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America's moment of infamy

FBI's Clinton inquiry bombshell may come too late to sway a US election campaign that has long been in flames

Comment
Richard Wolfe

If it looks and sounds like a scandal, is it really a scandal? The latest Hillary Clinton email flap has all the trappings of one. With evasive answers, shady characters and FBI investigations, there must be something going on. Right?

Rather like Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction, we may not know what's hidden or where, but it sure looks like the Clintons have been hiding something. Sadly, this reasoning is enough for most Republican voters and a good chunk of independents. As America finally heads to the polls on Tuesday 8 November, it may be enough to depress support among Democrats just when the party needs to drive a high turnout among voters.

But it's not at all clear what the FBI is talking about in terms of Clinton emails. Some reports suggest they are neither to nor from Clinton herself, in which case we have just consumed a giant nothing-burger. After all, we already know that the FBI has no idea whether the emails amount to anything of significance.

This raises the obvious question: what on earth was the FBI director James Comey thinking when he dropped his letter last Friday,



Band of honour ... polling suggests most US voters made up their minds long before election day Joshua Lott/Getty

making it crystal clear that he knew nothing? As a rule, law enforcement agencies don't publicise the fact that they are clueless.

Beyond Comey's extraordinary intervention in the late stages of a presidential election, his letter raises another, more familiar question about the Clintons: why do they attract pseudo-scandals with such alarming ease and frequency?

From the Clinton foundation to the private email server, from Benghazi to Anthony Weiner, from Whitewater to Monica Lewinsky, the list is as long as it is spurious.

Whatever crumbs of wrongdoing there may be, they don't amount to something worthy of Watergate, or even the myriad gate-suffixed scandals since. Questionable behaviour is not the same as criminal or even impeachable conduct.

Perhaps the pseudo-scandals say more about the Clinton haters than they do about the Clintons themselves. The good news for the scandal-mongers is the next Clinton administration may well be nearing. House Republicans are already prepping their subpoenas in case they can launch another several dozen

investigations into the newly elected President Clinton. In that context, it doesn't matter whether the FBI's Clinton emails amount to anything more than political gossip. The Hunting of Hillary has only just begun.

What does matter is the impact on voters in these final frenetic days of the 2016 election. Recent polling suggests that most voters have already made up their minds about whether Clinton is honest and trustworthy: they don't believe her. To be sure, they also think the same about Donald Trump, albeit

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International news

Peace deal pledge by Santos

Colombian president aims for an acceptable agreement by Christmas

John Mulholland and Ed Vulliamy
Observer

The president of Colombia - and this year's Nobel peace laureate - Juan Manuel Santos has pledged to deliver a peace accord by Christmas to end the world's longest-running war.

President Santos was unexpectedly awarded the Nobel prize last month just days after a peace deal that his government forged with the Marxist guerrilla movement, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (Farc), had been narrowly defeated in a plebiscite. The rejected peace accord would have seen the Farc lay down its arms and become a political party, in addition to introducing land reforms and compensation for victims of the 50-year war. But critics attacked one of the deal's central tenets - the system of "transitional justice", which meant Farc leaders could have avoided lengthy jail terms in return for confessing their crimes and working to build peace - saying it was too lenient.

In an interview with the *Observer* on the eve of the first state visit by a Colombian president to the UK, which was scheduled for this week, Santos made his most robust commitment yet to finding a new peace accord since losing the plebiscite. He hoped an amended accord would not only be agreed with the Farc but also ratified - either by congress, another plebiscite or through other means - by Christmas.

He added that he was willing to proceed, if necessary, without input from the leader of the No vote, his political nemesis, the former president, Álvaro Uribe. "I hope that Uribe will also come on board because we want as large a consensus as possible," said the president. But he continued: "If [Uribe] decides not to join the bandwagon, then he will simply be isolated and we will continue with the other people [who previously opposed the accord] because we cannot simply stop the process - because it will come to an end if we do not continue it."

The peace accord's rejection was a huge setback for the president whose team have been negotiating the accord over the past four years in Havana, Cuba. Santos said that since the result "we started a national dialogue with all the promoters of the No vote to see what changes they would like in



Robust commitment ... Santos

the agreement, because they all said they wanted peace". He said that "all the negotiators and I have met almost every organisation and we are now digesting more than 500 proposals - and talking with the Farc - to have a new agreement, agreed and approved, by Christmas. That is my goal." He warned that further delay could imperil the process.

