

the japan times

THE INDEPENDENT VOICE IN ASIA

BY DAVID HOWELL
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Nov 21, 2022

COMMENTARY / WORLD

Is it the end of Trump and Trumpism?

The controversial former president winning re-election would not bode well for the future of America or the world

So, Donald Trump is going to have another shot at the American presidency.

It would be bad for America and bad for its allies, including Japan, if he won. An already shaken world order, supposedly based on the international rule of law, would be in for another battering.

This would not just be a matter of one administration based on one party replacing another as broadly happens in most Western democracies from time to time. It would be an assault on the whole Constitution of the United States and on the binding forces that have kept the Great Republic together, from its founding in 1787, although of course with the bloody interregnum of civil war along the way from which it in fact emerged stronger.

If that sounds too harsh, it should be remembered that modern democracy rests not just on everyone — that is rulers as well as ruled, being strictly under the law — a vital point which, incidentally, the Chinese leaders simply do not understand. It has also now come to rest on what might be called the rule of behavior, as well as the rule of the law and the Constitution.

This is to say that, in this age of hyperconnectivity, instant communication and total transparency, keeping a democratic society together and leading it, has to be as much by example and attitude, as well as by the actual letter of the law. Authority, and the respect and trust needed to maintain that authority, has to be earned in new ways and by new skills in the information age.

This is where Donald Trump fell down so badly last time. By his abusive negativism and open contempt for many, culminating in his refusal to accept the electoral verdict and his clear condoning of a violent assault on the Capitol Building itself, he demonstrated that he had just not grasped this central reality.

Whether Ron DeSantis, his immediate rival for the Republican nomination, would do better is an open question. Certainly, the Florida governor seems to have what might be called more polite and sympathetic communicating skills. But there is a deep danger, as well as a fundamental fallacy, lurking in any form of Trumpism — from which he will need to distance himself.

The Trump appeal was built on division — on skillfully orchestrated, deep and amplified anger of millions against the governing classes, the establishment, the ruling elite and so on. This was the Trump recipe and

it created not a new grassroots unity but a populism-driven fragility and hostility right down the center of American society

The wounds from that are still barely healing.

The fallacy was to believe that if the ruling structure of the hated elite was pulled apart, a new unity of the people would emerge, armed as never before with unparalleled power to combine, communicate and project their views. In the early days of the internet many believed that this is what would happen — the electronic age would be a liberalizing force, trimming overbearing governments and bringing true democracy to the people.

The opposite happened. “The people” turned out not to be a solid entity but a mass of conflicting pressures and interests, fragmenting into countless quarreling tribes of conflicting and rival identities — a process made actually far more intense by both the powerful new platforms and the centrifugal forces of the digital age.

New kinds of anarchy began to take shape, not of course just in America but in very many open societies and even in some closed ones as well, rocking political systems around the world — the extraordinary upheaval in Britain’s politics being only one example.

In America, it is just possible the worst is beginning to be over, so long as Trump does not return. U.S. President Joe Biden and the Democrats held on to the Senate and generally did better than expected, even though inevitably losing control of the House of Representatives. This is a major achievement, considering that incumbent U.S. administrations and parties usually lose out heavily in the midterms, and that this time

the circumstances of soaring living costs and wide social discontent were very strong and Biden himself seen as weak.

Further, it could be that some of the major global pressures of recent times are at last easing. COVID-19 is almost contained, although sudden localized resurgences cannot be ruled out. The vast energy price inflation, shaking almost the whole world, could be slowing down. Putin's military, although not defeated, has been halted and driven back on the ground by Ukrainian valor. He has also said he won't use nuclear weapons (although no one can put much credence on that!). Finally, Biden has found small areas of common ground in his recent meeting with Xi Jinping — so just a few blue patches in a still dark world sky.

Finally, whether Trump or DeSantis, or anyone else, stands for the Republicans, will Biden run again, going well into his eighties? It is possible. Although he has appeared to falter at times, there is now a certain spryness about him. He looks and sounds more like a president in this age when perceptions matter so much than he did even two years ago.

Perhaps age mixed with dignity, mixed with a certain humility and flashes of wisdom is exactly the calming leadership formula an uneasy nation needs in this bewildering and turbulent information age which has come upon us.

We shall see.
