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Date: June 2, 2018 at 2:26:50 AM GMT+4
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Subject: Steve Bannon's clever idea to save the GOP from brutal midterms

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Steve Bannon's clever idea to save the GOP from brutal midterms

By Fareed Zakaria, Friday, June 1, 2018

ROME -- The Republican Party faces dim prospects in the midterm elections. But it doesn't have to be that way, says Stephen K. Bannon, the chief ideologist of the populist wave that brought Donald Trump into the White House. "If the Republicans continue on the path they are on," Bannon told me Thursday, "they will lose 40 seats in the House and President Trump will be impeached." He presented an alternative that strikes me as clever, and it's a strategy that Trump himself seems to instinctively get.

Bannon was in Rome to learn from and provide support to the unusual coalition of populists and nationalists who together won half the vote in Italy's recent elections and are now set to govern. Bannon sees that sort of coalition — mixing left and right, old and young — as his goal for the United States. "Europe is about a year ahead of the United States. . . . You see populist-nationalist movements with reform [here]. . . . You could begin to see the elements of Bernie Sanders coupled with the Trump movement that really becomes a dominant political force in American politics." (This column draws on an on-air interview he did with me for CNN, as well as a subsequent conversation.)

The Republican Party's strategy, for now, appears to be to make the midterm elections a series of local contests focusing on the tax cut and the healthy economy. Bannon views this as fundamentally misguided. "You have to nationalize the election," he said. Bannon understands that voters are moved from the gut more than through a wonky analysis of taxes. "This is going to be an emotional [election] — you're either with [House Minority leader] Nancy Pelosi or you're with Donald Trump. . . . Trump's second presidential race will be on Nov. 6 of this year."

Bannon is most focused on the issue of immigration because it hits both the heart and the head. "Immigration is about not just sovereignty, it's about jobs." He believes that the Trump coalition can attract up to a third of Sanders supporters who see trade and immigration as having created unfair competition for jobs, particularly for working-class blacks and Hispanics. He advocates appealing directly to those voters, saying, "You're not going to be able to take the Hispanic and black community from the STEM system in grammar school to our best engineering schools . . . to the great jobs in Silicon Valley, unless you start to limit these H-1B visas and this unfair competition . . . from East Asia and South Asia."

Now this strikes me as entirely wrong. The reason that not enough Hispanic and black students end up in Silicon Valley has much more to do with a broken education system, particularly for poorer kids, than the modest number of skilled Asian immigrants who get work visas. The most likely result of limiting these visas is that talented immigrants will simply go elsewhere — Canada, Britain, Australia — and start successful companies there. And, in fact, there is lots of evidence this is already happening.

But Bannon is right that this is a brilliant electoral strategy. The idea of greater immigration controls has an undeniable mainstream appeal. The Democratic Party is too far to the left on many of these issues, embracing concepts such as sanctuary cities, which only reinforces its image as a party that is more concerned with race, identity and multiculturalism than the rule of law.

Where Bannon is analytic and historical, Trump is instinctive. But the president appears to see the situation similarly. I wrote last month that Trump would try to fight the midterm elections on immigration and added, "Do not be surprised if Trump also picks a few fights with black athletes." In recent weeks, the president has labeled immigrant gang members "animals" and suggested that football players who silently protest police violence against blacks should leave the country.

Bannon thinks Trump is just getting started in nationalizing the election around immigration. He predicted the next major battle would be over the proposed wall along the U.S.-Mexico border. "The wall is not just totemic. The wall is absolutely central to his program. . . . As we come up on Sept. 30, if [Congress's] appropriations bill does not include spending to fully build his wall . . . I believe he will shut down the government."

Sadly, but not surprisingly, Bannon doesn't think the fighting and the rancor in the United States are going away any time soon. The "battle between nationalists and globalists is at the fundamental roots of what America is, what America will be," he said. "This is very healthy, and . . . I think this is going to go on for a long time. . . . We've got a lot more fighting and a lot more scar tissue to go over."

You can watch my CNN special "The Steve Bannon Interview" on Friday at 9 pm ET and Sunday at 10 am ET.

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