

US Elections

A historical perspective

by Michael Meurer, November 5, 2016



ELECTION NOTES

I know that passions are running high on both sides in the Clinton vs. Trump campaign environment of 2016, but this is not the first election the US has had with enormous stakes.

All US elections have been important in their times for varying reasons, but there are a few that I believe stand out for being easily as important as 2016 if not more so, sometimes as much for their unintended consequences long after the election as for their immediate impact. A few notes follow that I hope will be helpful putting the wretched campaign of 2016 in a broader historical context.

LINCOLN vs McCLELLAN—1864

I would start with Lincoln's 1864 reelection campaign in the middle of the Civil War, in which his Democratic opponent Gen. George B. McClellan was ironically forced to run as the peace candidate on a Democratic platform promising a quick end to the war. The campaign was almost as nasty and full of personal insults as the campaign of 2016. McClellan, like Trump today, took every minor insult personally and was accused by his opponents of being a latter day Napoleon with dictatorial

tendencies and delusions of grandeur.

In the run up to his 1864 nomination by the Republican Party, Lincoln dumped his first term VP Hannibal Hamlin because he was considered a political liability. He picked Andrew Johnson instead because Johnson was a rare anti-secessionist Southern Governor from Tennessee with solid conservative bona fides.

Lincoln won in a landslide, but he was assassinated a few months later. Johnson became President in April, 1864, and one month after being sworn in, he brought an end to the civil war that Lincoln had begun. He took charge of "Presidential Reconstruction" by treating the



former Confederate states as wayward brethren who had not really seceded. He opposed voting rights for newly

emancipated blacks and let former Confederate states pass new racist constitutions until the Republican Congress held an impeachment trial to stop him.

In retrospect, I would say that the election of 1864 was every bit as consequential as the election of 2016.

FDR vs. WILLKIE & DEWEY – 1940 & 1944

In 1940, running for a historically unprecedented third term, it was clear that FDR would take the nation to war in Europe against a newly ascendant fascism under Hitler and Mussolini.

Opposition to the probability of war became the rallying cry of FDR's Republican opponents led by Wendell Willkie, and the campaign degenerated into outrageous mudslinging in its final weeks that would rival today's Trumpian zeitgeist.

In 1944, FDR ran for reelection again while WW II raged in Europe and the Pacific. He picked hawkish Sen. Harry Truman of Missouri as his VP candidate to assuage conservative Southern Democrats. During the campaign, Republican opponent Thomas Dewey railed against a fourth term for FDR, calling him a "tired old man" with royalist tendencies who lacked the energy to lead the nation in a time of war!

Sound familiar? FDR as "low energy?"

The Republicans even accused FDR of putting American military lives at risk by sending a US warship to rescue his dog Fala in Alaska. FDR complained that his opponents had attacked his entire family and were now so desperately craven they were going after his poor innocent dog.



But not to worry. FDR retorted that his dog had risen above the partisan fray and did not resent the attacks.

A few months after being sworn in for his fourth term, in April, 1945, Roosevelt suffered a stroke and died. The hawkish Truman assumed the presidency and brought WW II to an abrupt

end only four months later by dropping the world's first atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan on August 8 and 9, 1945.

In retrospect, the 1944 election looks like perhaps one of the most important in human history, not just US history. Handling the nuclear codes was no longer a hypothetical proposition.

LBJ vs. GOLDWATER – 1964

Although such judgments can and should always be debated, I would add the presidential campaign of 1964 to the list of most historically important.

