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Reference List

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Section:

Person Of The Year 2000

PERSON OF THE YEAR

The wildest election in our history revealed a nation split so evenly that it took a controversial intervention by the Supreme Court to settle the issue. But now there is one immutable fact, one that recounts and lawsuits won't alter: GEORGE W. BUSH will be our one and only President. What follows is an intimate look at the man and an unflinching assessment of his challenge.

For a proud son of a one-term President, could there be a more humbling path to power than this? The candidate with the perfect bloodlines comes to office amid charges that his is a bastard presidency, sired not by the voters but by the courts. You could almost see the weight of it, the regret and relief and resolve, when Bush rose last Wednesday night with tears in his eyes and promised, "I will work to earn your respect," all but admitting it does not just come with the job when you win this way. But could anyone possibly use this to greater advantage than George W. Bush?

"I believe things happen for a reason," Bush said Wednesday night, hinting at something his audience was still too bruised to even imagine. Does it take a war, a flood, to leave us no choice but to start all over again? Bush campaigned for a year against partisan politics--and that was before partisanship became so poisonous that it polluted every institution of government. The man who talked less about what he would do than how he would do it finds that his bet has been called. You promise to be a uniter, not a divider? Here is a broken, cloven polity. You promise to change the tone? We can't bear to listen anymore to the rancor of the past five weeks, or eight years, or 13, if you extend this period of pitiless politics back to the confirmation hearings of Robert Bork.

But there's more. Bush staged the most inclusive Republican Convention in memory, surrounded himself at every chance with poor schoolchildren whom he promised he would not leave behind--and in the end won a smaller percentage of the African-American vote than any Republican since Barry Goldwater. The comics joked that he won 100% of the black vote where it mattered most--on the Supreme Court--but Bush himself admits that the greatest misconception about him is that he is not racially sensitive. He can staple Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice to his side, but it won't change the fact that 40% of the African Americans who went to the polls in Florida were new voters, and many wonder whether their votes were even counted.

If the task ahead seems impossible given how the race ended, it is worth remembering how it began. Bush came to the field with less experience in public life than just about anyone in a century and proceeded to take in more money in his first four months of campaigning than anyone had ever raised in two years; he confronted a sitting Vice President with the wind at his back and maintained a nearly unbroken lead for more than a year, even though more people agreed with the other guy's positions. He took on the suicide wing of his party, which would rather be right than win, and made them roll over and play dead, threw the invisibility cloak over the congressional wing of his party and made them disappear. Stripped of every winning Republican issue--the cold war, crime, the economy--he proceeded to run on Democratic ones--education, health care, Social Security. Lampooned as a feckless frat boy, he ran a more disciplined race than we have seen in years; he made his inexperience a virtue, his vagueness a shield, his sins a sign of sincerity.

That was enough to keep him in the race far longer than the computer models projected, if not enough to win him the most votes. But then came the second campaign, and the way he played the endgame told us even more about him than anything he had said as a candidate. Through the five-week Florida prizefight, he showed what he meant when he kept saying he would hire the best people, give them their freedom and hold them accountable. He stood back, stayed out of the fray since law isn't his field and he knows what he doesn't know.

Even some Democrats now say privately that Bush and his soft serums may be better suited to cure the disease that afflicts the capital. With a Congress almost perfectly bisected, Republicans thirsty for power and Democrats for revenge, Bush is the one holding the needle and thread. He always said he would reach across party lines, and now he has no choice: what began as a campaign promise has become a precondition for his presidency. He must go hunting for Democrats to put in his Cabinet and for issues with broad support, in hopes that some quick successes on the easy problems will yield the capital for the harder ones.

So the first election of the new millennium is finally over, and the cast has scattered and the chads swept away, but in a few weeks the characters will all come together one last time on a plywood platform on the West Front of the Capitol: Bush, Cheney, Chief Justice Rehnquist and the rest of the court, the Gores, the Clintons, the parents Bush, the winners, losers and refugees of the strangest election in more than a century. All through the campaign, George W. Bush practiced for this moment, the very first act of a new President, when he put his hand in the air and swore to uphold the Constitution and the honor and dignity of the office, so help him God. This time it will be for real, the easiest part of the job and yet harder than he could have imagined, because while the

office has at last been won, the honor remains to be earned.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): On the first election night, Bush was ready with an acceptance speech--but had to wait five weeks to give one

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): READY AND WAITING With help from wife Laura, Bush prepares to address the nation Wednesday night

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE)

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By Nancy Gibbs

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