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Behind the scenes at election central

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ing out to their political foes. Some, perhaps too wishfully, talked about ways they could forge relationships and seek out strong ideas, even if they came from the other party. But almost all of those who made such comments were from competitive districts and needed some crossover appeal to win.

With redistricting having produced fewer competitive seats, there’s less incentive to work together or to admit that in compromise and debate, one party rarely gets everything it wants. Rep. Tom Rice, from South Carolina’s new 7th District, was one who did sound pragmatic and realistic when asked about negotiating in Congress, pointing out that as a tax attorney, he never got everything he wanted in a deal. Rice won a crowded primary in which many conservative groups stayed on the sidelines, but if he puts his outlook into practice, he and other like-minded members know they’ll come under scrutiny from their supposed allies.

Perhaps we could all take to heart the words that David Shi, former president of Furman, delivered at the 2008 Commencement, when the university’s invitation to President Bush to speak created a great deal of rancor on and off campus. Shi sounded this conciliatory note:

“Regardless of our diplomas and degrees, none of us has all the answers, no matter how loudly we speak or how certain we seem or how brashly we behave. The humility embedded in our imperfection should prompt us, at least occasionally, to reassess our dogmas, harness our arrogance, and slow our keystroke rush to judgment.

“Liberally educated people are those who have learned to practice tolerance and self-criticism and embody civility and humility. This doesn’t mean that we should not be confident or forthright in our convictions. It does mean that we should not contemptuously dismiss the convictions of others.”

Good luck, for now, getting those words to ring true anywhere near Washington. [¶]
I ALMOST DIDN’T MAKE IT, thanks to Hurricane Sandy.

That was how things began for me on Election Weekend — the most important days of the year, a time that we, as political analysts and junkies, had been anticipating since 2010. But despite the superstorm ravaging the East Coast and leaving much of New York City and the surrounding metro areas without power, I was able to catch one of the first Amtrak trains out of Washington, D.C., to the Big Apple to work as an Election Night consultant with CBS News.

It was my first prolonged foray into the behind-the-scenes workings of television news. I was joining a cadre of other political analysts, strategists from both sides of the aisle, and correspondents pulled from diverse beats to cover this once-every-four-years blowout.

I’d spent past election nights hammering away in print newsrooms, tracking Congressional races and feverishly writing and tweeting for the Web. To my readers, details and minutiae were important, as we were the strange junkies obsessing over every race in the country.

But now, my job was to assist in making sense of the 2012 battle for control of the House and Senate — a battle that would be somewhat overshadowed by the race for president.

It was a bit strange to run through rehearsals before Election Night, pretending in real time that each possible outcome — either President Barack Obama or President Mitt Romney — was happening. From our vantage point at the House and Senate desk, a few of our races would garner attention, but it was clear that determining who would reach 270 electoral votes first was the biggest story of the night.

When Election Night finally arrived, it almost seemed anticlimactic. As political analysts and journalists, we had worked for two years toward this day, just like every politician and staffer whose fates would be held in limbo until they knew the results.

At CBS, we started receiving embargoed exit poll data at 5 p.m. — an exclusive first glance at what the voters were thinking and saying. While the outcome looked close, the polls appeared to show that the country was leaning toward President Obama. Television likes to cover the fight for the House and the Senate, but it loves the presidential race.

Our House and Senate group was sequestered in the “60 Minutes” studio, far down the hall from the actual, historic CBS newsroom. But I had to sneak a peek — and wound up getting goose bumps. I had grown up watching the “CBS Evening News” with my family, and I remembered Dan Rather sitting in that very chair. Watching him was how I first developed my love of news. Now I was standing in the same halls Walter Cronkite and Edward R. Murrow had walked. And the news was about to begin.

Once the voting closed there was a flurry of excitement, but I was huddled with my laptop in a corner behind a green screen onto which, through the magic of television, we could project all the fancy graphics supporting the reports from our correspondents.

There weren’t many surprises early on with the Senate, and it quickly became a good night for Democrats. By winning seats in Massachusetts, Connecticut and Virginia, they were making it hard for Republicans to pick up the majority in the Senate chamber that they so coveted.

The presidential race, of course, dominated coverage. The exit polls and subsequent results weren’t moving in Romney’s direction, and some of the biggest surprises to me were that Virginia and Florida, which I expected to go the GOP’s way, weren’t.

Just after 11:30 p.m., CBS and most other networks had declared Obama the winner after putting Ohio in the incumbent’s column. It all happened in a flash, while our group was still focused on tracking how many seats each party would win or lose in the House or Senate. But not much from our desk mattered in the next hour, with concession and victory speeches to come.

The long, strange trip ended for me around 4 a.m., as I kept zeroing in on undecided House races, some of which would remain in recount purgatory for weeks to come. After about two hours of sleep and a frantic rush to catch the train back to D.C., we were ready to begin making sense of what it all meant.

And then, it was on to 2014. . . .

— JESSICA TAYLOR