

Trump may be down, but he's certainly not out

He may appear beleaguered, but this battle is far from over

by Conrad Black



As this is written, the winner of the United States presidential election is still uncertain; it is apparently down to Arizona, Georgia, Nevada, North Carolina and Pennsylvania. Joe Biden can win with any two of those states and Donald Trump needs all but one and Pennsylvania has to be among them, so Biden at this point is the provisional favourite before questions of judicial review are considered.

The Republicans are not accused of any irregularities and the only such allegations are against the Democrats, mainly in states run by the Democrats (U.S. federal elections are conducted by the state governments). There have been complaints of Republican scrutineers being prevented from

seeing ballots, and the president has noted some unusually lopsided “dumps” of votes, including in Michigan and Wisconsin, states already presumed to have been won by Biden. All of these questions are going to have to be examined quickly and would be vulnerable to whole or partial judicial reversal. There is a rich tradition of such rough and tumble electioneering in the United States; a number of ballot boxes are still officially being searched for in Chicago from the 1960 election, in which Mayor Richard J. Daley of that city and the Senate majority leader and vice-presidential candidate, Lyndon B. Johnson, for his creative electoral antics in Texas, prompted the Democratic presidential candidate, Sen. John F. Kennedy, to exclaim, “Thank God for a few honest crooks!”

This may be one of those American elections where the real victor will always be disputed, like 1960 and 2000 (when George W. Bush won by one electoral vote after he apparently won the state of Florida by 537 votes out of over five million cast against the incumbent vice-president Al Gore). But in this case, if Trump loses, it will not just be the result of what the president and his supporters describe as massive and brazen fraud at the polls (far exceeding the 50,000 or so missing or possibly fraudulent votes in 1960). It will be chiefly because of a campaign by almost the entire national political media and polling organizations to smear the president throughout his term.

Trump was practically certain of re-election prior to the onset of the pandemic, but the virus gave the Democrats the opportunity to climb into bed with the most vocal scientists, demand a complete shutdown of the economy for humanitarian reasons and then accuse Trump of inflicting a bone-cracking economic depression on the country because of his prior mishandling of the coronavirus. (When he stopped direct flights from China, where the virus originated, on Jan. 31, he was accused by Biden of “hysteria” and “xenophobia.”) While

the media spewed out paroxysms of bilious denigration of the president, Joe Biden was in his Delaware basement, in a candidate protection program, shuffling around in a mask in dutiful terror of the coronavirus, while Trump conducted the most strenuous presidential campaign in American history.

Whatever the result, a number of conclusions have already emerged. President Trump's policies are generally approved in the country: he is running behind his party against an extraordinarily unprepossessing opponent, and the positive reaction of the financial markets to the re-election of a Republican Senate and unexpected Republican gains in the House of Representatives reflects relief that the Democrats will not have the congressional votes to adopt what is by American standards the extreme socialist Democratic program, which was essentially independent socialist Sen. Bernie Sanders' campaign program, only slightly tempered by the presumptive nominee to produce the Democratic platform. Heavy tax increases, implementation of severe environmental rules including a virtual state of war on the petroleum industry, reversion to practically unlimited and undocumented immigration, and a variety of similar nostrums are not going to be possible even if Biden, who has faced in all four directions on every issue in his political career of nearly 50 years, is finally elected president.

The most frequently levelled charge against Trump has been that he is a racist, and the election results show that the country did not buy into this. Trump has tripled the percentage of the African-American vote that was achieved by John McCain, the Republican nominee 12 years ago, and he has pulled more than double the Hispanic vote gained by Mitt Romney when he was the Republican candidate in 2012. Those who were supposedly the subjects of his racist bigotry flocked to him, exposing the entire sordid argument as bunk. Trump has been a cordial acquaintance of mine for more than 20 years; he has his faults and some of them are quite conspicuous and

notorious, but he has no racial or sexual prejudices at all that I have ever detected.

The personality of the president may have been rejected by a slight majority of his voting countrymen even though his policies have not, but that is the consequence of the hate campaign against him and had practically nothing to do with his public policy choices. The entire Democratic campaign was confected hatred of the president coupled to the false charge that he had mismanaged the COVID-19 pandemic and was complicit in the demise of almost all of the 240,000 Americans who have died with, though not necessarily from, the coronavirus. Almost none of the campaign against Trump had anything to do with policy, or because he is remotely as odious and obnoxious a person as he was portrayed; it was that he had promised to disassemble and evict practically the entire political establishment. He has, to take a phrase from the segregationist Alabama governor of the 1960s, George C. Wallace, "shaken the establishment by its eye-teeth," but they have fought back savagely from their entrenched positions and the issue these coming weeks will be whether that establishment manages to evict him or not.

Trump's populist conservatism, based on Ronald Reagan's old dictum that, "The only welfare system we have ever had that worked is a job," and consisting of sharp tax cuts, incentivized enterprise zones and elimination of illegal immigration, has been popular and successful. They will be protected by Mitch McConnell, elected on Tuesday to his seventh consecutive six-year term as senator from Kentucky (he is almost certain to win a seventh two-year term as majority leader). If Biden prevails, it will be in an unbelievable atmosphere of recriminations. Biden and his running mate, Kamala Harris, are not competent to hold the offices that they may soon assume and have practically no chance of being successful in the execution of them. If Trump, who in four years will be the age Biden is now, and presumably more

robust, wishes, he can emulate Andrew Jackson after the so-called "corrupt bargain" between John Quincy Adams and Henry Clay denied him victory in the 1824 election, campaign for four years, and be the only president apart from Grover Cleveland elected to non-consecutive terms.

He may appear beleaguered, but this battle is far from over. He has had the greatest impact on the country of any president since Reagan, and has shown the way forward for the Republicans. Four years of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris would stoke up an enormous amount of nostalgia for Donald Trump. It might not be unrequited. If he wins he will be better in his second term than in his first; if he retires, he will soon be fondly remembered (as American ex-presidents are), as a colourful former heavyweight champion. And if he wants to return he can; he is almost imperishable, the more so because he has been the subject of such vile snobbery. In living memory, only Franklin Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower and Ronald Reagan have had such a huge and fervent following.

First published in the