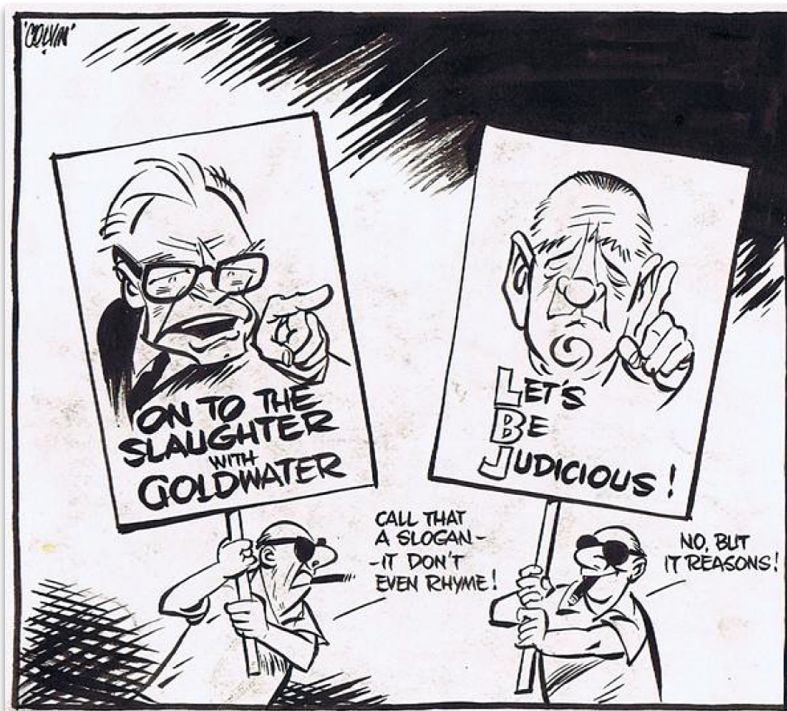
Lyndon Johnson had assumed the presidency when JFK was assassinated in Nov. 1963, during the first campaign trip of his reelection bid in Dallas.

After assuming the presidency and winning the Democratic party nomination, Johnson went on to win a landslide general election victory a year later, in Nov. 1964, against conservative Republican Barry Goldwater. He won in large part by depicting Goldwater as a trigger happy lunatic who was unfit to have the nuclear codes! Look no further

than the infamous Daisy TV ad. It ran only once, but it devastated Goldwater's chances of winning.

I admit that Trump makes Goldwater look warm and cuddly by comparison, but the similarities in the campaigns against them more than five decades apart are nonetheless striking.

The election of Lyndon Johnson was enormously consequential both domestically and in foreign policy. Johnson got the US further mired in the Vietnam War, with enormous cost of US and Vietnamese life, which spurred very large anti-war protests that spread across the country.



On the domestic front, as part of his Great Society agenda, Johnson launched a "War on Poverty," pushed Medicare through Congress, began

implementing the Civil Rights Act that he had passed in July, 1964 after Kennedy's death, and signed the Voting Rights Act into law in 1965.

The social upheaval generated by the civil rights and anti-war movements during Johnson's term gave an opening to Nixon in 1968, who like Trump, ran as a law and order candidate with a secret plan to end the war in Vietnam, much like Trump's vague pronouncements that he will "defeat" ISIS.

Many pundits and analysts on the right see in Johnson's administration the beginning of state intervention at the federal level that created the multicultural society that twice elected Barack Obama president, and they are still fighting against not only Johnson's Great Society programs, but FDR's New Deal society.

Absent the election of 1964 and Johnson's subsequent attempt to consolidate and expand Roosevelt's New Deal, the campaign of 2016 would not look the same. Trump is unwittingly campaigning against much of LBJ's legacy, although he wants to keep Social Security and Medicare in tact, which is part of his populist appeal to older white folks.

TRUMP vs. CLINTON

I do not wish to argue the merits

of either side in this post, but I do want to note that it is difficult to imagine an election being of greater historical consequence than the 1964 vote that kept Johnson in power. The same is true for any of the other elections I have mentioned above, and probably several others I have overlooked.

The raw passions that have been unleashed in 2016 are not entirely new, nor are they solely the result of Trump's bombast.

Our presidential campaigns have become multi-billion dollar reality TV spectacles. In 2012, I wrote an article for Truthout titled "The Election as a Marketing Spectacle," tracing the origins of the dark money that is driving this self-destructive insanity. In this milieu, ratings are driven by controversy and deliberate exaggeration of social divisions irrespective of the long term costs to democracy.

Trump has taken the modern campaign spectacle to a new level in the age of social media, but the phenomenon predates his candidacy. The ugly campaign of 2016 is in many ways a self-inflicted wound that started decades ago.

In a nation with a \$1 trillion plus military machine, we can and must do better. Robust US presidential campaigns and elections can be conducted for a

fraction of the cost in one tenth the time.

France, for example, gets the same kind of lousy results we often get, but they do it in one month with a legally mandated spending limit of \$50 million.

The French model isn't a long term answer, but it highlights the absurdity of our nearly permanent election spectacle and how little it has to do with small 'r' republicanism and democratic self-governance.

