'To injure no man, but to bless all mankind'

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Learning *Some colleges seek to nurture student entrepreneurs, providing dorm rooms that double as offices.* **Page 11**

Books *Joseph Ellis explores George Washington's character and personality in a fascinating new biography.* **Page 15**

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Can it really be this close, again?

■ Four years after a disputed election, voters go to polls today in one of the most intense races in a half century.

By LIZ MARLANTES and LINDA FELDMANN
STAFF WRITERS

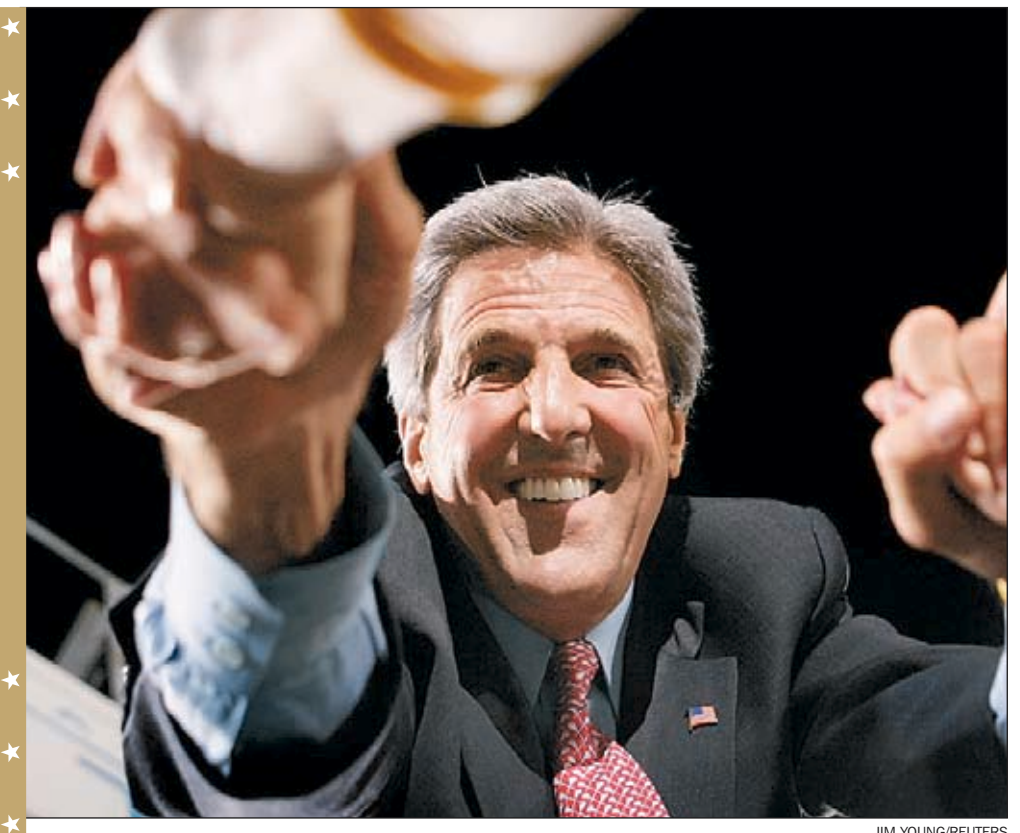
Decision 2004

WASHINGTON – Four years after a disputed election that left the nation bitterly and almost evenly divided, Americans return to the polls today facing yet another excruciatingly tight contest that could defy history by once again coming down to a handful of votes in a few key states.

