



Episode 949: After Trump, What?

Guest: Bob Merry

WOODS: This article of yours I meant to read it, and then Paul Gottfried said I had to read it, and I did, and I agree with 99.9% of it, and I just want to discuss it with you. There are some people who are extremely anti-Trump who are libertarians or who are more generally left-liberals. And particularly the left-liberals would love nothing more than to see him out of office, but there are also the Never Trumpers out there on the conservative right in the conservative movement who I suspect would rather like to see him go as well because they think, Well, we would get a fairly conventional right-of-center GOP guy, Mike Pence, and he would steer the ship of state to the right way. But you see it quite differently. If we got rid of Trump, it wouldn't be that we'd now have a nice, calm Mike Pence running the show. Instead, the left would have gained a tremendous momentum, more than it's had in a long time. So let's hear your case for that.

MERRY: First of all, I don't think we're in calm waters. I think the country is in very roiled waters, and I think the reason for that is that the old status quo has essentially crumbled and Trump's election reflects that. So if you sort of look ahead and say, Well, if Trump falters, we're not going back to the status quo. The country has basically moved itself beyond that. And so what's going to happen? I have in this piece I think six propositions that sort of add up to the likelihood that if Trump falters, the greatest possibility will be a highly liberal, probably socialistic European-style democratic socialism from our Democratic Party will prevail. And I don't want that, and most of your listeners I'm sure don't want that, but I think that's a very strong possibility.

WOODS: Well, before we go into your different points, I want to ask you something that I asked Paul. It seems that, although the Democrats would love to talk a good game about getting rid of Trump just to keep him off balance, in a way he's a boon to them. MSNBC, for example, is flourishing like never before. I'm sure that donations to left-liberal causes are exploding. And the Democrats, despite their narrow defeats in some elections this year, I think are still in a fairly strong position because they can keep people agitated about how terrible Trump is. Whereas Pence is such a bore – that's what I meant by calm. I meant if you had Pence in charge, it would be conventional politics again. Why would the Democrats want conventional politics? They want Trump to keep their base agitated. Why would they want to take him out?

MERRY: Well, they want to take him out because they want to take out any Republican. They particularly find him odious, largely because he's moving the country

in directions – in some ways, or at least trying to, not very effectively, in my view – in directions and areas that they just can't abide. This speech in Poland in Warsaw where he talked about Western civilization, I mean, I've never seen anything like this where the West actually rose up in many instances – Jim Fallows at *The Atlantic*, Peter Beinart at *The Atlantic* – and essentially decried any mention of "Western civilization" or "our civilization" or "the West." That's an amazing development in American politics, and Trump is the first president in a long time who's stood up and talked about the West.

So they want to get rid of him, and they feel that if they do get rid of him, they will be in a position to pick up the marbles. And my piece suggests that yes, indeed, there will be an opportunity for them to pick up the marbles because of how presidential politics works. This is not a sophisticated form of communication, our system of selecting our leaders. Every four years, we go to the polls, and preparatory to that, the politicians stand up. It's kind of a communication of ducks and drakes, and it goes back and forth. A politician says something. He tries to assess what the response is. If the response is favorable, he goes in that direction. If not, he tries something else.

And ultimately, the American people have developed a comfort level with that system, and if the current president or the current presidential party if the president isn't on the ballot, has faltered, has failed, has let down the American people, they turn to the alternative. And that means that we go back in our two-party system between the Republicans and the Democrats, and when the Democrats fail, as Obama did in his second term – I think he succeeded mildly in his first term and he failed mildly in his second term – they turn to the Republicans. And when the Republicans fail, as they did in George W. Bush's second term, they turn to the Democrats. And that's what we're likely to see if Trump fails. I'm not predicting it, but I'm not seeing a lot of evidence that he's going to be able to put this together.

WOODS: You mentioned the speech in Poland. I found that extremely interesting, because it seems like just yesterday that everybody understood that references to faith and family and maybe even Western civilization are just platitudes that can be found in any politician's speech. So it's so interesting that our culture has moved so far to the left that even when you make almost throwaway references occasionally to these things, this is interpreted as sinister signaling to your alt right buddies. It's bizarre.

MERRY: It's the dog whistle thesis –

WOODS: Just crazy.

