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The Road to the White House

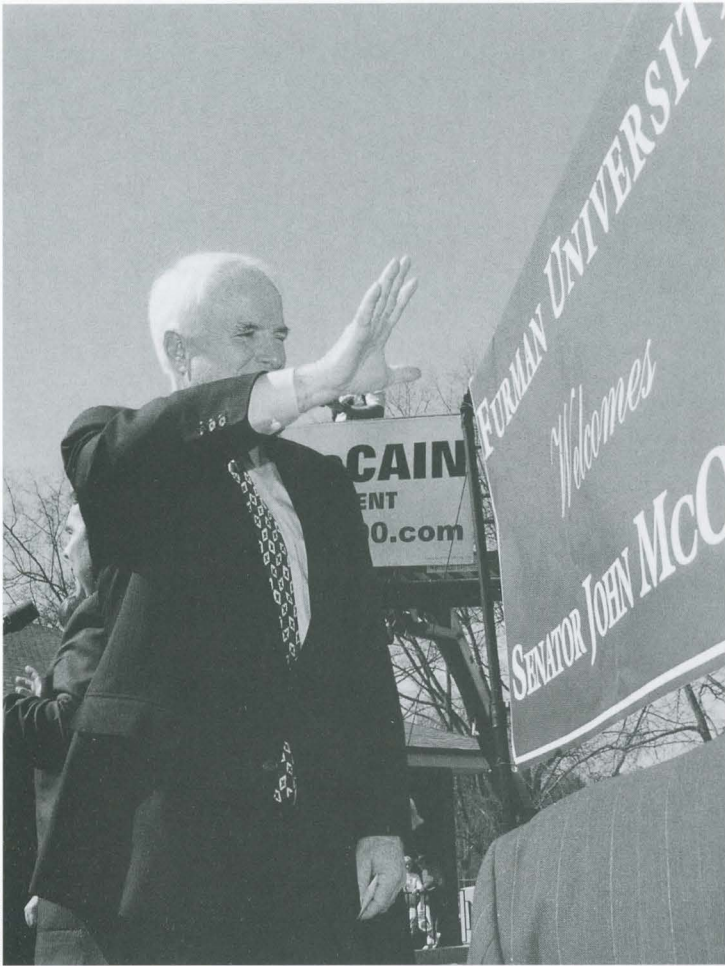
Danielle Vinson '89
Furman University

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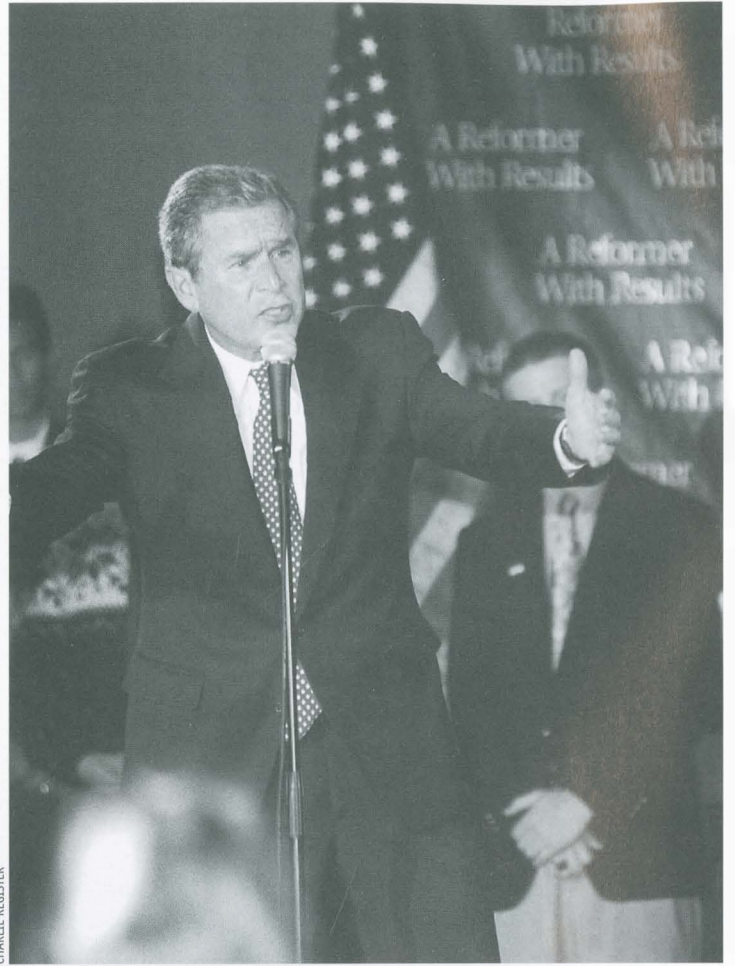
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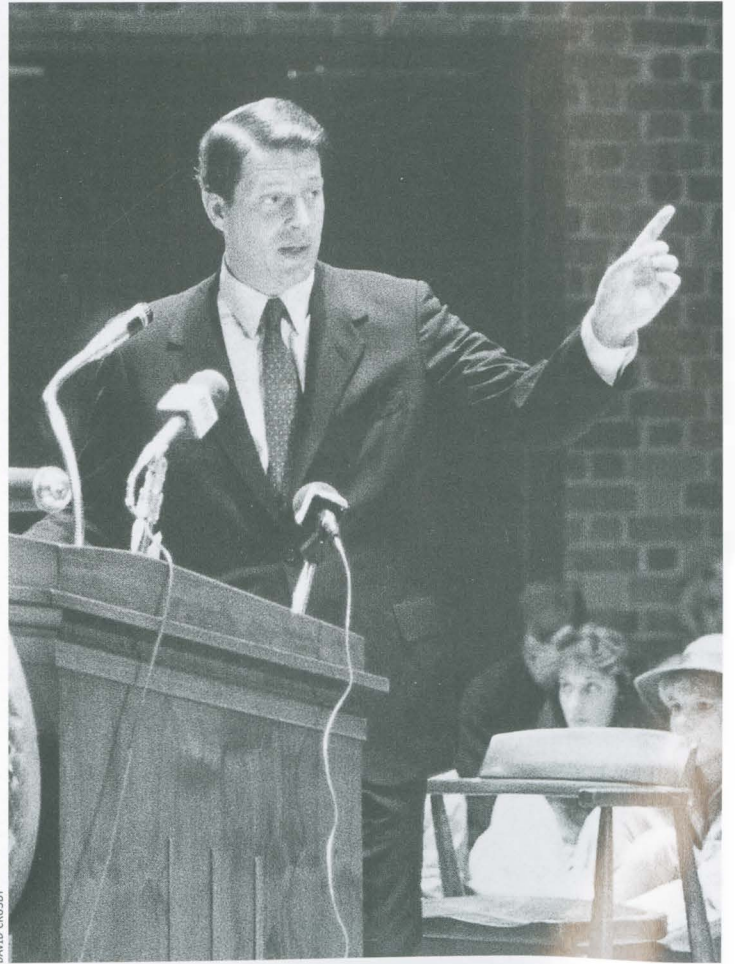
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DAVID CROSSY

The Road to the

White House

The presidential campaign may be shifting into high gear, but much of what we see and hear this fall will have been shaped by the events of the last eight months.

By Danielle Vinson

We heard the rumblings that it was headed our way. Reporters for national newspapers began calling political science professors throughout the state for a crash course in South Carolina politics. Campaign consultants in Washington began quietly buying up ad time on South Carolina television and radio stations. Voters began receiving mail from the candidates.

On the evening of February 1, we went to bed not fully aware of what would follow. But the next morning, we awoke to a full-fledged stampede as the road to the White House came roaring through South Carolina on the heels of John McCain's overwhelming victory over George Bush in the New Hampshire Republican primary.

