

# A choice of past, present or future

DEMOCRACY can be magical. When it works well, the wishes of the electorate can express the soul of the nation. America has done this by whittling the presidential campaign down to three candidates, each of whom expresses different mainstream aspects of the American soul.

Much of the world is relieved that extremists like Rudolph Giuliani and populists like John Edwards have been eliminated. Senators John McCain, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama are choices other nations around the globe can live with. Each represents an aspect of the American soul that has worked well in realms of foreign policy.

Mr McCain represents the past. But what a glorious past it has been.

America has done more good in the past five decades than any other nation. At the end of World War II, when America was at the peak of its power, it rejected the European impulse to colonise and dominate. Instead it chose to work towards liberating much of the world, delivering political freedom to billions. It launched a rules-based world order that enabled nations to emerge and prosper - from Japan and Germany in earlier decades to China and India more recently.

Without the open trading system America engineered with the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, the precursor to the World Trade Organisation, East Asia could not have succeeded. This American-designed world order has delivered more peace and prosperity than the European period of global domination of previous centuries.

Mr McCain, rather than President George W. Bush, symbolises this glorious past. His commitment to honour and decency and his belief that America must remain a moral beacon remind the world how good America once was.

His steadfast opposition to the use of torture shows his awareness of how much the Bush administration's cavalier treatment of human rights issues has damaged America's standing in the world. Despite its free media, few Americans are aware that Amnesty International has described Guantanamo as "the gulag of our time". The moral authority America lost through its use of torture in Guantanamo and in the Abu Ghraib prison scandal was far more precious than the scarce intelligence that torture has provided. Virtually all intelligence experts know that torture does not work. Mr McCain knows this personally. He was tortured as a prisoner of the North Vietnamese.

He also understands what "responsibility" means. To argue against "ditch and run in Iraq" may win him few votes in America but much support outside the US. If he is elected, the world will hope for an era where America regains the respect it once enjoyed.

Mrs Clinton represents the present. Many Americans still remember Mr Bill Clinton's administration as one of the happier chapters of recent US history. The end of the Cold War produced a huge sigh of relief that nuclear terror had finally ended, explaining why, in American memories, the 1990s appear to be a sweet patch of history.

Mr Clinton made some foreign-policy mistakes, from Rwanda to Bosnia. But he introduced fiscal discipline, kept the global economy growing and oversaw a stable world order. The American nostalgia for this era is understandable. Similar nostalgia is also found in the rest of the world. Hence, Mrs Clinton's message of "experience" resonates with many outside America. The competence of the Clinton administration contrasts sharply with the incompetence of the Bush 43 administration.

It is fair to compare the happy Clinton era with the nightmarish Bush era. Both 9/11 and the folly of the Iraq War have made Americans feel more insecure. Mr Bush deserves a large part of the blame for this. But Osama bin Laden began planning the attacks long before Mr Bush was elected. In his own way, Mr Clinton was also asleep while new forces were brewing. He had a golden opportunity to fashion a new world order when the Cold War ended. He failed to seize it.

Hence, despite Mrs Clinton's experience, few outside America believe that she can recreate the happy 1990s unless she understands how much the world has changed.

The powerful economic resurgence of Asia and the new peaks of anti-Americanism in the Islamic world are new forces the US has to deal with. The world has changed dramatically since Mr Clinton left office. Sadly, Mrs Clinton's rhetoric seldom mentions these new realities.

This is why many outside

Obama. He represents the future.

More than any other presidential candidate in recent history, he has a unique capacity to listen to other voices around the world, perhaps in part because he lived outside America as a child (and may well become the first American president with some knowledge of Bahasa Indonesia, which he learned in his childhood in Indonesia).

His Foreign Affairs essay reveals this capacity to listen:

"In the case of Europe, we dismissed European reservations about the wisdom and necessity of the Iraq War. In Asia, we belittled South Korean efforts to improve relations with the North. In Latin America...we failed to adequately address concerns about immigration and equity and economic growth. In Africa, we have allowed genocide to persist for over four years in Darfur and have not done nearly enough to answer the African Union's call for more support to stop the killing."

As we move from a mono-civilisational world of Western domination to a multi-civilisational world, the world needs an American president who understands intuitively and intellectually that we are dealing with a new phase of human history. America must learn to listen to new voices. Mr Obama can teach it how to do that.

His election would also destroy immediately half of the massive anti-Americanism in the world. Having travelled to all corners of the globe, I have first-hand experience of how different regions think.

Africans will celebrate. The sight of a son of an African father occupying the most powerful office in the world will boost their self-esteem and give them hope that Africans too can succeed. The 1.2 billion Muslims will also marvel that American society elected a Christian with "Hussein" as a middle name despite right-wing efforts to suggest that he might be Muslim.

The support for Mr Obama comes not just from the poor and the dispossessed. An Indian billionaire also asked me to root for Mr Obama. He said: "With Obama, what you see is what you get. With Hillary, you get a new mask every day."

Mr Obama's authenticity has clearly struck a positive chord outside America. He has convinced many Americans that the time for "change" has come; and 3.5 billion Asians know that change has already come for them. The Asian century has begun. At no time in recent centuries have young Asians been more optimistic about their future. They are looking for an optimistic young American to connect with. Mr Obama could not have come at a better time.

American leaders will have to surf new waves of history. Only Mr Obama seems to have this surfing agility. If the world could vote, most would vote for him. Former United Nations secretary-general Kofi Annan spoke for many recently when he said: "I think an Obama presidency would be inspirational, an incredible development in the world."

The writer is Dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, NUS. His latest book, *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift Of Global Power To The East*, appeared last month.

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