MERRY: – that you basically are in favor of some kind of white supremacy.

WOODS: So let me ask you then: I can see the thesis that the Democrats could have a lot of momentum, let's say, if there were no Trump left or if Trump was a big failure, but what's to stop them from nominating a Hillary Clinton clone, in that we would just get more basically corporate left-liberalism for a while? What makes you think – because I think from your column you're kind of suggesting maybe the Bernie Sanders wing in particular would be energized by this. Why is that the case?

MERRY: Well, the party elites would want nothing more than to get some kind of a Hillary Clinton type person in there. That's what they'll try to do, just as they did with Hillary Clinton when they basically tilted the playing field. But what I'm saying in this piece and what I believe is that the country is really in an unsettled situation, and it's unsettled because both the domestic political status quo and the international geopolitical status quo have both begun to crumble. In fact, they're in progressive crumbling right now. And the politicians are always the last people to get this, because they are so invested in the status quo. They can't get it. They can't see it. They refuse to see it. But the American people see it, and that's why they turned to Trump.

I mean, just think of what happened to the Republican Party. You had all those candidates, all those conventional candidates. Jeb Bush, everyone said it was his to lose – which I kind of hate that phrase because it's so ridiculous actually. But nevertheless, he's got the money, he's got the family connections, he's got the name, etc., etc., etc. And if it's not him, it'll be Marco or it'll be somebody – and then this guy Trump comes out of nowhere. He's disgusting in some of his rhetoric and some of his behavioral patterns, it appears, and yet the American people said, Well, he's the only guy who's talking like he understands that we've got to move into a new direction. And so he blew away all those other candidates. That's going to happen to the Democratic Party in 2020, I believe.

WOODS: You say that – and there's no doubt about this, that there are a lot of Republicans out there who think that once this anomalous Trump is out of the way, we'll just go back to the old GOP the way we used to be before Trump. We'll just pretend this unfortunate incident never occurred, and we'll just carry on as before. We'll just have some Marco Rubio-like guy who repeats a lot of slogans and talking points and we'll go from there. Why is that not a plausible approach?

MERRY: Well, it ignores I think or it doesn't take into account sufficiently what happened in 2016. I think that the voters – not the party establishment certainly. The party establishment was aghast. But the voters basically said, We're tired of this. This is old-style politics. One of the reasons we're in this crisis and part of our crisis is a crisis of political deadlock is because both parties are ossified in their traditional thinking, and we have reached a point where neither one can get an upperhand because there's no major consensus for the old politics in either party.

So the result of that – and just consider this. This is really rather significant. The result of that is that we are on a knife-edge of politics in our country. Trump didn't get the popular vote, as everyone knows. He lost it by 2.1 percentage points. And Obama won reelection with only 3.9 percentage points. George W. Bush won reelection in 2004 by 2.4 percentage points. He won his election – or actually, he lost in the popular vote, but he won his election. But the separation was one half of a percentage point between George W. Bush and Al Gore in 2000. This tells you something. It tells you that the country is really on a knife's edge and we can't move forward because we are at this political parity.

And American people understand, the voters of both parties understand that we need new kinds of politics. We need to create new coalitions with new political dialectics, new clusters of issues that bust of this deadlock. And we're not going to get it from

these status quo politicians. So I just think that those days are gone, so that question can come up and it will come up between now and 2020, and that's where the analysis will be and that's where the major political journalists will be and all the polls and the Politicos will be analyzing it in terms of the conventional, old-fashioned status quo politics is dead. And 2016 proved it in the Republican Party; 2020 is going to prove it in the Democratic Party. And at some point, we're going to get a successful president who is going to have a new breed of politics that is going to be able to bust up the old deadlock and move the country forward.

WOODS: You write in the article, "Any Democratic politician who hopes to have a chance at the nomination in 2020 will have to break with the old politics of identity pandering and condescension toward middle Americans. He or she will have to start with the daunting task of recapturing the American working class, still the bedrock of today's politics." Well, I think given Hillary's performance – I mean, Hillary's performance, given how uninspiring and awful of a person and candidate she was, her results were actually not bad in terms of sheer votes. They were not bad given everything against her.

