

20201102 LAL thoughts on tomorrow's election

Why I am writing this

As we are about to witness a unique electoral experience in the United States (not so united anymore), I started jotting down some personal thoughts which started as a private exercise to try to weigh what is happening now in a broader historical context to try to make some sense in a world that is making little sense these days. So, as this note developed this morning, I thought that others may find this entertaining as a comment sent out before the avalanche of opinion, commentary and endless observation which will start tomorrow evening. No matter which way the election goes, America will not be the same, and not for the better, as a new civil discord, starting many years past as I will explore, may well become permanently entrenched into the political fabric for likely at least the next generation, if not longer.

So, I decided to send this to a few close friends and associates who I know are as engaged in contemporary political developments as I. We have lived the same history and have seen a very different type of world displace the world into which we were born. The expectations and hopes that we took for granted are being extinguished.

This is not a discussion about who is better for America or the world – Trump or Biden – as the thesis I advance is that neither is, and what will happen tomorrow is far from what was needed at this consequential time.

What is needed could not happen

The United States has experienced a remarkable resilience throughout its history, able to heal massive wounds, imperfectly at times, but healing nonetheless, even after the carnage of a civil war that redefined the nation. But that ghastly but necessary experience a century and a half ago allowed for a post-slavery union to emerge and correct a glaring defect not fixable at the formation of the country.

The current divisions were created more than a generation before 2016 but visibly exacerbated by both sides as political discourse continued a decline with roots tracing back to at least 1964. What is needed now is that one side – and it doesn't really matter which – wins decisively, akin to FDR in 1932 or 1936, Johnson in 1964, Nixon's 1972 and Reagan's two goes in 1980 and 84. Only that can and would allow the country to heal yet again. Except it can't happen.

Instead, we will see a repeat of political anaemia, result wise, along the lines of Kennedy's 1960, Nixon's 1968, Bush II's 2000 and Trump's 2016.

This got me to thinking about past razor thin US elections and encouraged me to ask if what is going on now is just a repeat of certain historical trends, that this is a healthy contest of competing views that contributes to the maturing of a nation. I have given this a lot of thought over the past three weeks and have concluded, as most if not all of us have intuitively already decided, that today is unique. But, today did not emerge in a vacuum. Today has been built on yesterday's foundation. This didn't just happen. This was caused to happen. A different tomorrow can also be caused.

Divisions have been a part of American history – the venom though is new

There have been many, many close US elections. Perhaps one of the most controversial is the 1824 election of John Quincy Adams, the son of one of the great American founders, John Adams, the

first vice-president and the second president. JQA's legacy is spirited into today's political environment through the remarkable connections to Bush I (GHWB) and Bush II (GWB), the only other father/son presidential legacy. They are connected more importantly for this discussion though through controversial elections of the respective sons.

JQA won in 1824 with a *minus 10%* plurality and his election almost tore the country apart, for it was forged through post-election deals and promises of electoral college support unimaginable in today's times. And yet, JQA was likely the most qualified person ever to serve as president with an unprecedented and not yet repeated lifetime of training and exposure. JQA governed in a non-partisan apolitical fashion, perhaps more to buttress his father's legacy than his own. The 2000 "hanging chad" election of GWB created scars that survive to this day, but which, in my view, would have been present no matter who benefitted from the Florida chad count in 2000. The result simply identified the person upon whose back the target would be painted. The country would have been no less divided had Gore won. The GWB/Gore divisions would have had greater impact had it not been for 9/11 which displaced politics for a time.

Interestingly, political division in the US is the rule not the exception, with some unique respites created by the times and the leader. FDR is the main exception. Since FDR (1932 – 1945) with the exception of the 1st two years of Eisenhower (1953-54), the US senate had a democratic majority, until more recent times. This served FDR well as he enjoyed a resounding majority in both the Senate and House (from 1937 – 1939 for example, the Senate Democratic majority was 75 to 17 and the House of Representatives was 333 to 89). Eisenhower had a Democrat Senate and House for all but the 1st two years of his presidency. Kennedy and Johnson had Democrat majorities in both house of Congress but no one could argue that the last two years of Johnson's term was not divisive. Nixon had a Democrat majority his entire presidency, yet experienced one of the biggest landslides in 1972. Carter had a Democrat majority in both houses but his presidency was anything but stable. Reagan had the Senate in six of his eight years but Tip O'Neal (and we all remember him) held the power in the House Reagan's entire presidency. Bush I didn't have the Senate or House and Clinton only held them in his first two years with Newt Gingrich zooming into power as Speaker for most of Clinton's term. Bush II held a slim lead in his first six years, and lost the House in his last two years. Obama ended his last two years with a massive Republican majority in the Senate (54/44) and the House (246/188), and Trump held a majority in the Senate his entire term but lost the House 2018.

