

## Final round for the White House

BY BUNN NAGARA



*U.S. presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump (R) speak at campaign rallies in Westbury, New York.*

**Scandals are not new in US presidential elections, but selective labels used on candidates are even more revealing about policies to come.**

THE extended melee playing live to a global audience, being the match also known as the US presidential election, is in its final round.

With both contenders compromised as caricatures, a narrow points decision is more likely than a knockout. But why does this sordid slugfest seem so familiar?

In the red corner, the tag team of Trump-Pence loudly exerts its signature ballyhoo. The Clinton-Kaine team in the blue corner is as dramatic as it is body-slammed by troubling doubts and FBI investigations.

All this collective buffoonery means more entertainment than news. So the market-savvy media nudges news reporting aside for lurid entertainment: Trump's large hands, Trump's large groping hands, Hillary's unsecured emails, and more of her unsecured emails rather than their troubling content.

For all the news reports are worth, both contenders are flawed candidates who do nothing for the respectability of a presidential election.

Trump's and Hillary's strengths are as a wealthy businessman and a Senator and Secretary of State, respectively. Yet, these track records also show their weaknesses.

Trump is accused of womanising, profiting from declaring bankruptcy and not paying his share of taxes. Hillary stands accused of sticking with a mistaken Iraq invasion, mishandling the deadly siege in Benghazi, recklessness in using unsecured emails, questionable transactions involving the Clinton Foundation and helping sponsor the IS terrorist group.

On a personal level, Trump has bragged about treating women disrespectfully. Hillary has also demeaned women victims of her husband's philandering by denouncing their allegations as lies.

There can be no end to the allegations if sensationalist reporting wants to go there and stay. It would be better to see how the larger electoral environment in the US has evolved over the years until this point.

A respectable sense of propriety has always been a mainstay of US election campaigns. As a rule, candidates shy away from unwelcome controversy.

But given the visibility and public appeal of presidential campaigns, they also serve as magnets for scandal. However, not all controversies kill political campaigns or presidencies.

Trump has described Hillary's email controversy as the biggest political scandal since Watergate, which unhinged Nixon's presidency in the 1970s. Is it so?

The first presidential sex scandal involved Thomas Jefferson, accused of fathering an illegitimate child with his slave Sally Hemmings. He denied the affair and remained as president.

Decades later, the presidency of Ulysses S. Grant was riven with corruption scandals. Despite Grant's calls to punish the offenders, his credibility was damaged when he acted to protect his staff implicated in the scandals.

In 1884, presidential candidate Grover Cleveland was accused of fathering an illegitimate child. Yet he managed to win the election and even a re-election.

Warren Harding's presidency was tainted with corruption scandals in the 1920s. Members of his Cabinet were found to have acted improperly with naval oil reserve lands for money.

In the 1980s, the Iran-Contra arms scandal rocked the Reagan presidency. Secret arms sales to Iran were used to fund insurgents in Nicaragua to topple the revolutionary government there, resulting in US Congressional hearings but little else.

Senator Gary Hart was the leading prospect as Democratic Party candidate for the presidential election in 1988. Then news broke about his affair with Donna Rice aboard the yacht named *Monkey Business*, and all his presidential ambitions ended abruptly.

In 1998, President Bill Clinton became the second sitting president, following Andrew Johnson, to be impeached. The sex scandal involving White House intern Monica Lewinsky remains the most lurid political scandal in modern times, amid other allegations against Clinton from other women.

But while scandals may be titillating, they neither indicate nor explain policy. Ideology is usually more indicative of what is in store.

The 2016 presidential election is remarkable in a way that few have noticed. Far from the mud-slinging and innuendos, a sense of ideology has figured much more than in previous elections.

Bernie Sanders burst onto the scene as a serious candidate despite the label of "socialist". In an ultra-capitalist United States, the term carries negative connotations that had undermined if not destroyed previous contenders.

In the 1970s, California Governor Jerry Brown was a liberal Democrat seen by many as something of a socialist. That was enough to condemn any presidential ambitions he might have had then.

Instead of any socialist rhetoric, Brown merely did the conscionable and frugally managed state expenditure in the public interest. His critics roundly condemned him as a "radic" (radical).

But here in 2016 there was a strong contender in Sanders, standing openly and unabashedly as a “socialist”, at times seriously threatening Hillary’s prospects as party nominee. The leftist stigma no longer seemed an obstacle.

In the US context, anyone who even hints at state aid in terms of welfare payments or industrial policy would be labelled “socialist”.

Thus a social democratic Europe covering even conservative or other right-of-centre positions would appear to be socialist in the US.

Then in 2008, a young community activist from Chicago with little top-tier political experience besides the Senate had likewise burst onto the national scene: Barack Obama.

Some right-wing circles viewed his political aspirations with doubt at best, or more than a bit of suspicion. Yet in relatively little time he became the party nominee for the general election and won the presidency.

This time, Republican candidate Donald Trump has been labelled an “isolationist”. This term also carries a negative connotation in the sense of wanting to cut the country off from working with the rest of the world.

Countries like North Korea are deemed to be isolationist. But is that a correct term to describe Trump’s policies for the US?

Trump has indicated wariness in starting hot or cold wars, and expressed opposition to Nafta and the TPP because they violate US trade interests.

But he would not hesitate to defend the US in a defensive war, or in joining trade deals that protect and promote US interests.

However, his differences with Hillary over meddling abroad have made Democratic Party stalwarts condemn him as isolationist. In contrast to Trump, a hawkish Hillary is more ready to confront Russia and China.

The Libertarian Party candidate Gary Johnson has also labelled Trump isolationist, while claiming himself to be different in being “non-interventionist.” It seemed almost convincing.

As fighting raged in Syria, the plight of refugees in Aleppo became prominent. As questions were raised about US involvement there, Johnson admitted on MSNBC that he did not know what Aleppo was.

The term “neo-conservative” or “neo-cons”, which became prominent with George W. Bush, has not gone away. It now applies to Hillary and her cohorts.

Neo-cons are ideological Zionist hawks who seek to intervene in the affairs of other countries. They hope to “democratise” and “liberalise” others if possible, and to challenge or attack them if necessary.

Contrary to widespread expectations, neo-cons originated with the Democrats and not the Republicans. Inspired by right-wing Democratic Senator Henry Jackson, they abandoned Jimmy Carter and leaned towards Ronald Reagan in the 1980s.

Now that the Democrats are set for a right-wing leadership again with Hillary Clinton, the circle is complete. It coincides with the fact that the Democrats have throughout US history started more wars than the Republicans.

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