Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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From on top of the world to targets: The day that changed Washington

On Tuesday night, as the dust was settling, the votes were being tallied and the magnitude of the Democratic shockwave across the United States was becoming clear, Robert Garcia, the incoming chair of the House of Representatives Oversight Committee, issued a simple warning to members of the Trump administration.

"Lawyer up," Garcia wrote.

In the span of a day, a momentous one in terms of American political history, President Donald Trump and his allies went from standing atop the world to targets.

Come January, Washington will be a place transformed, one where power will be shared, equally and uneasily, between a lame duck president and the new Democratic congressional majority.

For Trump, Tuesday represented a repudiation of almost everything he has done, said and stands for.

The evening was made worse for Republicans by the fact that the president decided to make himself the main character of the 2026 midterms.

He was the main character all right. He arguably was foremost in the minds of almost every voter in liberal strongholds like California, emergent battleground states like Texas, and traditional conservative enclaves such as South Carolina who pulled a lever for a Democrat.

Now Trump's White House is likely to be besieged by a flurry of demands and subpoenas from congressional Democrats eager to probe what they view as a venal administration that has flouted the rule of law – and perhaps rack up some political points and settle some scores along the way.

Who may find themselves under scrutiny

Squarely in the crosshairs will be figures such as Pete Hegseth, the secretary of "war," and Elon Musk, the former Trump consigliere and hatchet man who set fire to a fortune trying to protect the Republican majorities.

Others who may find themselves under scrutiny include Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the Secretary of Health and Human Services, who has undermined national vaccine policy and gutted institutions such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Attorney General Todd Blanche, who has been accused of being too cozy with the White House, FBI Director Kash Patel, who critics say has politicized the agency and mounted a retaliation campaign against agents who investigated Trump, Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick, who Democrats have charged benefitted financially from Trump's tariff policies and Russ Vought, the White House budget czar and architect of mass firings across the federal government and the evisceration of several agencies.

Wednesday saw one immediate casualty: House Speaker Mike Johnson, who despite his fealty to Trump saw his majority vaporized, said he will not stand for Republican leader in the next Congress.

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House Democrats are particularly interested in questioning Justice Department officials about the role of the White House and its allies in the approval of several massive corporate mergers, including Paramount's purchase of Warner Bros. and the tie-up between broadcasters Nexstar and Tegna.

They may also inquire as to why the department agreed to settle the high-profile antitrust case against entertainment venue giant Live Nation.

It's also likely that Trump's aggressive immigration enforcement measures and the actions of ICE agents on the streets will be another focus, as will the Trump family's investments in cryptocurrency, real estate and defense contracts.

The White House also may have to answer questions about donations to Trump's presidential library and his ballroom project, as well as his acceptance of a $400 million jet from the Qatari government.

An inquiry into whether the Justice Department has released all of the relevant material relating to the late sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein appears inevitable as well.

The designated fall guy for the war

But it's Hegseth and Musk who are likely to be the central figures in a series of Capitol Hill inquisitions.

Hegseth has run roughshod over the Pentagon, firing generals, rolling back protections for service members, and, of course, prosecuting an unpopular war that appears no closer to nearing a resolution.

There remains the possibility that Hegseth could become the designated fall guy for the war.

The same fate befell Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld after a Democratic wave in 2006 during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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The president ruled out the possibility on Wednesday, but as with Trump, nothing is guaranteed. Bush offered similar assurances about Rumsfeld. Hegseth could also decide to jump ship himself.

Vice President JD Vance, seeking to preserve his own political viability ahead of the 2028 presidential election, squarely blamed the war as the root cause of the Republican wipeout in a lengthy social media post on Wednesday.

Musk, the Tesla and SpaceX CEO, presided over the newly formed Department of Government Efficiency, which drove hundreds of thousands of departures from the federal workforce and attempted to gain access to troves of private data, sometimes in violation of federal law.

He may also be called to answer for the decision by Starlink last month to throttle access to the service in Ukraine.

Musk has much on the line. His companies hold tens of billions in government contracts largely through the Pentagon and NASA.

He spent at least $474 million supporting Republican candidates this election cycle, according to an analysis by The New York Times.

What went wrong so quickly

Trump and his aides have already sought to skirt blame for Tuesday's setback. They've attributed losses to lazy candidates who failed to connect with voters coupled with the fact that Trump himself wasn't running for office.

"If I were on the ballot, we would have won," Trump told reporters on Wednesday while standing on the construction site of the new White House ballroom.

But that likely won't wash with the president's fellow Republicans, many of whom may still be walking around in a daze wondering what went wrong so quickly after securing hegemony in Washington just two years ago.

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Trump spent the month of October crisscrossing the country, urging his supporters to come out and vote on his behalf.

His nonstop road show, in which he frequently digressed into irrelevant topics and drew attention away from the candidates themselves, seemingly made things worse. His trips to states such as Iowa, Kansas, Ohio, and Texas did little to boost Senate candidates there, all of whom lost on Tuesday.

For his part, Trump, to the surprise of some, almost immediately pledged to try and work with Democrats rather than attempt to litigate the results of the election.

Whether there will be any appetite for that on the Democratic side remains to be seen.

During Trump's first term, he was impeached twice by the then Democratic-controlled House, which also pushed him to turn over his private financial records.

There seems to be little interest in impeaching him again, but that could always change.

A détente with Democrats

Relationships between a lame-duck president and a Congress controlled by the opposing party have historically been thorny.

The most notable example was the attempt by House Republicans in 1998 to impeach and remove President Bill Clinton for lying under oath about his affair with a White House intern. Clinton was also dogged by probes over campaign fundraising.

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Republican George W. Bush's final years were marred by investigations concerning the politically motivated firings of several federal prosecutors and the outing of CIA agent Valerie Plame.

In turn, House Republicans grilled Obama administration officials over the 2012 attack on the U.S. diplomatic compound in Benghazi, Libya.

The Republican-controlled Senate later denied Obama a confirmation vote on his pick for the Supreme Court, Merrick Garland.

If Trump can't reach a détente with Democrats, he likely will resort to trying to do what he can with unilateral executive actions, as he did during his first term when he sought to divert funds for the construction of a wall along the U.S. southern border.

The president told reporters on Wednesday that he'll "get along probably with the Democrats unless they want to be destructive," sounding like a man who viewed his party's defenestration as just another day at the Oval Office.

Trump's blasé attitude aside, there's no mistaking that, as Nina Simone sang, "It's a new dawn, it's a new day" in the nation's capital.

And given the way things went last night for Republicans, if Nina Simone had been on the ballot as a Democrat, she likely would have

won too.