While the FDR legacy is unrepeatable in any way one wishes to address it, and is an anomaly in so many complex ways, Eisenhower is generally considered a great president as is Kennedy and Reagan, with all the others being "also rans" even though Johnson's first couple of years were quite magnificent as was Nixon's 1st term, especially if one were to remove the albatross of Vietnam. Yet, even FDR was not all above the tumult of politics and the [Democrat convention of 1944](#) in my personal view perpetrated the most scandalous political backroom deal with the underhanded removal of Henry Wallace as VP to be replaced by Harry Truman, a massive act of political conniving for which the world would later pay dearly. Oh, how the world would have unfolded differently had the backroom bosses led by the crooked [Tom Pendergast](#), had not prevailed and the decent and worldly Henry Wallace remained on the ticket and became president in 1945 instead of Truman.

So, while being aware that political division in the US is the prevailing rule what is going on now, is very, very different. This stirred me to look at one of the most seemingly divisive elections of the past – 1960.

1960: Kennedy versus Nixon – the televised debates

We are all aware of the 1960 election and of the 1960 televised debates, especially the first one. These were historical for many reasons. It not only was the first televised presidential debate, it was the first [presidential debate](#) period! But, it captures a different time. As already noted, political division was always the norm, but that division was apparent and measured very differently 60 years ago than in recent times, especially at this very moment.

We all know that the 1960 election was one of the closest in history and coloured by fraud (Chicago), and the entertaining view is that Kennedy won because of charisma and charm and Nixon lost because *well* because he was Nixon.

These debates are also important because each of course became president and each presidency ended for distinctive but tragic reasons. I have long formed the view that both Kennedy and Nixon were essential to the development of modern America politics – that they *are* the archetypal incarnation of American politics. While modern history (if there is such a thing) paints a picture that they were very, very different, I have always rejected that thesis and believe they were more alike than not. Paradoxically, Nixon is viewed as the war-monger, Kennedy as the peace-maker, Kennedy as the man of inclusion, Nixon as class and race baiter, when in fact, the true roles, while more nuanced, are almost reversed to modern depictions.

So, while I have been immersed in the active contest on right now, as a needed respite, I recently watched all four 1960 debates, and I would encourage everyone reading this to do the same. They were [September 26](#) in Chicago; [October 7](#) in Washington DC; [October 13](#) simultaneously from Los Angeles and New York; and, [October 21](#) in New York. I had never seen them before in their entirety and found them fascinating, ever the more so when contrasted with what is happening at the very minute these words are being written.

The first debate: We have all seen some excerpts from the 1st debate, those supporting the idea that Nixon was and looked ill (he was – he had a severe knee infection and had been recently released from hospital and he looked it), and Kennedy was the tanned Adonis (he was), and image carried the day and Kennedy won. Seen from today's vista that seems a reasonable narrative. But, in 1960, not only did that not happen it wasn't possible. While it was clear Nixon flubbed the medium in Debate #1, (he caught on for debates 2, 3 & 4), he had and showed a mastery of the issues. As did Kennedy. Both very ably stated their case for America – not just for themselves. Each explained where they were similar and where they differed. I have seen every presidential debate since 1976 (which was the next debate – there was none when it counted most in 64, 68, and 72), and have concluded now that no other debate since came close to the promise presented by the first four in 1960. But, the main take-away is that both opposing candidates explained differences for America with respect and regard, with politeness and yet firmly, and what clearly showed through is that both were both inspired by America and inspired Americans. At the end of the 1st debate, and this may be the reason few if any have ever given any attention to debates 2, 3 & 4 (after all, 60 million viewers in a country of then 167 million people was remarkable), no voter could not know who earned their vote and why it was earned. No acrimony. No anger. No finger pointing, figuratively or literally. No theatrics. But for the substance, they are poor theatre by modern standards, but actually fascinating and spellbinding by the scope of content and discussion.

