

19/12/2000

The new American dynasty

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ARTHUR M. Schlesinger Jr, the famed American historian, said in *The Imperial Presidency* (1973), that "Every president reconstructs the presidency to meet his own psychological needs."

Ted Sorensen, J.F. Kennedy's wordsmith said, "In the White House the future rapidly becomes the past; and the delay is itself is a decision."

George W. Bush was a great success as governor of Texas as is his younger brother Jeb in Florida. Their father was, like Jimmy Carter, a one-term pres affairs.

But I have the feeling he will make his mark in foreign affairs despite the fact he has never been outside the US in all his life, except to Mexico. Precisely, it is because of that.

Texas has produced three of the 43 presidents in 211 years (or four, if you count Eisenhower who was born in Texas but raised in Kansas. The Bushes were born elsewhere but settled in Texas.) and I have lost count of how many chief ministers we have had in Sabah in 37 years!

Thirty-seven years ago, a prototype Texan was President. He was Lyndon Baines Johnson, the only American President who ever visited Malaysia. I was an intern in his office when he was Vice-President and accompanied Tun Razak to the White House when he became President at the height of Indonesia's Konfrantasi against us.

Johnson, whatever commentators and biographers have written about him, was a good friend of this country. Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, on Tun Razak's suggestion, agreed to rename the Felda scheme in Labu, Negri Sembilan, Kampung LBJ, to commemorate the President's visit there.

Then in 1988, another Texan (George W. Bush Sr who was defeated by Bill Clinton in 1992) and now his son is in the Oval Office.

On polling day I wrote in this column that George W Bush would win what appeared to be a neck-and-neck race, the closest Presidential election since 1960. It was as Dan Rather, the famous broadcaster, said, "this race is as tight as a too-small bathing suit on a too-hot car ride back from the beach."

The man who actually robbed Gore of his chance was Ralph Nader, the Green Party candidate, who commented that "you can't spoil a system that's spoilt to the core."

The George Bushes now join the John Adamses as the only father-son occupants of the Oval office.

Yet, for its faults, democracy in the US is immensely strong, and it has survived the five tortuous and demeaning weeks that have made the 2000 Presidential Election an object of bewilderment and derision across the globe.

I "voted", as indeed did Malaysia, for Bush simply because I believe he will start his tenure in the White House on January 20 2001 without an inherent prejudice against Malaysia. Malaysia-US bilateral ties are expected to be enhanced if, as Dr Mahathir Mohamad said, the new President would scrupulously observe the tradition of not interfering in the domestic affairs of another sovereign and independent nation.

For sure, Kuala Lumpur will not erupt into party mode just yet. But we are guardedly optimistic.

President Bush can advance US interests and strategic alliances, even promote democracy, expand free trade generally and create wealth with a

balanced policy based on political realism.

I am not deluding myself that Bush does not have his own foreign policy priorities. But for as long as his administration and he respect our sovereignty, he deserves our co-operation and support. We are not, objectively speaking, poles apart and there are not too many political positions that each finds hard to stomach. Malaysia being a small nation, is rather insignificant in overall US foreign policy though not unimportant for US strategic and commercial interests.

After all, Malaysia is the US' 11th biggest trading partner. I expect, at the very least, Washington's tone will be more diplomatic as it strives to promote strong defence, democracy against failed leaders with failed policies and state organised terrorism.

As far as I am concerned, Bush won Florida all along. For sure, ultimately the Presidency was decided by a 5-4 US Supreme Court decision, apparently reflecting the justices' own political allegiances. Now, Malaysians know there are politicians in black robes!

Two of the four Supreme Court justices who dissented, David Souter and John Paul Stevens, were appointees of Republican Presidents, George Bush Senior and Gerald Ford respectively, whilst Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Stephen Breyer were appointees of President Clinton. Of the five who gave the Presidency to George W. Bush, three were appointed by Reagan and one each by Nixon and Bush Senior.

