

# midterms



a short story by  
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*Midterms* is a work of fiction..Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously..Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

*Author's Note:*

*Midterms* was my entry in National Public Radio's Round Nine of their occasional feature, "Three Minute Fiction," in which they invite listeners to submit an original, unpublished story of 600 or fewer words which is "not inappropriate" and fulfills a condition set by that Round's author-judge. In this case, historical thriller author [Brad Meltzer](#) required each story to "reference a U.S.

President, real or fictional." Inasmuch as the day before the September 23 submission deadline was the 150th anniversary of one of our history's most momentous—and politically shrewd—decisions, I felt dutybound to indulge that reality. My conceit: What if that "game-changer" had presented itself in an electoral environment like today's?

# MIDTERMS



## E. G. Fabricant

Looking outward and south, he saw the trees telegraphing an appreciable breeze from downriver. That, and the imminent equinox, meant that the fetid grip of Washington's summer was weak.

He turned, arms folded, and fixed his weary eyes on his seated visitor. "So, Mr. Sterling: Why should I not go forward, again? Your best case."

Sterling made a show of uncrossing his legs, repositioning his portfolio and papers, and tugging at his expensive cuffs. "Mr. President, you're facing midterm elections in six weeks, and your House majority is at risk. Your critics are in full cry, and their list grows by the hour. Topmost, failing to keep your pledge to end the war quickly; look—"He retrieved a newspaper on the desk between them and pointed at circled text: "The voters are depressed by the interminable nature of this war, as so far conducted, and by the rapid exhaustion of the national resources without progress.' Add to that suspension of civil liberties to 'protect' us from insurgents; unwillingness to contain border migration; and the economy: higher taxes, the

risk of inflation. They're already all over this rumored policy of yours, saying it would drive up unemployment. Don't neglect the usual open whispers of corruption, cronyism, and patronage. Even if your party sustains its majority, you might lose the pro-war conservatives across the aisle that you need to govern."

"And..." Sterling laid out a sheaf of gaudy circulars and cleared his throat. "With all due respect, Mr. President, you've never been the comeliest of figures. I doubt there's a creature on God's Earth you haven't been compared to unfavorably, by Election Day."

Sterling reddened, and paused. His client smiled and cleared the way with a minor gesture. "Please continue." "The casual and uninformed are swayed by these things, especially at the last. All our interviews with likeliest voters show your negatives at perilous levels, and the tycoons backing your enemies are capitalizing without stint. You're being outspent. Badly."

The President shifted forward. "What about foreign capitals that remain or seek to be economic partners with our declared enemies? Have you tested that effect?"

"Indeed. Your expression of resolve might compel them to maintain or increase their distance, so it's a calculated risk. In the balance is, how strong can you be when they know you're saddled with a hostile Congress?"

"Finally, Mr. President, bear in mind you're up for re-election in 26 months. As we speak, your natural rivals are making the rounds of the well-positioned, especially the opinion-makers and plutocrats. Until this war is resolved, you'll be making enemies and potential rivals by the bale. You're less than

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halfway through your first term, and you've already managed to make a former military man with political experience in the West a darling of the liberal wing of your own party." Sterling pointed at a portrait above the fireplace. "Lest you forget; no incumbent has been re-elected since he was."

"Is that all?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. President."

The Nation's chief executive pondered, stroking his chin. He stepped to Sterling and accepted his hand as he rose. "Please show yourself out, Mr. Sterling, with my compliments." He waited until he was again alone, crossed to the other door, and ducked through. "Hay—get a message to Chase: 'Suspend work on preliminary proclamation, urgently.'"

His assistant secretary balked. "Sir?"

"You heard me—the Emancipation Proclamation. Ask Nicolay to notify the Cabinet and command; we'll meet tomorrow."





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