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Hell In A Handbasket

By Mike Tully

Elections are the pinnacle of democracy and a time of dread. In America, we celebrate the right to engage in free and fair elections – so far – but cringe at the prospect of the other side prevailing. When we vote, we aspire to heaven but brace ourselves for a ride to hell in a handbasket. It has always been thus.

And that's okay. It's important to care. It's also important not to assume Biblical violence should the opposition win. After all, there will be another election. Live and fight another day, as the saying does. I used to remind myself that, while I cared deeply about the outcome of elections, it's not a disaster when the other side wins.

When the Supreme Court handed George W. Bush the 2000 presidential election, I told myself it was not the end of the world. While W was far from the brightest bulb in the marquee, he seemed like a decent guy (and still does). How much damage could he do? The answer, sadly, was a lot.

I didn't realize how easily evil men like Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz could override the dim, amiable guy Americans had elected President. I never thought a president – albeit one who was duped – would con the American people into going to war under false pretenses. I had seen too many of my generation sent to their death in Vietnam. Watching another generation sending young Americans to die for a mistake was almost too much to bear. I had told myself a Bush presidency could not possibly be as bad as my fears warned me. Turns out, it was worse.

There was no panic in 2008 or 2012. Barack Obama seemed like an easy winner in both elections. More importantly, I did not lose sleep over the prospects of a John McCain or Mitt Romney presidency. While I believed then – and still do – that the policies Obama favored were better for the country than those proposed by McCain or Romney, I had no doubt that America would survive either of them being elected President.

Then 2016 happened.

Like many of us – including national pundits – I didn't think there was a snowball's chance in Gila Bend of Donald Trump being elected President. After all, he was a clown, a con man, a fraud, and totally unqualified to serve in the Oval Office. He would be overrun by a Hillary Clinton landslide and slink back to “not reality TV” or orchestrating sleazy business deals.

Then the emails happened.

When I first learned that Hillary Clinton had been using a private email server that included official communications, my heart sank. I'd worked in the public sector and knew how sacrosanct public email servers were. While I understood that Clinton didn't break any laws, I also knew that she had done something unnecessarily stupid and self-destructive. But I didn't think it would cost her the presidency.

Then James Comey happened.

When the self-righteous Comey torpedoed the Clinton campaign with his infamous "Weiner's laptop" announcement, I felt like I'd been kicked in the umpa-loompas. The polls were close and the last-minute undecided voters were breaking Republican.

And then Trump happened.

Okay, I told myself, he got elected, but how much damage could he do? I figured he'd probably mail in the job and leave actual governance to individuals who knew how to do it. He'd be a caretaker, I told myself, warming the chair behind the Resolute Desk until we replaced him with a real president.

And then shit happened.

Donald Trump, a conman and failed businessman whose claim to fame was fame, has turned into the most dangerous force in American politics. Certainly, our country has been on the brink before. We killed each other with relish during the Civil War. We allowed the Klan to dominate swaths of the country in the early 20th century. We fought each other in the streets in the 1960s and 70s. But we survived.

Now what happens?

No matter what occurs in next week's midterm election, no matter how many Mark Finchems, Kari Lakes or (cringe) Herschcl Walkers prevail, America will survive, eventually right the ship of state, and return mature adults to governance. That's what always happens – until it doesn't.

The Founding Fathers, despite their flaws and limitations, managed to bequeath us a remarkably elastic political system that adapts, maladapts, and somehow resolutely stumbles forward. There has always been a special magic about America. Outgoing Speaker of the Arizona House of Representatives, Rusty Bowers, told the January 6th Committee he believes America is divinely inspired. Frankly, I think God is too busy trying to figure out how he or she got the dinosaurs and saber-toothed tigers wrong to care a whit about human politics. But, Godly or not, there has been something historically special about the American experiment. Maybe it is divine. Or maybe, as they said in "[Bagdad Café](#)," "the magic is gone."

In which case I say, move over. This handbasket is crowded.