn't have asked for a better result. Moreover, as Christopher Hitchens put it, Jim Webb may not be "the Scoop Jackson the Democrats need," but he's probably "the next best thing."

When you add up the conservative wins and the seats that the GOP simply gave away (Foley in Florida, DeLay in Texas, Ney in Ohio, etc.), it will be tempting for Republicans to console themselves with the thought that the election results were an aberration and that the majority can be easily regained in two years. They should be leery of such consolations.

This fallacy has been a staple of the unofficial Democratic Party platform since 1980 and has taken on greater importance over the last twelve years. It's also one of the reasons that they have largely been

kept from power until now. The Democrats have always presumed that the majority (and the White House) was rightfully theirs but had somehow been taken from them, either by bad fortune, deception, or outright thievery. Republicans need to be careful not to fall into this same trap. The voters rejected some portion of the Republican Party's agenda. The party will now have to figure out what, exactly, was rejected and why. And then it will have to address those shortcomings. That will take some time. The presumption that House can simply be flipped back without this soul-searching and subsequent political salesmanship is dangerous.

It should be heartening therefore for Republicans to read these words, spoken this morning by their party's chairman Ken Mehlman:

I see three things out of it. First of all, we need to recommit ourselves to our conservative reform principles; that's very important. We need to try to work where we can on bipartisan basis with Democrats. We need to bend over backwards to try to do that while maintaining those conservative reform principles. And I think another thing, the number one issue that was listed [in exit polls] is corruption. We need to remember, people that serve whether it's in the congress or in the government or any level, are people that ought to be about public policy and public service. That ought to be their basis. It ought not to be continuing your power in office but what you are trying to accomplish and what you are trying to reform. If we can focus on those three things then while last night was very difficult for many of us, ultimately we will be stronger and be able to serve the public better because we'll have learned and grown from it.

How all this will affect the course of politics will depend in large part on the actions of two people, the Speaker-elect Nancy Pelosi and President Bush. Last week, we wrote that the upside to a change in majority would be the necessity of Democrats growing up and acting like responsible adults. Now it's time to test that theory.

In an ideal world, Pelosi would play bad cop to Bush's good cop, essentially telling Maliki and the Iraqis: "Look, we gained power because the American people are impatient with this war and with you. It's time for you to join wholeheartedly in the struggle for your country, lest we tire further and pull the plug on funding the whole mess."

We're not especially confident about Madame Speaker's willingness to work with the Bush administration rather than antagonize it. But it's the best we can hope for under the circumstances. Rightly or wrongly, this election sent the Iraqis, al Qaeda, Iran, and the rest of the Muslim world the message that the American people are growing tired of the struggle. It is up to Pelosi (and to a lesser extent Reid) to ensure that this message is leveraged to the greatest advantage of the American people who sent it.

As for President Bush, it will be interesting to see how he reacts to this. As John Podhoretz has pointed out, since his unsuccessful run for Congress in 1978, Bush has not lost an election. How he deals with this loss will affect the future of the country greatly.

Despite all of the nonsense about how the Democrats will do this, that, or the other thing to the war on terror, until House Judiciary Committee chairman-elect John Conyers wins an impeachment conviction, President Bush is still the commander-in-chief and still the face of American foreign policy. In Europe, in New England, and in the media, the expectation is that Bush will be chastened by this election and will thus be more conciliatory. Maybe. But it is also possible that he will simply decide to fight even harder. Two years ago, we predicted that after winning reelection, the "unbound" Bush would deal aggressively with the nation's enemies. For a variety of reasons, most of which we can't possibly know, Bush has not been thusly unbound. But clearly there is nothing stopping him from unbinding himself now.

If Bush were to ask our advice, we'd suggest that he take both tacks and move aggressively while being conciliatory. The way to make that work, of course, would be to offer conciliation to the right people. We'd start with Jim Webb. Unlike the rest

of the anti-war crowd, Webb has no interest in seeing the humiliation of Vietnam repeated. He has a professional interest in maintaining the integrity of the military. And he has a personal interest in seeing the United States deal with the troops wisely and constructively, given that his son is serving in Iraq.

We tend to think that the President will, indeed, respond to this setback with vigor and clarity of purpose. Of course, we've been wrong in predicting that before. But this time, it really is different. There are no more elections to run. No more campaigns to plan. No more reasons to be delicate. And very little more time.

The other day, White House Press Secretary Tony Snow told reporters the following:

I know you guys are desperate for, you know, the President sort of putting on the spurs and walking off into the sunset, but there's also a 2008 campaign to come and two more years of this presidency. Trust me, you guys need to strap on your running shoes, because it's going to be a busy two years.

We hope he's right. We believe he will be. But then, we've thought so before.

Certainly, the nation's enemies aren't going to sit around analyzing vote totals from North Carolina's 11th Congressional district. They're going to get busy too. They're going to take the message they believe they've been sent and set about trying to ensure that this opportunity is not wasted. Or as Michael Ledeen put it:

They surely see the scimitar of Allah lopping off W's head, and they will be encouraged to accelerate their drive for ultimate victory. It would not surprise me at all to see renewed attacks against Israel and against what is left of the government of Lebanon by Hezbollah and Hamas, and my heart breaks for the Iraqi people, who will undoubtedly be subjected to an intensified assault.

The question is whether the American politicians are up to the challenge. If President Bush has any intention of keeping this election setback from being a serious drag on him, on his party, and on the nation, then he will have to get his own shoes tied tightly. We can only hope that a having a share of power will convince Nancy Pelosi and Harry Reid to go along for the run.

Post Script. The Fallout. The resignation of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, which became official only a short while ago, is a bittersweet moment for the nation. There can be little doubt that Rumsfeld has been an incredibly valuable asset to the Bush administration and the country over the last nearly six years. In addition to leading the Pentagon through some of its most difficult challenges, he freely served as the lightning rod for criticism of the war effort in Iraq. Had Secretary Rumsfeld not served this role – essentially that of a buffer between disgruntled Americans and their president – President Bush's standing might be even lower, and yesterday's defeat for the Republicans might have been even greater.

At the same time, it is possible that the Secretary has outlasted his usefulness to the country and no longer possesses the ability to carry out his duties effectively. With everyone save the President appearing to fault the Secretary of Defense for every little problem in Iraq, it may well be time for a new leader, one who can execute his responsibilities without the constant second-guessing and criticism that have been the hallmark of Rumsfeld's tenure. Certainly, it is better that his replacement, the former Director of Central Intelligence Robert Gates, will be running the show over the next two years, given that Secretary Rumsfeld is all but certain to be the perpetual star attraction at an ongoing series of hearings called by the new Democratic Congress.

Given the speed with which this change was made and a replacement found, it is clear that the President had accepted the resignation before yesterday's election and that the timing of the announcement was, as the President indicated, arranged so as not to play a role in the campaign.

Dennis Hastert too is done, though by contrast to Rumsfeld, his change in job status is clearly a result of yesterday's vote. Speaker Hastert was far less conservative than many would have liked, but he was nonetheless an effective Speaker, managing some of the slimmest margins in Congressional history. We suspect that Nancy Pelosi will soon find out just how difficult it is to hold things together under such circumstances. Republicans should be grateful to Hastert, both for his leadership and for his willingness to get out the way to make room for new blood.

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