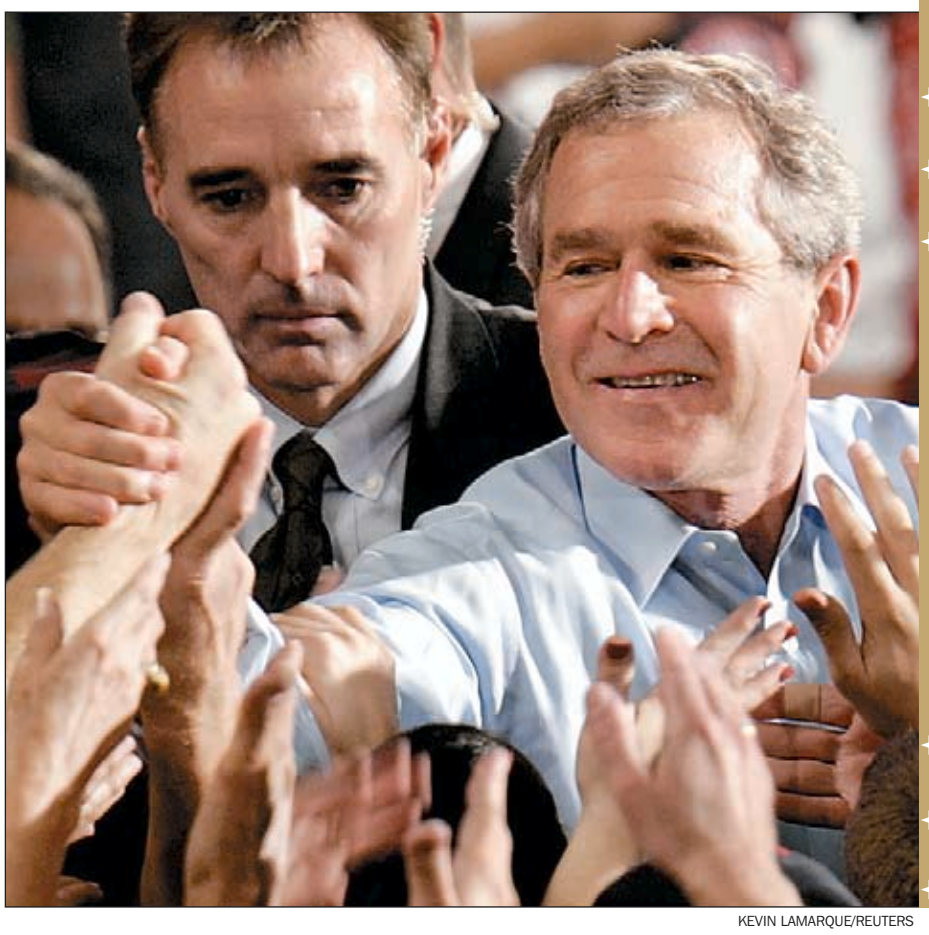
Despite the longest and most expensive campaign in US politics, and an election cycle that has included a number of dramatic events – including the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, the Iraq war, and an economic recession – neither President Bush nor Sen. John Kerry appears to have gained any discernible edge among an electorate that looks as stubbornly fixed as it did in 2000.

The closeness of the race is particularly unusual, given that a campaign involving a sitting president almost always plays out as a referendum on the incumbent's record – with the public typically coming down

See **CAMPAIGN** *page 10*



JIM YOUNG/REUTERS



KEVIN LAMARQUE/REUTERS

Winner's tough task: governing

■ The race has left Americans even more polarized, creating a daunting challenge for next president to unite a nation.

By PETER GRIER
STAFF WRITER

WASHINGTON – After the thrill of victory fades and the inaugural balls have ended, the winner of today's election may face an unpleasant reality: Winning was the easy part. Governing the nation in the wake of such a close and hard-fought campaign could be an extraordinarily difficult task.

That's due to the nature of both US problems and politics. It's hard enough to deal with Iraq and terrorism – not to mention the future of healthcare and Social Security. It's that much harder to do so at a time of record deficits, with a Congress that seems to grow more polarized by the day.

This doesn't mean the presidency has been rendered powerless. If nothing else, the occupant of the Oval Office will make world-shaping military and foreign policy decisions from 2005 through 2008.

It does mean that George Bush or John Kerry will probably have to be flexible in his domestic agenda, while steering a careful course between partisanship and accommodation.

"Whoever wins, I don't think they're in for a happy couple of years," says Gary Jacobson, a political scientist at the University of California, San Diego.

See **GOVERN** *page 10*

Arab view dims on Iraq rebels

■ Insurgent tactics are drawing rebukes from the Arab world.

By DAN MURPHY – STAFF WRITER
and NICHOLAS BLANFORD – CORRESPONDENT

CAIRO AND BEIRUT – More than a year and a half after the US invasion of Iraq, popular support in the Arab world for the insurgents is softening – somewhat.

With images of civilian casualties from US airstrikes set against insurgent slayings of unarmed Iraqi police and civilians, Arabs and the Arab media are increasingly struggling with the question of how far to support an insurgency that sometimes uses tactics they feel are immoral.

Conversations with ordinary people, intellectuals, and politicians illustrate that clearer lines are being drawn in people's minds between what is seen as "legitimate" and "illegitimate" resistance.

"People are coming … to grips with complicated realities," says Abdel Moneim Said, director of Egypt's Al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies. "We can't deal with the emergence of groups like the ones who bombed Taba here in Egypt until we understand that some of these so-called resistance groups

See **IRAQ** *page 4*