I was interviewed by an American Radio station and I stated that the American election was flawed and a farce that had taken the shine out of American democracy. It did not convey the best image of American democracy to the developing world. President Bush should bring new realism in international relations by accepting that America cannot be the world's moral guardian, especially when it is quite clearly arbitrary about whom it chooses to take the moral high ground.

The Bush Administration, with General Colin Powell as his chief foreign policy advisor, will more or less continue the previous administration's policy towards Malaysia, although it is too early to say for certain. Perhaps Bush will put less pressure on human rights than Clinton and concentrate for a while on improving American democracy that has suffered in the past five weeks. Bush's victory is a big boost for big business, the defence industry and special interest groups (oil and tobacco). It is a disaster for environmental politics and the United Nations.

One must not forget that it was Bush Senior who proclaimed the "New World Order" to underscore Washington's world dominance, and it is not impossible for Bush Junior to be more belligerent in projecting US power, ignoring the legitimate interests and rights of other sovereign states and punishing those who do not pretend to accept Washington's policies.

Even a superpower needs friends and must be part of the global community. I do not believe Bush and Powell will unnecessarily push and bully small nations. However, only time can tell. We must make American public opinion our ally. Only American public opinion can contain Bush.

Before Bush starts his foreign adventures, as an escape valve and a means of avoiding any intractable problems at home, he must first deal with the bitter divide in the US political system and the badly bruised judiciary. His slim majority and court-mandated victory should not and must not be translated as a mandate for radicalism at home or overseas. He has to live with a neatly divided Senate and only with a slim majority in the House of Representatives. Nevertheless, a victory is a victory, regardless the margin. Bush should not feel disadvantaged by public doubt over his victory and legitimacy.

For 36 days Americans, and those of us with access to CNN, were able to watch every laborious detail of Al Gore's desperate and badly advised

attempt to sue his way to the Oval office. I have never seen more exhaustive and comical instantaneous responses and counter-responses from various spokespersons on both sides. The process must have been extremely traumatic for both. In the end, even if it was a bit late, Gore did the right thing, indeed the only honourable action left for him to take: concede that he had lost.

I've been lucky enough to have been in the US for three presidential elections, in 1960, 1984 and 1996. The 2000 election more than any previously reflected the effect that television has and will continue to have on politicians and future polls. The electronic media has also introduced a new dimension into politics (not excluding Malaysian politics, and many Malay politicians in particular don't seem to know just quite what to make of this).

Well, even old dogs must learn new tricks if they want to stay in the kennel. Ministers should realise that some of the efforts to use TV cameras to their advantage often appear more funny than awe-inspiring.

Bush, in many ways, came out better on TV than Al Gore. Bush is more believable and natural than Gore, who always looks awkward, artificial, dull and contrived. The best thing about the 2000 presidential election is it shows how politicised the American judiciary is, in addition to the wicked old Cook County political traditions of corrupt practices, horse trading and secrecy.

The high-minded American cleric or ulamak has been exposed. Having pontificated for years on the superiority of American liberal democracy, he has been unmasked as a practitioner of practical politics and no better than a pragmatic Malaysian politician.

Most presidents come to Washington bright as freshly minted dimes and leave much diminished, and Clinton is a good example.

John Updike in *Rabbit at Rest* (1990) said that George Bush (Sr) talked to Americans like they were a bunch of morons and they ate it up. "Can you imagine, the Pledge of Allegiance, 'read my lips' - can you imagine crap like that in this day and age?"

President Bush Jr will perhaps be guided by what Johnson said, "that the hardest task is not to do what is right, but to know what is right."

Richard Nixon was judged as both brilliant and a villain but he has gone down in history as one of America's most significant chief executives. As George Bush is neither a villain nor smart, he has, I think, a great four years ahead of him.

The Us should not squander its unmatched power and influence to promote peace; enhance democracy, prosperity, justice and equality.

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