For the next two and a half weeks, South Carolinians saw up close the race to become president. Each day the mailbox brought new messages from the candidates and the interest groups that supported them, including dozens of postcards from the McCain campaign alone. The state was papered in yard signs. Radio and television ads reminded voters that McCain would "bring honor back to the Oval Office" and that Bush was a "reformer with results."

Pretty soon the mud started flying. Ads suggested that Bush was no better than Bill Clinton when it came to integrity and that his tax plan was irresponsible; others told us McCain's campaign was "crawling with lobbyists" and that he wanted to give power to "union thugs."

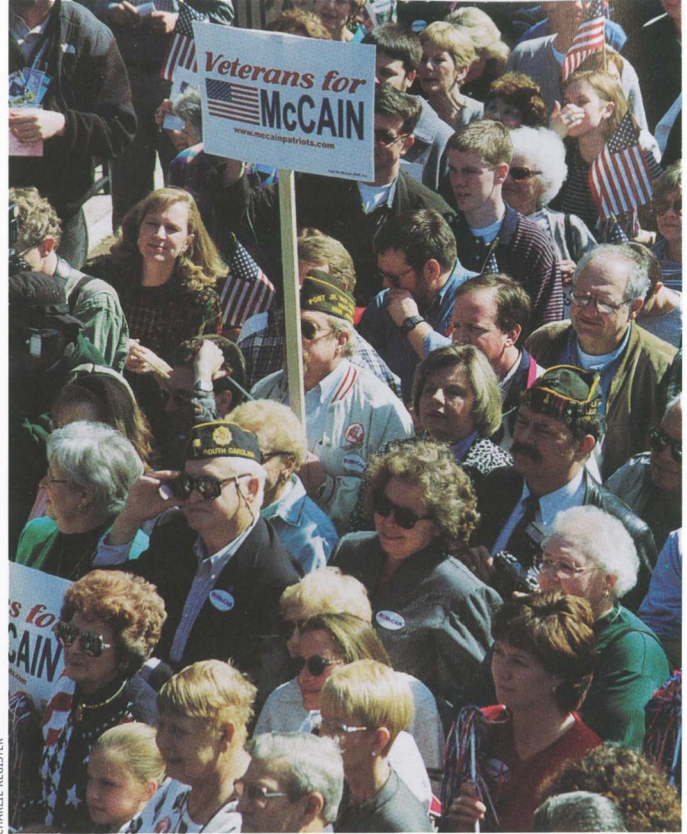
In the midst of the ad war, the candidates were popping up everywhere. They trekked back and forth across the state — to oyster roasts in the Low Country, book signings in the Upstate, barbecues in the midlands — always with smiles on their faces, wanting to meet each of us.

And all of them found their way to Furman, which in the process received a substantial amount of national publicity. First, Alan Keyes stumped in the Mickel Community Square of Johns Hall. Then Gary Bauer endorsed McCain on the patio of the University Center overlooking the rose garden. Finally, Bush wrapped up his South Carolina campaign in the Furman dining hall.

We also found that the road to the White House has a lot of telephones. The messages on our answering machines were endless. Rep. Henry Hyde of Illinois, chair of the House Judiciary Committee, wanted us to vote for Bush "for the sake of the children." Charlie Condon, attorney general of South Carolina, asked us to vote for Bush because "he shares our values." Even Democrats, who didn't have their own primary, were encouraged by state Sen. Phil Leventis and South Carolinians for Reform to vote for McCain, while Keyes told us to "vote our conscience." And all of these phone calls ended with the hope that God would bless us.

Thankfully, on February 19, God did bless us as the primary finally arrived, Bush was declared the winner, and the candidates roared off to Michigan, the next stop on the journey to the White House. South Carolina was suddenly old news, and we were left to catch our collective breath and sort through all we had just seen and heard.

