

## IPS Corporate Associates Dialogue: Steve Clemons on the US Presidential Election

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One certainty about Donald Trump's recent victory in the 2016 US presidential election is that it has contributed significantly to an era already marked by great uncertainty. More importantly, what does this mean for the Asia-Pacific region as well as for Singapore? On 24 November 2016, the Institute of Policy Studies hosted a dialogue between Mr Steve Clemons, Washington Editor-at-Large for *The Atlantic*, and Professor Chan Heng Chee, Singapore's former Ambassador to the United States from 1996 to 2012.

There were many opportunities for members of the 110-strong audience to ask questions, and the 90-minute discussion covered a range of issues such as trade, foreign relations, security and strategic leadership. Here is a selection of questions and Mr Clemons' responses.



## A dissatisfied electorate

**Question:** Analysts are in overdrive due to the shock of a Trump electoral victory. How did everybody miss reading what was on the ground? A cottage industry has since sprung up to try and understand how and why it happened. What does the American lesson hold for us?

**Steve Clemons (SC):** My extended family in Texas gave me insights into the thoughts of ordinary Americans. Many of them had fought in wars, when they returned; technology jobs they had signed up for were shipped off to China, India or the Philippines. The quid pro quo that used to exist in the US — playing the role of a global security guarantor and in return, working Americans benefitting tangibly from that — broke a long time ago. The joke was that the US fought the Cold War but China won. However, this seeming break in American engagement is not a new phenomenon. The signs were present long ago. It is not as big a disruption; I think you can make a case that there is continuity in the evolving US political system. I worked with Clyde Prestowitz, who was an iconoclast when it came to trade and economic policy. He said that trade was not merely a religion; it had to bring tangible benefits back to US. You had to keep the balance between winners and losers. This is because trade is the only visible thing that Americans see, thus it gets the political burden and the blame when people feel aggrieved. The 2008 and 2009 financial crisis affected many middle class Americans who became victims without redress. They had been seduced into mortgage loans and suffered huge losses when the bubble burst. Coupled with fatigue from long military engagements, such as in Iraq and Afghanistan, Americans were dissatisfied and felt left behind.

Furthermore, the electoral defeat of Hillary can be attributed to elites getting comfortable in their bubbles by dismissing the complexities present. For instance, this year is the 25th anniversary of the Rodney King riots. Los Angeles had designed itself in a way that it was largely unaware of the pain and troubles shrouding the city. The west side has scenic beaches and Hollywood while the east is rife with gangs and killings. This tension blew up every 20 years. Likewise, on a national scale, we have created the same problem: a winner-takes-all capitalism and politics.

Tired of the status quo, American citizens wanted a wrecking ball. The more Trump lied, the better and bigger the ball. In contrast, they saw Hillary as a regal monarch, a queen, who gave a winking nod to existing global political relationships. This was why they voted for the wrecking ball.

## Foreign Policy

**Q:** What sort of policy do you think President Trump will pursue? He is known to be an isolationist, neither interested in global nor multilateral agreements. Will Mike Pence drive foreign policy?

**SC:** There was an article by *The Atlantic* called The Obama Doctrine — an interview with Obama by Jeff Goldberg. Obama articulates his policy of strategic restraint where his threshold for international engagement was considerably high. In contrast, Hillary is more interventionist. On that scale, Trump will be on the side of Obama but more flamboyant. The foreign policy of Andrew Jackson, the seventh US President, feels similar to Trump because it is inward-looking. It is willing to clobber somebody who may have impugned or attacked American interest but has no interest in the maintenance of a global scaffolding or structure. Similarly, Trump is easy to anger and willing to strike if pursuing ISIS but disinterested in residual responsibilities.

Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law, is about to become the most powerful man in the world. Pence is a governor and his concerns tend to be domestic, with scant knowledge of foreign policy. Trump sees himself as a brand, disinterested in details; thus he is going to turn to Pence as an implementer and executer. However, when it comes to higher stakes issues, Kushner will be behind the scenes regardless of who the face is. Notably, Trump discounted what Pence said during the Vice-Presidential debate. Therefore, I do not see Pence emerging as a determinant voice.

