The Center Holds’ examines how Obama prevailed in 2012

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DR. GLENN C. ALTSCHULER
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On Election Night 2012, Barack Obama was apparently happier than he had been four years earlier. He believed that the stakes were higher with Mitt Romney as his opponent than with John McCain. And the outcome meant more to him, he told colleagues, because the public had made an informed judgment of him and his accomplishments as president.

At the victory celebration at McCormick Place, a convention center in Chicago, not far from his home, Obama went to the podium, accompanied by Stevie Wonder’s “Signed, Sealed, Delivered, I’m Yours,” and declared “We are an American family, and we rise and fall together as one nation.”

Pivotal moment
The presidential contest was a pivotal moment in American history. It preserved the social safety net of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal and Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society – and Obama’s signature legislative achievement, the Affordable Care Act.

As Jonathan Alter claims, it stopped the momentum of Tea Party reactionaries, who had helped Republicans gain 63 seats in the United States House of Representatives, the largest number in more than 60 years, in 2010.

A columnist for Bloomberg View, an analyst for NBC News and MSNBC and the author of “The Promise: President Obama, Year One” and “The Defining Moment: FDR’s Hundred Days and the Triumph of Hope,” Alter draws on interviews with many of the key players in both parties to provide a sharp, smart, and stirring account of Obama’s last campaign in “The Center Holds.”

Awfully close call
Although he documents the president’s communications failures, his lack of skill as a negotiator, and his disastrous mistake in assuming that the economy would bounce back rather quickly, Alter does not hide his preference for Obama, who, he insists, was “mild mannered and moderate by any historical standard.”

Romney, he suggests, was an intelligent man “running for president in a political party that was no longer serious” – and remained wedded to remedies for budget deficits, undocumented immigrants, gay marriage and foreign policy that “were badly out of step with American voters.”

As Alter reminds us, the political center in the United States did, indeed, hold. But it was an awfully close call. Obama benefitted from an extraordinarily adept digital campaign and an extraordinarily inept adversary, who succumbed to xenophobes and “knifed himself” during the primaries.

Bolstered by minorities
Thanks in no small measure to blatant attempts at voter suppression by the Republicans, Alter indicates, the turnout among African-Americans and Latinos was very high.

Black votes enabled Obama to carry the swing states of Ohio and Virginia; Latinos made the difference in Nevada, Colorado and Florida.

And yet, Alter agrees that had unemployment spiked to 8.6 percent in the fall and had job growth fallen below zero, “both possible within the margin of error,” the president would “most likely” have lost the election.

Romney’s confidence (he didn’t prepare a concession speech) was clearly misplaced, but he had pulled even (or close to even) after the first debate and was only a slight underdog a week before Election Day.

No second-term prediction
Most important, Obama’s enemies do not accept the proposition that “we rise and fall together as one nation.”
Perhaps because the Tea Party retains its animus toward the president, its stranglehold on the Republican Party, and its capacity to paralyze public policy, Alter declines to predict how Obama's agenda will fare in his second term.

After all, after the Newtown killings, Obama fought for gun control and lost. He made no progress on an alternative to budget sequestration. And fights over immigration, “entitlements,” the debt ceiling “and a hundred other issues” lay down the road, Alter concludes. The center had held in November 2012. For a moment.

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