While South Carolina had a front-row seat for two weeks of the 2000 presidential race, public opinion polls reveal that most of the country is just now starting to tune in to the campaign. However, the early primaries and the pre-convention lull that many Americans ignored play an important part in the long journey to become president — and foreshadow what will come this fall.



An enthusiastic crowd of John McCain supporters and interested onlookers turned out February 16 for a rally at the University Center. The event drew substantial media coverage when Gary Bauer, who had earlier been one of McCain's rivals for the nomination, stepped forward to say that he was endorsing the Arizona senator, whom he described as the GOP's "best shot" for regaining the White House.

★ ★ ★ Excess Baggage ★ ★ ★

The presidential nominating process in our country has evolved over the years to give the public a larger role in the process. Instead of the leaders of each political party brokering backroom deals to select the party's candidate for the general election, a series of primaries and caucuses now allows the voters to decide the nominee. Presumably, the process produces candidates who are more appealing to voters. The irony, however, is that the campaigning required to win the primaries often burdens the nominees with excess baggage as they head into the general election.

Both George Bush and Al Gore spent part of the summer trying to rid themselves of some of the baggage they accumulated during the nominating process. For Bush, one of the first things to cast off was the reputation he had earned as being too scripted and inaccessible to the press. Although the image may have been a bit unfair — compared to McCain's open door policy with the press, anyone would have seemed inaccessible — Bush needed to ditch this label. Contrary to popular belief, reporters are not nearly as concerned about a candidate's ideology as they are about their ability to talk to the candidate regularly, so they can do their jobs. Bush seems to have overcome this problem by spending more time with reporters on his plane this summer, chatting informally with them during trips.

Bush also spent the summer trying to put the compassion back into his self-proclaimed "compassionate conservatism." After the New Hampshire loss, a series of events focused more attention on his traditional conservative positions, and

particularly those issues linked to the Religious Right. He appeared at Bob Jones University, which is not unusual for a politician in South Carolina. But the national press saw this as a change in strategy designed to appeal to religious conservatives. Around the same time, the National Right to Life Committee endorsed Bush, bringing the abortion issue into the headlines.

Although this did energize Republican voters for Bush, he seemed to realize he was not likely to win the general election by being "the conservative candidate." He needed to re-emphasize his theme of compassionate conservatism to gain the support of moderates and independents who are suspicious of the Religious Right. To this end, Bush used much of the summer to highlight his stands on such issues as education, health care and Social Security. News reports followed his lead.

Gore has also tried to rid himself of some unwanted baggage. The press has long considered him boring, and the Democratic primaries did little to change this image. The televised debates between Gore and Bill Bradley were steeped in complex policy nuances and contained little levity. At times, both candidates were compared to pieces of furniture. In this media age, where the lines of news and entertainment are often blurred, such an image can be lethal to one's chances of becoming president.

Consequently, Gore embarked on an effort to show his more personable side and to shed his boring persona. During the summer, he made more appearances with his oldest daughter and his wife, both of whom are livelier with audiences — and bring out the lighter side of Gore. In terms



The Democratic primaries were not as intense as those on the Republican side, and Al Gore didn't even campaign in South Carolina. But the vice president had actually visited Furman before: in October 1987, during his first run for the presidency. Sen. Gore of Tennessee spoke to a packed house in Daniel Recital Hall, as students filled both the seats and the stage.

of strategy, it was easier to put them in front of the audience and let Gore laugh at their comments than for Gore to develop a sense of comedic timing.

While the summer and the conventions have given the candidates opportunities to shed some of this negative baggage, other issues and actions will not be so easily cast aside. Bush will have to deal with continuing fallout from the Bob Jones visit and his willingness to defer to states on the Confederate flag issue. He must also try to eradicate his image as a policy lightweight, which wasn't helped when he flunked a reporter's quiz about the leaders of various countries. Although Bush probably has a better understanding of policy than he is given credit for, he has tried to deal with questions about his grasp of the issues by joking in a self-deprecating way and claiming that he will delegate to the experts he hires. (This, of course, is easier than actually learning all the policy details.)

