Letter from Tallahassee: Election Day Hangover

I woke up today feeling wretched and I didn't even bother to drink too much last night.

For the first time since 1972, I went to bed early on Election Night. The statewide results in Florida were too painful to bear, and the chirpy happy talk from the MSNBC/CNN yapping heads was doing nothing to make it go down easier. Yeah, flip the house, lots of ponies in that stable full of dung, but dammit, if I go to sleep and never wake up, I will never have to face a world in which the idea of Senator Rick Scott and Governor Ron DeSantis is a real thing.

Alas, I woke up, and it's all I can do not to go back to bed and stay there.

Florida is, in a word, fucked. Our governor elect is a man of few ideas beyond sycophantic devotion to Trump and simmering resentment at liberals who, evidently, wish to turn Florida into Venezuela. Naturally, he makes no sense beyond the fevered imaginations of Fox News inmates, which is DeSantis' prime and only true base. He is a pure bred Fox hothouse flower, anointed by Trump and carried to victory by his partisans. He ran a terrible, inept campaign. He appealed to the ingrained racism and resentment that may be this state's number one cash crop, painting a decent and good man as a crazed, soft on crime socialist who wants to destroy "our" jobs and economy. You know, the black guy, nudge wink say no

more amirite?

And he won.

The man DeSantis will replace is widely known for shady ethics, crony favoritism, a “blind trust” with surprisingly good eyesight, and a multi-billion dollar Medicare swindle. Rick Scott plunked down $51M of his own money to buy a U.S. Senate seat, much as he bought the Governor’s office. Keep in mind that he walked away from the Medicare scam with around $350M in severance. That means that Rick Scott has bought his political career with your money. Nice work if you can get it.

Scott will represent Florida alongside the Emptiest Suit in Florida Politics, Marco Rubio, a man notable for his earnest conversion from Trump critic to Trump taint licker. Scott’s addition to the absurdly labeled “world’s greatest deliberative body” provides him a broad range of platforms upon which to ply his habitual grift and graft.

Other depressing news? The Agriculture Commissioner, Chief Financial Officer, and Attorney General are all dyed in the wool Trump-fondlers. The A.G. outcome is especially dispiriting, her campaign largely financed by outfits like GEO and Core Civic, private prison corporations who make money hand over fist based on the policies of people like AG-elect Ashley Moody. Anyone hoping for a glimmer of criminal justice reform in this aggressively carceral state has got another thing coming.

The Florida electorate also engaged in an orgy of Constitutional amendment passage. Among the bright spots: the gradual elimination of Greyhound racing in the state, a barbaric holdover from yesteryear. Amendment 9, which bans offshore drilling in state waters, also bans vaping in most workplaces. It’s a bizarre conflation of unrelated issues.

Among the lesser lights: passage of several measures that require super-majorities to raise taxes and educational fees,

exactly the kinds of policies that all but crippled California in the decades following Proposition 13. Along with a couple of mandated caps on property tax valuations, these GOP-pushed policies are designed to ensure that funding levels for government programs, specifically education, continue to wither. As Grover Norquist has longed advocated, the GOP is intent on shrinking government to the size where they can "drown it in the bathtub."

Then there is passage of Amendment 6, aka Marsy's Law. This pander-heavy "victim's rights" measure received massive national backing from law and order groups. In short, it attempts to circumvent defendant rights in favor of emotional appeals to stricter "justice" for victims. It remains unclear how this might differ from good old fashioned vengeance aside from the fact that victims will not be allowed to administer corporal or capital punishments themselves. For now.

Expect this one to face legal challenges for its overreach, though hopes for winning those challenges is diminished by the ongoing right wing takeover of the Federal and State judiciary under Trump and DeSantis, whose first official action will be appointment of three State Supreme Court Justices on his first day in office. This is in fact the one and only specific policy DeSantis articulated during the campaign. One wonders what he will do to occupy himself for the remaining 3 years and 364 days.

The brightest spot on the statewide ballot was the overwhelming approval for Amendment 4, which restores voting rights to most formerly incarcerated felons who have served their sentences, roughly a million voters, predominantly minorities. This is a huge progressive win, though anybody who thinks a DeSantis administration will not go out of its way to undermine this initiative has not been paying attention to the GOP's near-religious devotion to voter disenfranchisement over the past four decades.