With regard to certainty in public policy, we need to face it that Trump is erratic. A *New York Times* interview with Trump said that he does not seem to be hardcore on the climate. The media seems to be grasping and pining for any straw of hope. But the truth is that Trump will zig and zag for ideas. After presenting his hardline views on immigration, pundits thought he was insane when he visited Mexico and said that the President was a nice guy. Then, he went to Phoenix and gave one of his toughest talks on the issue. In three days, he had expressed three different opinions on immigration. Yet, nobody was making him accountable for either of the three opinions or their conflicting nature.

I think we are witnessing a big change in terms of US engagement with the world. We often talk about what will be the US position after the Cold War. I think the US will become a big, often important but not always important power that will not be the guarantor of stability. We are seeing Trump in a pugnacious flair, hugging Russia and moving away from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). He is basically saying, we are not going to be in the business of defining an international order anymore; an unprecedented move for a US President.

**Q:** Historically, election rhetoric has differed from actual administration. To what extent will Congress be able to balance foreign policy under Trump?

**SC:** Trump is going to repeal and replace Obama's executive orders. He has the Senate and the House of Representatives and he will have the Supreme Court. When John Bolton was nominated to be the US Ambassador to the United Nations, my blog started to battle against his confirmation vote and we won. We won by creating wedges between Republicans who hold radically different views on Republican identity. Republicans are not a strong majority in Parliaments. Two or

three senators will become swing votes. This increases the likelihood of a congressional gridlock that we are counting on as checks on Presidential authority. Thus, Trump will be able to say: "I tried, too bad, these bad guys stopped me." He is going to harass and point fingers at those members of the Senate that stopped him. That is Trump's trick. He will say crazy things when he knows in fact, the system will stop him.



### President-elect Trump's personality

**Q:** One of the things that worries me most about Trump is that he is enormously narcissistic and has a tendency to explode. Is this a cause for worry when a red button is within reach?

**SC:** I do not know what he will do, but a lot of people worry about that. The people around Trump are patriots and they think they are guiding him in the right direction. Well, the bottom line is that Trump is a developer and dealmaker so he does not understand our nuclear legacy or weapons. From my encounters with Trump, I do not think that he is someone who will rush to a button. Instead, my worry does not lie with the big button, but the little buttons. I worry about his proclivity to use conventional weapons as illustrated by his threats to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Iranian ships that are harassing US ships. The danger lies in anomalous behaviour — when Trump says, "I am going to blow them out of the water" — in that it is not part of the script. If you did blow the Iranians out of the water, the situation will escalate far beyond the two parties involved.

I think Kushner is integral in stopping the rage. We have seen that the rage of Trump is part of what his constituency loves. This rage is domestic, fuelled in part by white supremacist groups. With reference to Lee Kuan Yew, the split with the communists was something he had to do; it was dangerous but extraordinarily important. In my opinion, Trump has to split with these white supremacist groups that are paying tribute to him to survive politically. This element of rage is a performance as well as something real. It is perilous because it opens different Pandora's boxes and has a real impact on whether the country tears itself up or not.

### **Role of the media**

**Q:** With media fragmentation and the proliferation of fake news, what is the role of the media in the US?

**SC:** I believe fake news will be rolled back and antibodies will emerge. Hopefully, I am not too naïve. As one of Washington's early political bloggers, I started the [Washington Note](#) blog wanting to rip the throats of mainstream media. Battles in the media against white supremacy crowds will be fought. But it is going to require building bridges to connect to the communities that are seduced by the lies in the mainstream media that have strangely become conventional. We need to find ways to seduce people back to the right side of the line.

**Q:** Against the backdrop of Obama's very successful use of information and communications technologies, what kind of rapport will Trump need with the media to politically survive and succeed?

**SC:** When Trump destroyed and demolished Fox News, Trump ran against Fox News. None of us believed it because you could not become president without Fox News. Trump's brand became bigger than Fox. I would not use the term "rapport" because there is no rapport, only a desperate gasping of air by media outlets around him. There is not going to be an alliance between the media and Trump but the media cannot do without him. In this age where Twitter and Facebook is common, a community of angry people can talk to each other online, distanced from reality. Trump is able to tap into that frustration where it bleeds over into the real world. There is an unbelievably tense relationship. Trump leaked the news that he had met with five major news outlets when it was supposed to be off the record. He wants to send the signal that none of us in the media are safe. Hillary got no space or air because he stole it. His brilliance in manipulating these tools is something that his next challenger has to beat and become better at. In this quickly evolving ecosystem, the ability to deliver a message in the fragmented media world is very important.



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