For Gore, more problematic than being boring is his reputation for being mean-spirited. This side of Gore emerged during the primaries, when he decided to attack Bradley after Bradley became a serious threat. Gore began the summer using the same tactics against Bush. When Bush made a proposal, Gore labeled it "risky" and suggested that Bush was "unethical" for supporting some of these policies. Gore defended himself by saying he was delineating the differences between his positions and those of his opponents, but his aggressive style and the personal nature of some of his attacks have been in stark contrast to the relatively upbeat tone of both Bradley and Bush. Although Gore's negative strategy was successful in the primaries, voters, and particularly independents, have been turned off by negative campaigning in recent years.

★ Expanding the Entourage ★

In addition to redefining themselves and disposing of some of the excess baggage from the primaries, the candidates must begin to expand the entourage traveling with them on their journey to the White House. After all, the one with the most fellow travelers on Election Day historically has become president. The nominating process encourages candidates to appeal to members of their own party, but winning in the fall requires moving beyond the party. Bush and Gore have both attempted to expand their partisan bases.

McCain, who attracted many independent and Democratic voters (confirming that one does need Republican support to win the Republican nomination), had no sooner suspended his campaign than Gore and Bush began wooing his supporters. These mostly moderate voters could be pivotal in a close election, and because they are not strong party loyalists, it is not clear which way they lean, making them a worthwhile target for either candidate.

Both Bush and Gore have taken steps to win these people. Both have spoken with McCain and have praised his leadership on different issues. Bush and Gore have also adopted McCain's language of reform. Oddly enough, Gore has advocated a version of McCain's campaign finance reform. No, he has not forgotten about the pictures of him with the Buddhist nuns at a Democratic fund-raiser in 1996. Instead, he has pointed to them and the Clinton Administration's difficulties with this issue as evidence that reforms should be welcomed by all. Bush, too, has talked about reform, but rather than campaign finance, he has stressed the need for changes in education and Social Security.



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Alan Keyes was the first of the Republican candidates to visit Furman this year, speaking to about 125 people February 3 in the Mickel Community Square of Johns Hall. Keyes, who was an ambassador to the United Nations during the Reagan administration, asserted that he was the most genuine conservative among the candidates and could best meet America's moral challenges.

Bush and Gore have also reached out to Hispanic voters, many of whom are relatively new to the political process. Hispanics comprise a growing voting bloc and have become an important population in several states with large numbers of electoral votes, including Texas, Florida, California and New York. As both candidates address Hispanic groups in Spanish, we can also expect them to advertise on Spanish language stations during the fall campaign. In fact, Bush began running an ad this summer targeting New York's Puerto Rican population. It features his nephew, who is Hispanic. The ad has run in both Spanish and English.

★ ★ ★ **What Lies Ahead** ★ ★ ★

Most of the American public is just starting to pay attention to this journey to the White House. Much of what we will see has already been tested in the primaries and during the summer. So, what can we expect in the coming months?

First, the debates between the candidates should be revealing, not so much in terms of their policies as in their styles. Their strengths and weaknesses will be on display. We will see how well Bush's strategy of joking about his lack of knowledge and his plans to delegate the details will work compared to Gore's command of policy. Likewise, we will see if Gore's substantive knowledge will overcome his mind-numbing presentation when contrasted with Bush's upbeat delivery and self-deprecating humor. Both men have a temper, and the debates will be a good forum to watch how well they control their anger when challenged or misrepresented.

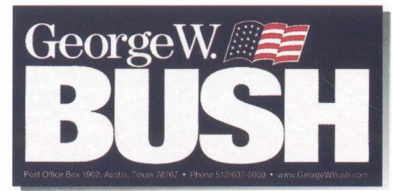
A second area that will be worth watching is how the candidates use different types of media. We have become accustomed to the air war during campaigns, the bombardment of radio and television commercials. However, the ground war is rapidly becoming the most interesting facet of campaigns. Candidates and groups who want to influence elections have found that more direct, personal communication with the voters is effective — and increasingly easier. Voters nationwide can expect mail, and those in the battleground states, where the outcome is unclear and the electoral votes are numerous, can expect phone calls and visits. In addition, e-mail has become an important way of communicating with voters.