The second, third and fourth debates: Nixon gained his ground and overtook Kennedy on several points, and it was Kennedy that was the aggressor and was a more angered and determined cold warrior, but like the 1st debate, positions were clearly and fairly articulated, respectfully but forcefully. It was clear the stakes were high – the future of concern was not just America's but the world's, with the big

contest being between the US and China and the USSR. While we didn't get to see Kennedy's full impact, if one were to gauge the likely qualities of a Kennedy second term, one must look to his [June 10, 1963 Commencement Address to the American University](#). Contrasted with what we know Nixon did with China and the USSR and discounting Vietnam from both the Kennedy and Nixon legacies (since we can't fairly gauge Kennedy's unfulfilled future actions on Vietnam and since Nixon inherited a dramatically escalated mess from Johnson in 1969), it is clear that both world visions by both Kennedy and Nixon may well have concluded on the same point, if both given equal chance, a luxurious opportunity of course which history does not permit. (Since I mentioned Vietnam a few times and while there is no time to explore this and remain consistent with the opening premise, I blame Truman's actions in 1945 and 1946 more than Kennedy's in 60-63 or Nixon's 68-73, although Nixon likely could have concluded his war ending achievement earlier but it may have cost him re-election or even the nomination in 1972.)

So why are we wallowing in the trough today?

So, while the 1960 election resulted electorally in a politically divided country, the people of the country were not divided. The sense of neighbour which existed before 1960, through its leaders and through its people, continued, at least for awhile, after 1960. It was still America. A 50/50 contest ended with a still united country (again, at least for awhile – it was about to change). While contemporary America is equally divided 50/50, unlike 1960, this is felt in everyday life. The division is real, is deep, is vitriolic with neighbour against neighbour, red against blue, and with the effect perhaps only beginning. This paused me to wonder how this happened? And, this is happening not just in the US – it is happening to a lesser extent in Canada, in Europe and elsewhere. To explore what in god's name is going on, I will focus on the US against the backdrop of the American presidential elections. It cannot be explained just by the explosion of social media but I posit that without Twitter, it would lose fuel fast.

As I have noted, it is my view that political division in the US is not new. It is the norm and finds its roots in Philadelphia in 1776 and every year since. It was front and center in the 1948 election, in 1952 and as already written, even within the Democrat Party in the 1944 convention (which while I will not explore contains many, many similarities to the 2020 Democrat nomination process for the president and vice-president).

In 1952, the election was an easy contest between a war hero Eisenhower and the noble, accomplished and qualified Adlai Stevenson, but it really was a referendum on the massively unpopular Truman. Yet, the 1952 election was shrouded by the cloud of McCarthyism, to the point that even Eisenhower betrayed his mentor General George Marshall, not defending him against accusations of being soft on communism.

While 1956 was a rather quiet affair, 1960 was the most significant election since 1932, but one that was fought less on personality (even in the shine of Kennedy's star aura) than it was on distinctive views of America's future. Both opponents presented visions of hope (with Kennedy's message sprinkled with a bit of a dose of fear), but both also shared many common broad themes. They agreed on much and had the conviction and strength of character to so-say in the debates. They weren't afraid to agree. (This was long before politics became a sport little different that Monday Night Football, with careerist political operatives less interested in ideas that winning.)

In 1964 the pre-Vietnam burdened Johnson sought a Great Society of hope and pitted that vision against Goldwater's message of fear and militarism. Hope won. Big.

By 1968 the Johnson ship self-destructively sunk under the weight of Vietnam, and in a period of political assassination, riots and social unrest, Nixon eked out a "hope" victory in 68 against McGovern,

and from 68-72 advanced many socially progressive projects, which remain to this day (OHSa, EPA, etc.). In 1972 he achieved one of the biggest presidential victories, squandering it by 1974 (I have always been fascinated by the Shakespearean Nixon and will contrast the Nixon of 1960 with the Nixon of 1968 and 72 nearer the end of this piece).

By 1976, Republicans were a spent force and Ford stood no chance against Carter, even though it was less about Carter, which perhaps explains his anaemic 50.1% margin (Ted Kennedy almost knocked him off in the 1980 primaries, unheard of for a sitting presidential candidate).

