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Al Gore moves a step closer to the White House

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US VICE President Al Gore became infamous in Malaysia for championing the Reformasi movement as well as former Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. Gore's name was also on everyone's lips in his own country for a week because he insulted the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad; whom Gore's aides called "a tin pot dictator".

Gore's father, a former senior senator from Tennessee, had said that Al (Albert) was born, raised and schooled to be the president of the US. Gore's cousin, author Gore Vidal, said that according to a teacher at St. Alban's school (in Washington DC) where they were pupils, Gore's ambition was so obvious at an early age that his canny schoolmates, most of them children of Congress or of high officialdom, called him "Ozymandias, King of Kings: look on my works, ye Mighty and despair."

Gore failed to get the Democratic Party nomination for the 1988 presidential race. However, he was selected by Bill Clinton as his running mate in the 1992 and 1996 elections. Clinton has declared that he wanted Gore to succeed him in the White House as a reward for his undivided loyalty to him (Clinton).

Following the Republicans' unsuccessful impeachment trial against Clinton, the Democrats are now confident that they can retake Congress from the Republicans and retain the White House.

There is talk that the impeachment trial ought to be left in the past and the general feeling is that the country should move on and both sides seek a new bipartisanship. However, one can expect trench warfare between the Democrats and Republicans during the next 21 months before the Presidential elections in November 2000.

One thing I can tell you as at the time of writing, is that there is no impeachment fatigue. On the contrary, each side of the political divide has started a campaign to demonise the other. The failed Republican impeachment attempt has indeed given a real boost to Al Gore. The fact that the Republican House Managers could not even get a majority of Senators, in a Senate where the Republicans are the majority, to back the perjury and obstruction of justice charges against Clinton, does not say very much about Republican solidarity or their electoral prospects. The Democrats iron-clad unity throughout the trials, both in the House as well as in the Senate (rightly or wrongly), was exemplary, especially in American politics where party discipline is lax - unlike the situation in a parliamentary system.

The House Democratic Minority leader Richard Gephardt, until very recently the perceived main opponent who could derail Gore's train at the Democratic Party Convention in the summer of 2000, after reassessing (wisely) his chances, has opted out of contention.

More important (this is the reason I strongly believe), is the fact that there now exists a splendid opportunity for the Democratic Party to dislodge the Republicans from the House of Representatives where the Grand Old Party (G.O.P.) holds a slim majority.

Gephardt, as I have said, has shrewdly withdrawn very early on from the Presidential race and has sensibly decided to remain as House Democratic leader, judiciously opting to focus his talents and energies on becoming a Speaker should the Democrats win control of the House of Representatives. The decision by Gephardt, embraced by Gore, blessed by the White House

and strongly supported by the Democratic Party, is a noble one. It forges a secure alliance between Gore and Gephardt that will pose a lethal threat to the Republicans.

The father's wish for his son may become a fact in 2000. But Clinton's warm embrace may also become a poison dart in 21 months' time. Clinton, if he wants Gore to win - which I have little doubt - has now got 21 months to salvage his own damaged reputation.

He may have escaped a conviction but as the respected veteran Senator Robert Byrd of Virginia said - speaking for many Democrats and many decent Americans everywhere - when he stated that he considered Clinton guilty on both counts and that the offences themselves did not constitute "high crimes and misdemeanours" and as a result feels that he could not vote to evict, without broad American public support, an elected president who is a hugely popular figure.

The Clinton-Monica Lewinsky scandal will echo heavily in the campaign for 2000 despite talk of moving past the partisanship and the desire to rebuild trust in the tarnished political system. Already, former Vice-President Dan Quayle - the man who became infamous because he could not spell potato (he insisted that it was spelt potatoe) - campaigning for the Republican presidential nomination in New Hampshire, had said in his opening shot that the fight for "American values" has just begun.

Contrary to what you may have read, the American public is not yet weary of scandals. Of course, they are bored with Lewinsky and are looking for fresh exposes. What is politics without scandals? The impeachment battle may have ended in the Senate but it has already shifted to the 2000 campaign.

The American voters have "Mr Potato" to thank for that. Clinton is already facing a new legal threat, only days after winning an acquittal at his impeachment trial. A federal judge, Susan Webber Wright, who presided over Paula Jones's lawsuit against Clinton, indicated that she may hold him in contempt of court for providing misleading testimony about his affair with Monica Lewinsky in a sworn deposition last year, in which he denied a sexual relationship with Monica Lewinsky.

Gore desperately wants to occupy the Oval Office and I believe, he will not leave any stone unturned in the run towards the 2000 election. He will do whatever it takes. The only man who is perceived as being able to stop Gore's train is George W. Bush, the popular governor of Texas and the eldest son of former President George Bush, who was unseated by Bill Clinton in 1996.

Another Republican presidential aspirant is Governor Pataki of New York State, who last week in Miami tore into Gore in a preview of 2000, by calling him a liberal who would make Uncle Sam (Big Government) even bigger if he got the chance.

Pataki harshly said that Clinton's proposals on education, Social Security and the budget surplus, as contained in his State of the Union address, were unacceptable and demonised the Democratic philosophy which has always been, "more power to Washington, higher taxes, more belief in Government and less belief in the individual". He also added, "that judging by the record, Gore would be even more liberal, more focused on Washington and have more of a belief in Washington and its inherent powers."

The Republican bashing of Gore, the front runner (I am willing to bet with anyone that he will be the Democratic nominee), barring any unforeseen scandals emerging by 2000, will grow by the day from now on, as Republicans - after their impeachment debacle - try as hard as they can to refocus the G.O.P's attention on issues involving the bread and butter politics instead of being a one issue - impeachment-obsessed - party which