



U.S. President Donald Trump reacts to impeachment while speaking during a campaign rally in Battle Creek, Michigan, Dec. 18. (CNS/Reuters/Leah Millis)



by Michael Sean Winters

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Growing up, the time between Christmas and New Year's was always vacation time. We kids were off from school and both of my parents were educators, so they did not have to run back to work until the new year either. But, we rarely went anywhere during this holiday so it always felt like an "in between" time.

Liturgically, the week between Christmas and New Year's is all over the place. We had St. Stephen's Day yesterday, celebrating the first martyr, and today is the feast of St. John, apostle and evangelist. (Happy feast day Cardinal Sean O'Malley!) Tomorrow is the Feast of the Holy Innocents and Sunday we celebrate the Holy Family, which do keep our minds within the Christmas Octave.

The life of the country, and because we are the U.S., the world, felt like an "in between" time in 2019, one that was also all over the place. Trying to discern which way the national mood and the political climate was going often seemed like it had all the scientific precision of an ancient Roman haruspex looking to the entrails of sacrificed animals to predict the future.

The year opened with Nancy Pelosi becoming Speaker of the House again, and using her majority to pass a whole raft of legislation, but most of it died in the Republican-held Senate. The speaker was determined to do one thing: Keep the Congress from pursuing impeachment proceedings against the president, fearing they would backfire, especially against those newly elected Democrats who had to run for reelection in 2020 in districts that President Donald Trump carried in 2016. Pelosi's determination could not withstand the president's brazen attempt to convert the coin of the realm into his personal coinage and the year ended with a president impeached for only the third time in our nation's history.

The new year begins with the next step in the impeachment proceedings not entirely clear. Pelosi [threatened not to send the articles of impeachment](#) to the Senate unless Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell agrees to the interviewing of witnesses sought by Senate Democrats. Perhaps Pelosi simply wishes to leave the situation as it is, with the president impeached but denying him the prospect of any kind of vindication in the GOP-controlled Senate. Again, and quite to everyone's surprise, the nation finds itself "in between."

Trump lives in a state of frenzy that places anything and everything in a kind of conditional status. It would be wrong to state that he or his psyche are "in between" because this is his normal modus operandi. But, it places the entire nation in a state of constant imbalance: No one in the executive branch can be confident that the course they are pursuing, whether it be in economic or foreign policy, might not be upended in an instant by a presidential tweet.

The looming election could scarcely be more decisive and no one really knows how that will turn out. The president's approval rating has been stuck around 41-42 percent for months, although [it ticked up](#) 43.4 percent the day after the impeachment vote. A [state-by-state analysis](#) shows his approval rating is robust in Florida and North Carolina, and in Ohio, Pennsylvania and Virginia, that approval is only underwater by 5-7 points, a margin that could well close as soon as there is a binary choice for the voters. The economy shows few signs of even slowing down. An incumbent has many assets in a reelection campaign. Democrats may think that help is on the way, but whether it is or not is very unclear.

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The Democrats themselves face a critical choice: Will they support someone who does not see the need to fundamentally change the very economic structures that made Trump's election possible or will they select an economic populist who can go toe-to-toe with the president in parts of the country, especially the Midwest, that are still economically distressed? Or, as I framed the choice in [my report from New Hampshire](#), will the Democrats nominate someone who understand the necessity of returning to the original Bretton Woods economic structures, or someone who is content to tweak the Thatcher-Reagan laissez-faire economy that has hollowed out the middle class?

In between. It is such a common phrase that somehow does not capture the uncommon and perplexing times in which we are living. I went to the liquor store in between going to the supermarket and getting gas. The library is in between the brown house and the Congregational Church. The cheese course is in between the main course and dessert. Common place and pedestrian.

Perhaps this year, the word we need to describe the situation of the country is betwixt, with its air of archaic, pre-Enlightenment, slightly magical, Harry Potterish

location. We are betwixt Christmas and New Year's and, as a nation, we are betwixt what was and what will be, and what will be could hardly be less determinate.

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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