But here’s a real puzzler. Amendment 4 took about 64% of the vote. DeSantis and Scott each took closer to 50%. Who are the 13-14% who voted yes on reinstating the vote for returning felons while simultaneously voting for two guys (and their party) who are staunchly opposed to that outcome?

Bright spots? Sure, there are a few. Democrats managed to flip a couple of U.S. House seats and a handful of state house slots. But despite its popular image as a purple or swing state, the political leverage in Florida remains firmly in the hands of the Tea Party GOP. The vote margins might be thin, but their grip on power is decidedly strong.

The next four years are not going to be pretty for progressives in Florida. The enthusiasm behind Andrew Gillum’s race has been huge, especially among the traditionally underserved communities across the state. Can that energy form the basis for an ongoing progressive movement in Florida? Can Beto’s almost victory in Texas do the same there? These are two superb and charismatic campaigners. How might their personal appeal translate to support for a progressive movement writ large? Is it dependent upon a savior figure? Or will scores of first-time political enthusiasts now sink back into their non-participatory torpor, proven right once again that political engagement just isn’t worth the candle?

It’s a tough call. The Trump base craves a movement that feeds its sense of resentment, and in that they are more than served by the current regime. Their prevailing desire is to somehow “stick it to the libs”, even if that means undermining their own interests. The progressive base craves policy change, an often dull and incremental process that is far less emotionally satisfying than laser-focused rage.

But not even I can miss the bright spots. The fact that Gillum and O’Rourke came as close as they did in traditional hotbeds of reactionary and racist attitudes is indeed a sign of hope. The slim reed of Stacy Abrams’s campaign in Georgia, still

alive as of this writing, is another enormously encouraging sign of a populace (perhaps) awakening from complacency.

Victories and activism by dozens of progressive women, people of color, and LBGTQ figures were essential to the Democrats taking control of the U.S. House and a big handful of governor's races. We are rid of such perennially toxic figures as Scott Walker and Dana Rohrbacher. (Alas, Tennessee has delivered upon us the latest version of Michele Bachmann in the guise of Senator Blackburn, yet another in a tragically long line of "godly" Stepford candidates who reliably view the world through an "I got mine" lens.)

The brightest spot? A Democratic majority in Congress poses a legitimate barrier to Trump's rampaging authoritarianism and violation of law. A number of superbly qualified Democrats will take up the gavel across the House committees, bodies that will be empowered to investigate and subpoena the Trump administration in ways that quisling toadies like Devin Nunes and Jim "Gym" Jordan would never allow. This is a huge improvement over the current condition, no question.

Nancy Pelosi will once again be Speaker of the House. I have little patience with the 'dump Pelosi' faction among the Dems. She has been the most effective legislative leader over the past 30-40 years. Granted, I also have little patience with some of her statements, such as this one in the hours after last night's results became known.

> *"We will have accountability and strive for bipartisanship. We must try. We have a bipartisan marketplace of ideas that makes our democracy strong. We have all had enough with division."*

Well excuse me and all, but, fuck, no. There is no hope for bipartisanship in this political moment. The GOP leadership has made that clear since Obama nominated Merrick Garland for the Supreme Court. I can only hope that Pelosi is playing the

formal game here and that she has no intention of looking for points of compromise in the coming fight.

And make no mistake. This is the fight of our political lives. Two years of Trump, and the GOP's slavish submission to his toddler whims, have degraded our civic society to a low level not seen in 160 years. The sick irony is that it is fueled by the same questions of power and racial animus that powered the drive to secession.

What would civil war look like in America today? There is no neat geographic division between North and South to demarcate who would remove themselves from the larger whole, to delineate where hostilities might be generally contained. Civil war would be more a Beirut or Belfast model, bitter foes living next door to one another with the norm looking like recent spasms of violence in Kentucky or Pittsburgh or Charleston, or even the recent yoga studio shooting here in Tallahassee.

We may have already arrived. Did Fort Sumter happen and we just didn't notice?

For now, the civil war is asymmetric, one side predominant in the hostilities. There remains a hope that our fabled democratic norms and institutions will offer a path away from complete social disintegration. It is my hope, and the reason I will continue to pursue – and even believe in – the imperfect ideal of creating an enlightened self-governing republic. I admit that I find the prospect bleak.

And yet, we persist. To do otherwise is even bleaker.