

Political Notes

by Jon Fuhrman

Tuesday, February 9. I suppose it's a bit like being in recovery. No elections, no tweets, no outrages, no excessive drama. What's a political junkie to do?

For the next week, at least, we have the impeachment. President Trump never tires of being the first, the biggest, the best – the first to have been impeached twice, the first ever to have been tried after leaving office. Can't wait to see those entries in the Guinness Book of Records.

While ex-President Trump is overwhelmingly likely to avoid conviction, the “over-under” betting seems to be around 60 – will there be more than 60 votes for conviction (which requires votes by 2/3 of the members present). Six GOP Senators already voted to support proceeding with the trial and will likely vote to convict. Is it possible another 4 or 5 will vote to convict? Several of those votes – like Richard Shelby of Alabama and Rob Portman of Ohio – have already announced they are not running for re-election, liberating them from political pressures and allowing them to vote their conscience. My guess is that we might pick up two or three more votes, but five or six would really be pushing the envelope. Nonetheless, 56 – 62 votes to convict is a pretty convincing repudiation of the ex-President's conduct, not that it's likely to have any real impact on Mr. Trump.

But the Senate trial will likely be over pretty much by the time you read this column. Then it will be back to the mundane life of President Biden – jobs, stimulus, and COVID. Of those, COVID is the issue most immediately apparent and palpable to Americans. The vaccinations are proceeding apace, but the pace is still too slow. California, for example, is vaccinating about 1 million people a week. That sounds like a huge number. But with 40 million people (give or take) each needing two shots, it would take 20 months at that pace to inoculate to every citizen – flatly unacceptable. The bottleneck, pretty clearly, is supply. Mayors, Governors and other local leaders around the country are screaming for more vaccine. The distribution and inoculation structure is scalable – it can handle more or less as much supply as we can feed into it. But it's the manufacturing of the vaccine that's holding things up.

If the Biden Administration can dramatically boost supply, so that California, for example, inoculates 4 million people in a week, then voters are likely to judge the Administration a roaring success and support all sorts of other initiatives about which they might normally be skeptical. But if the Administration is not able dramatically to increase supply, and we drag the inoculation period past summer and into fall, there will be tough times ahead, both in Congress and in the 2022 mid-term elections.

The irony is that this vaccination program – the implementation of Project WarpSpeed – was supposed to be President Trump's crowning achievement. Vaccines were in fact successfully developed in record time, against all conventional scientific expectations, and the military was called in to organize and oversee the management and logistics sides. Yet, after the November election, suddenly no one cared, and it appears that planning and implementation efforts pretty much stopped dead in their tracks. So the Biden Administration is left with a legacy of lost opportunity and not much time to rectify the situation. Fairly or not, this will make or break the Administration. Eventually getting it right won't do – if this stretches much past Memorial Day, voters' patience will have worn out and the Administration, in their eyes, will be permanently tarnished.

While the Administration is scrounging up more vaccines and more manufacturing capacity, it's also hard at work scrounging up votes for the stimulus package. While Sen. Joe Manchin and a number of centrist GOP Senators have expressed concern about a blanket additional \$1,400 payment, the Administration seems entirely willing to find some compromise by which the stimulus payments are directed more exclusively to those most needy, possibly by lowering the income cap to qualify for the stimulus. Further, the Administration seems resigned to having the minimum increase dropped from the reconciliation package, especially since it really doesn't meet the rules that limit what can be included in reconciliation packages. However, the Administration is likely to come back to this issue – if not with

a straight hike to \$15 (from the current level of \$7.25), then perhaps a “path to \$15”, similar to what California adopted, with smaller hikes staged over a multi-year period.

My guess is that the stimulus package will be passed by early March, with votes to spare in the Senate. The Administration was quick to signal willingness to work with Sen. Mitt Romney as he proposed a more generous child “allowance” for families – one that could include outright monthly payments, administered by the Social Security Administration, with families from the lower end of the economic spectrum all the way up to upper middle class eligible to receive the payments. The eligibility will likely be lowered considerably – Romney proposed allowing families earning up to \$400,000 to receive some credits. But by sharing credit for this and other provisions supported on both sides of the aisle, the President is likely to round up a good number of GOP votes in the Senate.

On the jobs front, the President doesn’t really need to do anything – other than pass the stimulus bill and get the country vaccinated. If we can return to some semblance of normalcy by this summer, the economy will rescue itself. But if we’re still distancing and quarantining ourselves, there’s probably not much anyone can do to create new jobs – or recreate old ones that were lost during the virus / recession. So here’s to manufacturing more vaccine and getting us all immunized and hoping that, by this fall, we can go back to indoor dining, gyms, theaters, travel and all the other activities that, for so long, we took for granted.