So it seems like their strategy of identity pandering is actually working pretty well, and all they would have – so if they ever actually bothered to try to reach out to the American working class again – which they could do simultaneously, because it seems highly doubtful that very many of the other groups in the Democratic coalition are really going to be peeled off by the Green Party. When push comes to shove, they come back to the Democrats. All they have to do is reach out one small hand to the American working class to get them, and they can't bring themselves to do that. But my point is, even without doing it, they still seem absolutely dominant, so why would they?

MERRY: Dominant in the party or dominant in the country? They're certainly not dominant in the country. I don't see that. I –

WOODS: But the thing is, but you were saying we're on a razor's edge, right? So in other words, they've already got nearly half the country even before they're out of the gate, and then you have a highly unpopular Republican in office. They're doing all this without making an explicit appeal to the working class.

MERRY: Well, I think that that's a static analysis. That sort of says that you can lock in what Hillary got in 2016 and build from there, and what I'm saying is that the country is in a state of political flux and that isn't going to happen. But the other factor is that the identity politics constituencies of the Democratic Party are going to make it very, very difficult for the Democratic candidate using the old status quo politics just to attempt to meld or graft some kind of outreach to the white working class upon the identity politics, because those constituencies of identity politics have become very riled up and they don't want to hear it. There's a lot of anti-white sentiment among those people. I mean, you know, think about this. Jesse Jackson. You think about the Rainbow Coalition. Remember when he ran in 1964 and 1968 talking about the Rainbow Coalition? I covered him a little bit. I was a political reporter for *The Wall Street Journal* –

WOODS: Do you mean 1984 and '88?

MERRY: Oh, did I say '64?

WOODS: Yeah.

MERRY: Yeah, I get confused on decades because I've been around so long. But '84 and '88. So think about this coalition that he's talking about. It didn't really raise many eyebrows, but it's very significant. It included blacks, browns, yellows, reds, and women. So the Rainbow Coalition was basically everybody in America except for one group: white men. And who cared? White men didn't seem like they had to worry about it very much. They didn't see it as a threat. But by 2016, these white men, especially if they're in the working class or a sort of middle-middle class saw themselves as extremely beleaguered. And they were. And they understood what this was all about. So I don't think that the Democratic Party that's going to be based on the old constituencies' identity politics is going to get very far in the primaries in 2020, and if they try it, it's going to be increasingly difficult for them.

But I still believe the presidential politics are essentially based on referendums, which is a product of the performance of the incumbent or the incumbent party. And so if Trump falters and fails, I think the Democratic Party will win whatever it puts together.

WOODS: What does success look like for Trump?

MERRY: Well, I think that he's going to have to show that he can get legislation through that's going to affect people's daily lives. I think he's going to have to get some significant economic growing, which we hadn't had under eight years of Obama. He's going to have to address the needs and concerns of the working class Americans. His policies are going to have to have positive results. You can say, Okay, he's got a different view on trade. Fine. William McKinley had a different view on trade, but economic growth during his time was tremendous. And so it's possible, but it's got to work and he's got to make it work, and that's where the hard part comes.

Obama never really quite made it work. He made it work maybe to some mild extent in his first term. Same with George W. Bush. The problems of the Bush presidency, the chickens carrying those problems hadn't come home to roost by the time he faced the voters for reelection in 2004, but they came home to roost big time by 2008, and so there was no Republican that was going to beat any Democrat in 2008 because that term was such a disaster.

WOODS: What do you think Trump's prospects of success are? You say in your article that he looks to be headed for failure, but there are other cases of presidents who turned things around. Obviously we all know he's saddled by these Russia investigations and he's got people in his own party who aren't super thrilled with him. We see these headlines on Drudge about Pence, who looks like he's trying to get his own ducks in a row. He's got all kinds of problems, and then he has self-inflicted problems. What do you think he would need to do – what would be a sign to you that he's getting serious and things are going to change?

MERRY: Well, I think the first thing is you'd have to see a significant ending of some of the self-inflicted wounds. I think that the tweets that he puts out, many of them are not helpful to him at all. He's going to have to stop doing that. He's going to have to continue to do like what he did during his Warsaw speech, where he talks in very broad and very eloquent terms on very major matters that are facing the country. And he'll take a lot of heat for it, but I don't think that's going to hurt him at all.