Colombia's war began in 1964, with the foundation of the Farc by communist peasants defending the autonomous communities they had declared in protest against unequal land ownership. The war - which became entwined with those waged by drug cartels and rightwing paramilitaries - has cost more than 200,000 lives, according to most estimates, and displaced almost six million people.

Santos and his peace accord have come under sustained criticism from Uribe, who said in Miami last week that the deal would lead to "a second Venezuela" in Latin America - suggesting the Farc's entry into politics would reduce the country to the status of its flagging socialist neighbour.

Having lost the plebiscite by only 0.4% of the vote, Santos aims to incorporate changes suggested by the No camp in an effort to get the deal

through. But he insisted that there were some proposals from the No campaign that would not be considered in a new peace accord. "Some of the proposals are viable and we think the Farc should accept them, but others are simply not viable: for example the ones that say there is no armed conflict in Colombia, and that there is no war in Colombia and that there are no victims in Colombia and therefore the transitional justice cannot apply."

Santos singled out the religious constituency which supported the No campaign as one he may have won round to a new accord. "Probably the largest number of people who voted against the agreement did not do so because of the peace agreement but because the churches - the Catholic church and the [evangelical] Christian church - said that the agreement was defending what they called a 'gender ideology' which is absolutely not true. We have changed the wording and I think they now are absolutely for the agreement."

Santos's state visit to the UK this week was to include a banquet hosted by the Queen and meetings with the British Prime Minister Theresa May at Downing Street and a visit to Northern Ireland, where his diplomats have been busily engaged in consultations over the peace the British government forged there in 1998. He said the UK has been "a tremendous support in this process", including at the UN security council, where "they were the pen holders" over "a mandate to the secretary general to participate in the monitoring of the ceasefire. The UK has always supported the peace process, so I only have words of gratitude for the British in helping Colombia to achieve peace after 50 years of war."

May was due to welcome Santos to Downing Street to discuss a range of issues. In a post-Brexit environment, trade and business would doubtless have figured prominently.

As May says, "the UK has been Colombia's third-largest foreign investor over the past decade, and our trading relationship was worth £1bn (\$1.2bn) last year". It was the only state visit the UK has hosted this year, and May's first.

Asked if the urge towards a re-worked accord was connected to his return to Europe in mid-December to collect the Nobel prize in Oslo, Santos said: "The Nobel comes at the most opportune time. It has helped a lot to push forward this new agreement. I am not doing it because of that, but because of the urgency ... it has to be in the next days or next couple of weeks."

Evangelical bishop now Rio's mayor

Jonathan Watts *Rio de Janeiro*

An evangelical bishop has been elected mayor of Rio de Janeiro, as rightwing candidates across Brazil strengthened their influence at the expense of a decimated Workers' party.

Despite his past condemnation of Catholics and homosexuals, Marcelo Crivella, of the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God, won control of the city in a second round of municipal elections that underscored the rise of religious conservatism and the demise of the leftwing party that dominated politics for more than a decade.

The Workers' party lost every mayoral post it contested last Sunday, including two in São Paulo state, where it was founded, and Recife, long considered a stronghold. This followed heavy defeats elsewhere in the first round of local elections last month.

The party was pushed out of power this year with the impeachment of former president Dilma Rousseff, and has since seen its founder, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, ordered to stand trial on charges of corruption and obstruction of justice in the *Lava Jato* (Car Wash) investigation into bribery at the state-run oil firm Petrobras.

Although almost all major parties were involved in the scandal, Michael Mohallem, law professor at the Getúlio Vargas Foundation, said the Workers' party (PT) was worst hit and would be weakened in the runup to the 2018 presidential election. "It has regressed 20 years in terms of its number of votes. That is a direct impact of the Lava Jato operation," he said.

Disgusted by the Lava Jato revelations - which implicated dozens of politicians across the ideological spectrum in a massive kickback system - and tired of a lingering recession, voters showed their contempt for the entire political system. There was a record number of spoiled and blank ballots; many people failed to vote despite a legal obligation to do so.

They were also willing to choose candidates from outside the mainstream. In Belo Horizonte, the mayoral race was won by Alexandre Kalil, a former football club president from the little-known Humanist Solidarity party, who campaigned on a platform of not being a politician. In Rio, Crivella, a conservative from the small Brazilian Republican party, won with 59.4%, comfortably ahead of Marcelo Freixo, a human rights activist with the Socialism and Freedom party.