Which brings us to a third issue: the involvement of political parties and groups outside of the candidates' campaigns. We have heard a lot in recent years about "soft money," the unlimited contributions to political parties that are supposed to be designated for "party-building activities." In the wake of court rulings, the parties have been able to interpret a wide range of activities as party-building, including ads that make it clear, without explicitly saying so, which candidate the party hopes voters will choose.

While the candidates cannot formally coordinate with the party on the content of these ads, the commercials can be helpful to candidates. Beginning this summer, the Democratic National Committee spent money in key states on ads that criticize some of Bush's proposals and provide background information supportive of Gore. The Republican National Committee responded quickly with its own ads. In recent years, the candidates have been happy to let the parties do much of the attacking during the campaigns.



CHARLIE REGISTER



JOHN ROBERTS

A packed crowd enjoyed an indoor fireworks display February 18, when George W. Bush concluded his South Carolina primary campaign with a rally in Daniel Dining Hall. The building survived the histrionics, and Bush's victory the next day helped blunt the momentum McCain had built in New Hampshire and served as a turning point in the Texas governor's drive for the Republican nomination.

Beyond the parties, interest groups, individuals and other organizations have increasingly used independent expenditures to wage their own campaigns on behalf of candidates. Some have been very visible, choosing the traditional route of television and radio ads to support or attack a candidate. But many of them prefer the ground war. To mobilize voters they use such strategies as push polls, which are telephone surveys that feature loaded questions designed to influence rather than measure public opinion. They endorse candidates in mailings to potentially sympathetic voters and circulate, through the media, Internet or e-mail, information that may or may not be accurate.

The Christian Coalition is known for its effectiveness in mobilizing its members; Bush would be the beneficiary of a major push by this group. Gore expects help from labor unions, and indications are that he will get it. Some unions have November 7 (Election Day) written into their contracts as a holiday, which not only makes it easier for their members to vote but also provides a vast army of volunteers to help the Democrats get people to the polls and conduct last-minute campaigning.

The independent efforts of parties and groups can have a tremendous impact on the campaign. These groups' activities affect the strategies of the candidates, who have to respond to information these organizations inject into the campaign. Because voters cannot always tell where the candidates' control ends and that of outside groups begins, candidates may be held accountable for things these independent groups do. While the plethora of information provided during the campaign may be useful to voters, the trick is figuring out who is paying for the mailings, phone calls and ads — and

who should be held accountable for their accuracy and fairness.

Finally, there are the "forgotten" travelers in this process — the third party candidates. With limited exposure and resources, none of these candidates will have the sort of impact Ross Perot did in 1992, but they could force Bush and Gore to take a few detours to keep factions within their respective parties on track. For Bush, probable Reform Party candidate Pat Buchanan could lure away protectionist elements within the Republican Party, and for Gore, the threat is that some union supporters might find Green Party candidate Ralph Nader an attractive option. Neither Buchanan or Nader is likely to win electoral votes, but in the battleground states, just a few percent of the electorate going to a third party candidate could decide whether all of the state's electoral votes go to Bush or Gore.

While the entire country will feel the effects of the campaign and watch it unfold, there are a handful of pivotal states that could go to either candidate and that have large numbers of electoral votes — California, New York, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Michigan and Ohio, for example. The journey to the White House will go directly through these states.

For those of you living in one of these key Campaign 2000 battlegrounds, consider yourselves warned. That rumbling you hear will soon be a full-fledged stampede. Your peace and quiet will return November 8. ●

Danielle Vinson '89 has taught political science at Furman since 1995. A specialist in American politics, she earned her Ph.D. from Duke University.