But more than that, he's going to have to get a handle on the government, which he doesn't have right now. He's going to have to get a handle on Congress, which he doesn't have right now. And I don't know what that means, but it means that he's going to have to do whatever he has to do in order to get legislation that is going to conceivably move the country forward, generate economic growth.

And then I also think he's going to have to move the country away from some of the trajectories we're on right now that are leading to increasingly turbulent times in foreign policy. And he wants to. He wants to. He wants to establish a closer relationship with Russia. I endorse that. I think he should. But it's very difficult for him because of this investigation, this whole series of investigations. But we've also got this relationship with Iran. He's got people around him who basically see Iran as the font of all evil in the Middle East. I think that that's wrong and that can be very dangerous. He's got this awful Korea situation, which I don't even pretend to have an idea of how to solve that, but it's got to be dealt with very delicately.

So he's got a lot of challenges, and I wouldn't — there aren't many presidents who've sort of faced the kinds of challenges that he has. But all that means is he's going to have to deal with them. The great presidents did. Reagan had tremendous challenges and dealt with them brilliantly. Lincoln had huge challenges and somehow managed to get through it. So that's what great presidents do.

WOODS: Well, I guess time will tell what's going to happen, but it's pretty rough. I mean, the media — the thing is the whole thing with the media, it's true that he really does rally his base when he fights back against them, but I wonder what really matters for Trump, as for any president in this divided America, is the state of opinion of the independents. And I'm not so sure how independent voters feel about such a confrontational president with the media. I mean, to me, that's his best quality, but I'm not the typical independent voter, so to speak.

MERRY: Well, on inauguration day, his approval rating among independents was 42%, and right now it's fluctuating between 31 and 34%. And that's devastating. He can't sustain that. He's going to have to conduct himself in ways and show success sufficiently that he brings those people back towards him, and he's going to have to get more than 42% among independents if he wants to be reelected.

WOODS: Well, I'm going to recommend that people check out your piece, "What If Trump Fails?" I've linked to it at TomWoods.com/949. Before we wrap up for today, tell me about your position with *The American Conservative* magazine and tell me about the magazine a bit, because you are a relatively recent addition to the magazine.

MERRY: Yeah, I became editor of *The American Conservative* in November. I was on the board, and the organization found itself without an editor and they asked me to take over. I was very pleased to do it. I've actually retired from Washington. I'd spent 40 years here working for *The Wall Street Journal* covering politics and Congress and the White House and many other things, and then I was an executive, including CEO, of *Congressional Quarterly* for 22 years. And then my company, CQ, got sold to *The Economist* of London, and I was promptly unhorsed. So I was editor of *The National Interest* magazine for a couple years, and then I sought retirement. I moved out to the Northwest where I grew up. I built a retirement home on Puget Sound but kept a condo in Washington because I love it here. I get my excitement in Washington and my serenity in Washington state. So I'm now kind of commuting and running *The American Conservative*.

I will say this about the magazine: I'm very proud of it, and I've been a great admirer of it for a long time. My predecessor, Dan McCarthy was a brilliant editor. And what we try to do is, number one, we look at foreign policy from a conservative perspective that believes in realism and restraint, not the neocon idea that we need to go into the world in search of monsters to destroy and remake countries in our own image and supplant our cultural sensibilities over those of the indigenous populations, as we did in Iraq for example, and as in fact we're trying to do in Afghanistan. We're against that. We're very much against what we call crony capitalism or the idea that government enters into cozy relationships with business, and so we rail against that.

And beyond that, we try to be a big tent for conservatives, traditional conservatives and libertarians and religious conservatives and others who are interested in the preservation of our Western heritage and our Western ideals. So that's what we stand for. And our motto, which I'm also very proud of – I can't claim any authorship of it, but it's "Ideas over ideology and principles over party." So we stand as an independent conservative voice.

WOODS: Well, the website of course is TheAmericanConservative.com. People can check it out. And of course, your article, as I say, I'm linking to specifically at TomWoods.com/949. Well, thanks, Bob, and continued good luck with the magazine.

MERRY: Tom, thank you so much. It's a pleasure being with you.