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## The center can be ruthless and unforgiving

After all the predictions and characterizations, the midterm elections on Tuesday lived up to the billing. Words like tsunami, hurricane and cataclysm had become, despite their environmental rarity, commonplace in describing what was anticipated. And in the end, they were not overstatements.

In the House of Representatives alone, Democrats lost a mind-boggling 61 seats to jolt the balance of power to the Republicans. To put it into some kind of perspective, there hadn't been a loss this big since 1938, when Democrats lost 72 seats. In the U.S. Senate, the results were nearly as dramatic. Even though the Democrats were able to maintain their majority, Republicans picked up six seats. Remember, only one-third of the Senate is up for re-election at any one time. In state governments, Democrats lost some eight governorships.

Here at home, Republicans took President Obama's former Senate seat as well as the House seats in the 6th, 10th, 11th, 13th and 14th congressional districts. The Republicans also experienced a recrudescence in Illinois state government, capturing seats in the legislature as well as the state treasurer and comptroller's offices and nearly the governorship. It's hard to believe how much things have changed in just two years.

Even before the dust settled, the spin machines hummed. Republicans boasted that the election results represented a major shift of the country to the right, that the nation had finally eschewed the "failed policies of the left" and embraced their core values. On the left, many claimed the losses were merely the swing back of the pendulum — that inevitably, the party of the president loses seats in a midterm election, and that such was the case here.

Both are wrong. Such elections are won and lost by capturing the political center. And it is that center that shifts back and forth to decide elections. This year, the center sent a clear message to the president ... something along the lines of "just because we elected you in 2008 doesn't mean we are lockstep with you on every major issue." At his somber post-election press conference on Wednesday, the president seemed to get it. There, he spoke of compromise when just weeks earlier, he notified his opponents that "they gotta sit in back" and even referred to them as "enemies." For sure, the president has little choice now but to make a little room for the Republicans right next to him.

But the Republicans should beware. If



### Law & Politics

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they aren't careful and if they believe this election is a mandate for the policies of the far right, then they too will again fall to the political center's sword. Indeed, both sides would be wise to remember that the center is ruthless and unforgiving, that it slapped George W. Bush in the 2006 midterms, and followed that with an uppercut to the Republicans in 2008.

While all of this political back and forth has the qualities of an entertaining sporting event, we should keep in mind that politics is more than a game; it is the means by which we live with one another. And what better to discuss at a time like this than Joseph Addison's 18th century play, "Cato."

The play's protagonist, Cato, was a Roman statesman who vehemently opposed the imperial Julius Caesar. He refused to compromise his love of liberty and was respected for speaking truth to power regardless of his personal interests. Caesar, on the other hand, justified his dictatorship by pointing to the need for firm and decisive leadership in a crisis, that his unilateral assumption of power was only as necessary to restore the greatness of the Roman Republic. At the appropriate time, he might say, he would give it up. Caesar respected Cato and through an emissary, desired and even inquired into the "price of Cato's friendship." In response to that, Cato told the messenger:

*Bid him disband his legions,  
Restore the commonwealth to liberty,  
Submit his actions to the public censure,*

*And stand the judgment of the Roman senate.*

*Bid him do this, and Cato is his friend.*

In the course of Addison's play, Cato laments not that he needs a better pension, or that he has lost political power, or that he needs a driver, but mourns "what a pity is it that we can die but

once to serve our country!"

*Lucia: The senate owes its gratitude to Cato,*

*Who with so great a soul consults its safety,*

*And guards our lives, while he neglects his own.*

*Sempronius: 'Tis not to stalk about, and draw fresh air*

*From time to time, or gaze upon the sun;*

*'Tis to be free. When liberty is gone, Life grows insipid, and has lost its relish.*

But Cato's attempts to fight the mighty Caesar were for naught and in the end, he falls upon his sword rather than become "a slave, a captive, into Caesar's hands."

In his new biography on George Washington, Ronald Chernow notes how our first president identified with Cato and *his*, not to mention Ancient Rome's, personal code of honor. Indeed, at a particularly dark time during the American Revolution, when all was lost, when many wondered whether freedom was worth all the death and despair, Washington allowed some officers to put on a production of the play, a much needed morale booster, a reminder as to what was important, and the right way to serve one's country. Some have called "Cato" the favorite play of the founders, with its main character serving as the paradigm of what it meant to be an American; that is, being a person willing to sacrifice himself for truth and honor.

As for Tuesday's election, Obama entered office two years ago under precarious economic circumstances. The actions he and the Democrat Congress took, namely the passing of the stimulus package and the health-care overhaul, were to say the least aggressive and certainly sans any bipartisan support. They justified these actions in a way Caesar himself might have, noting that they merely did what they had to do to save their country from a free fall.

And while their supporters cheered them on, the center, those quiet people who neither shout, nor protest, nor beat drums, told them on Tuesday what they thought in quite certain terms.

The political center demands respect from members of all parties: for its power to guard against hubris and excess — its ability to deflate the most inflated of egos — its penchant for instantly flipping the nation's political direction — and, perhaps best of all, that it keeps many from having to fall on swords to make a political point.