By 1980, American politics started a big sea change, and Reagan, though not new to the national stage, re-configured the political method. This was, in my view, the start of the modern era of politics, with many Nixonian operatives strongly rooted in the Republican Party and politics starting to get a tad more vicious. By 1984 no one was going to beat Reagan and the task was dispatched to the hapless but competent and decent Mondale. 1980-88 was a significant period for the world, with Reagan taking a different stance in his 2nd term, with Gorbachev's taking the USSR reins 1985. My view is different than the contemporary American view that Reagan was the peace-maker, when I believe it was much more Gorbachev. But, it required the two of them, even though it was left to Bush I to finish the job.

By 1988, presidential politics took a turn to the dark-side, by everyone. The media destroyed Gary Hart for actions they winked at for Kennedy less than 30 years earlier, and the Republicans steamrolled Dukakis. While Dukakis tried to talk policy and ideas and vision, no one seemed interested, and he was destroyed by personal attacks on his actions as governor (pollution; paroles), and a bizarre photo with him driving a tank, for goodness sake. The 1988 election was the start of the slide to today. Substance was out. Personality and gimmicks were in. Attack was the game. Survival was the test. Neither Kennedy or Nixon of 1960 could have survived presidential politics of 1988. The die was now cast.

1992 was one of the most remarkable presidential elections, with the real literary hero being Ross Perot, to whom Clinton must be forever connected. With no Perot there would have been no President Clinton. Trump is actually the water-carrier for Perot although no one seems to have mentioned Perot's name for 20 years. 1992 was a bit about substance (Perot and NAFTA), but a lot about style, with many thinking the election turned when Clinton played sax on Arsenio. 1960 this was not. By 1996 Dole was just yesterday's guy and the Republicans were a bit adrift, open to takeover by those seeking power, not seeking consensus on ideas. They only had to wait four years.

The divisions fueled by the hanging-chad election of 2000 remain omnipresent to this very day. They have deepened. The 2000 Republican primary was more notable by those that got booted early on, particularly the first female governor of New Jersey, Christine Whitman (a sort of what could have been along the lines of 1944's Henry Wallace). By 2004 presidential elections were outright nasty, with personal slurs from both sides being hurled against each other. Kerry's Vietnam service versus Bush's non-service were a prime focus.

The historic 2008 election was a chance of a massive game changer, with Obama given the power to shake up everything. He didn't. That was the last chance for real permanent change, and a lost opportunity. Shame. In 2012 Mitt Romney didn't stand a chance and the Republican party started a new disintegration, but even with that, Obama who should have displaced Reagan's 1984 landslide, could muster more than 51.1% of the popular vote. By then, in my view, the divisions were no longer intellectual. They were tribal. There was a red team and a blue team. Politics became sport, nothing more, nothing less.

In 2016 the Democrats remained controlled by the backers and back-room, but the anaemic Republicans were ripe for takeover, and takeover is what they got. With Trump we see a merger of Goldwater and Perot, packaged to an electorate with a 15 second attention span. The Kennedy/Nixon debates of 1960 would stand no chance in 2016 or 2020. If the message is longer than half a minute, it fades away unnoticed. This is for all sides. The lines have been drawn and no one dares cross. No longer is politics a pursuit of persuasion. No one even tries anymore. I have always viewed the effort to persuade as the fuel of democracy.

The final words of Richard Nixon in 1960

In his final statement in the final debate in 1960, Nixon said this – and this captures more about 2020 than it does about 1960. He turned to the camera and said, “*To the American people, what can you do?*”

*“In the years to come it will be written that one or the other of us was elected and that he was or was not a great president. What will determine whether Senator Kennedy or I, if I am elected, was a great president? It will not be our ambition that will determine it, because greatness is not something that is written on a campaign poster. **It will be determined to the extent that we represent the deepest ideals, the highest feelings and faith of the American people. In other words, the next president as he leads America and the free world, can be only as great as the American people are great**”.*

My goodness. If only the Nixon of 1968 was guided by the Nixon of 1960. The Nixon of 1968, more so the Nixon of 1972, violated his own guiding words, and in so doing, destroyed the people’s faith, and let loose generations of distrust.

This is what explains today – loss of faith, loss of expectation, loss of belief. The dark side of Richard Nixon still casts its shadow on American politics. This was not caused by Trump. All he has done is exploit it better than others. The other side tries just as hard. It is the people who are being governed that are to blame – the people permit this – the people participate in this. Simply put, channelling 1960 Nixon, the people of today are not as great as the people of yesterday. Hopefully, the people of tomorrow will learn this.

Best regards. Enjoy the election. As serious as it is, it is still great fun.

Les.