

Election 2000: Roller coaster never seemed to end

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WASHINGTON, D.C. -- When he sat down to dinner with his family at Austin's Shoreline Grill last Nov. 7, Texas Gov. George W. Bush was confident he was on his way to the White House.

Before dessert arrived, brother Jeb, governor of Florida, was apologizing. It appeared his state would go to Vice President Al Gore.

But that was only the beginning of the confusing, exasperating night that has since seared itself into the reels of election history.

First, Bush was losing. Then it was too close to call. Then Bush won. Gore called to concede. Gore called to retract.

At 3:30 a.m., Bush went to bed without an answer.

The next day, his future still very much in doubt, he stepped before a bank of microphones. "It was a great night," he said, "an interesting night."

An understatement, yes. But no more so than this one: So much has happened since that night. For that matter, so much had happened *before* that night.

Election 2000 was, as Gore's press secretary Chris Lehane put it, "the Space Mountain of all roller-coaster rides."

When the roller coaster finally stopped, Bush stepped off to head for his new home at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave.

Bush, the eldest son of former President Bush, began his journey to the White House in June 1999, telling supporters at the airport in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, "There's no turning back, and I intend to be the next president of the United States."

He dubbed his plane "Great Expectations" for that first campaign swing outside Texas, and laid out broad campaign themes -- details to come much later -- on tax cuts, educational improvements, states' rights, free trade and military strength.

He said he would rally "the armies of compassion," faith-based organizations he said should help government by taking a leading role in helping the needy and wayward.

"I'm proud to be a compassionate conservative. I welcome the label," he said. "And on this ground, I will make my stand."

Backed by a massive campaign war chest and support from the GOP establishment, Bush emerged the clear winner in the Iowa Republican caucuses last January.

But his victory was tempered by a stronger-than-expected showing by businessman Steve Forbes and a respectable finish by former Reagan administration official Alan Keyes.

Next came New Hampshire, where Sen. John McCain of Arizona had been campaigning for months and scored a big victory.

Bush rebounded in South Carolina, only to stumble after maverick McCain three days later in Michigan. But the Texas governor bounced back again, putting McCain away in March and finally turning his attention to Gore.

The bitter and costly primary battle had left Bush wounded. Gays and minorities criticized him, as did abortion rights supporters who feared he leaned too far right and conservative Christians who warned him not to lean too far left.

Bush was still haunted by his decision to speak at Bob Jones University, a fundamentalist Christian school in South Carolina that had espoused anti-Catholic rhetoric and had a policy forbidding interracial dating. Critics berated him for that appearance, as well as his refusal to denounce the flying of the Confederate battle flag at the South Carolina statehouse and his opposition to hate crimes legislation and affirmative action.

Later, they began to question Bush's intellect, publicly wondering whether he is smart enough to lead the country. He has degrees from Yale and Harvard, but acknowledges he was only an average student.

And throughout the campaign, Bush was plagued by rumors of past drinking excesses, as well as his noncommittal answers to questions about possible past drug use. He refused to discuss what he termed his "youthful indiscretions."

In July, determined to showcase his vision for a more moderate, more inclusive Republican Party, Bush packed the stage of the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia with minorities and women. The Rev. Jesse Jackson and other prominent Democrats mocked it as the "inclusion illusion."

But Bush stayed on message, promising he would "restore honor and dignity" to the presidency. His poll numbers soared.

When Gore had his big party in Los Angeles two weeks later, though, the vice president surged ahead. Three debates later, pollsters were still calling the race neck and neck, predicting it would be among the closest elections in history.

Still, a confident Bush took a break the last weekend of the campaign, flying home to rest while Gore sprinted to the finish with a sleepless tour through several battleground states, including Florida.

Election night, Bush watched the results on television, retreating from the restaurant to the Governor's Mansion when early projections went against him, then preparing to claim victory when networks declared him the winner and Gore called from Nashville to concede.

An hour later, when Bush's margin in Florida had shrunk, triggering an automatic recount, Gore called back.

"Let me make sure I understand," a stunned Bush replied. "You're calling to retract your concession."

In the days that followed, each side dispatched representatives to monitor the Florida recount. Bush began organizing his government, just in case.

The brutal post-election battle dragged into weeks of recounting, court fights and accusations as sleep-deprived and stressed-out county election officials sought to clarify what actually constituted a vote.

Nearly five weeks after Election Day, a sharply divided U.S. Supreme Court exhausted Gore's hopes of further counting, handing the election to Bush.

The next evening, Gore, who had won the popular vote but lost the Electoral College vote, and therefore the presidency, went on national television to concede, saying "It's time for me to go."

Bush followed with his long-delayed acceptance speech from the Texas Capitol, urging the country to "move beyond the bitterness and partisanship."

"I was not elected to serve one party," he said, "but to serve one nation."

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