

America votes

AKM MAZHARUL ISLAM

LET'S take a closer look at the two candidates running for president this year.

George W Bush: The Republican

George Walker Bush was born on July 6, 1946, in New Haven, Connecticut, the first child of future president George H.W. Bush. In 1948, the family moved to Odessa, Texas, where the senior Bush went to work in the oil business. George W. grew up mainly in Midland, Texas, and Houston, and later attended two of his father's alma maters, Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, and Yale.

After graduating from Yale with a history degree in 1968, Bush joined the Texas Air National Guard, where he served as a part-time fighter pilot until 1973. After receiving an MBA from Harvard Business School in 1975, he returned to Texas, where he established his own oil and gas business. In 1977 he met and married Laura Welch, a librarian. The couple has twin daughters, Jenna and Barbara, born in 1981. They also have two dogs (Spotty and Barney), a cat (India), and an armadillo (Wetback).

Coming from a political family -- his grandfather Prescott Bush had been a senator from Connecticut -- George W. had been interested in politics since childhood. In 1977, he entered the fray himself, unsuccessfully running for US Congress from the West Texas district that included his hometown of Midland.

Following his defeat, Bush returned to the oil business. Bush then headed to Washington to become a paid adviser to his father's successful 1988 presidential campaign. After the election, Bush returned to Texas and headed up a group of investors to buy the Texas Rangers baseball team.

Bush again entered politics in 1993, running for the Texas governorship. Although he had a tough opponent in the immensely popular incumbent Ann Richards, he created a clear agenda focused on issues such as education and juvenile justice and won with 53 percent of the vote. He was reelected in 1998, not long before he announced plans to run for presi-

dent. During the 2000 campaign, Bush characterized himself as a "compassionate conservative," a somewhat vague description meant to evoke a kinder, gentler Republican. On the core issues, Bush adhered closely to the traditional conservative line, favouring small government, tax cuts, a strong military, and opposing gun control and abortion. His choice of running mate, Dick Cheney, former secretary of defense during his father's administration, provided his campaign with seasoned Washington political experience.

The 2000 election between George W. Bush and Vice President Al Gore was one of the closest in the country's history. By early evening on election night, it was apparent that whoever won Florida would win the election. Bush's razor thin margin of about 1,200 votes prompted an automatic recount. The case ultimately ended up in the US Supreme Court. Bush officially became the president-elect on December 13, after the Supreme Court reversed a decision by the Florida Supreme Court to allow manual recounts of ballots in some Florida counties. With Florida in his column, Bush won the presidency with 271 electoral votes, just one more than he needed, although he lost the popular vote by half a million. The Supreme Court decision generated enormous controversy, with critics asserting that the Supreme Court, and not the electorate, had effectively determined the outcome of the presidential election.

John F. Kerry: The Democrat John Kerry was born on December 11, 1943 at Fittsington Military Hospital in Denver, Colorado, where his father, Richard, who had volunteered to fly DC-3s in the Army Air Corps in World War II, was recovering from a bout with tuberculosis. Not long after Senator Kerry's birth, his family returned home to Massachusetts.

A graduate of Yale University, John Kerry entered the Navy after graduation, becoming a Swift Boat officer, serving on a gunboat in the Mekong Delta in Vietnam. He received a Silver Star, Bronze Star, and three Purple Hearts for his service in combat.

By the time Senator Kerry returned home from Vietnam, he felt compelled to question decisions he believed were being made to protect those in positions of authority in Washington at the expense of the soldiers carrying on the fighting in Vietnam. Kerry was a co-founder of the Vietnam Veterans of America and became a spokesperson for the Vietnam Veterans Against the War. In April, 1971, in testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee,

he asked the question of his fellow citizens: "How do you ask a man to be the last man to die for a mistake?"

Kerry then went to law school at Boston College before becoming a top prosecutor. Kerry took on organised crime and put the number two mob boss in New England behind bars. He modernised the Middlesex County District Attorney's office, creating an innovative rape crisis unit, and as a lawyer in private practice he worked long and hard to prove the innocence of a man wrongly given a life sentence for a murder he did not commit.

In 1984, after winning election as Lieutenant Governor in 1982, Kerry ran and was elected to serve in the United States Senate, running and winning a successful PAC-free Senate race and defeating a Republican opponent buoyed by Ronald Reagan's reelection coattails. Senator Kerry was re-elected in 1990, and again in 1996, defeating the popular Republican Governor William Weld in the most closely watched Senate race in the country. He is now serving his fourth term.

John Kerry entered the Senate with a reputation as a man of conviction. He confirmed that reputation by taking bold decisions on important issues. He helped provide health insurance for millions of low-income children. He has fought to improve public education, protect our natural environment, and strengthen our economy. He has been praised as one of the leading environmentalists in the Senate, who stopped the Bush-Cheney plan to drill in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

As chairman of the Senate Select Committee on POW/MIA Affairs, he worked closely with John McCain to learn the truth about American soldiers missing in Vietnam and to normalize relations with that country. As the ranking Democrat on the East Asian and Pacific Affairs Subcommittee, he is a leading expert on that region, including North Korea.

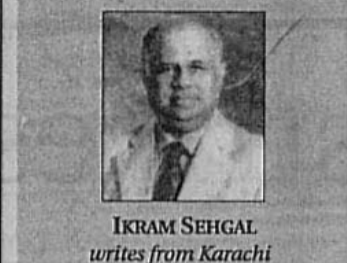
Years before September 11th, John Kerry wrote *The New War*, an in-depth study of America's national security in the 21st century. He worked on a bipartisan basis to craft the American response to September 11, and has been a leading voice on American policy in Iraq and Afghanistan, the war on terrorism, the Middle East peace process, and Israel's security.

John Kerry is married to Teresa Heinz Kerry, and they have a big joint family that includes two daughters, three sons, one grandchild, and a German shepherd named Cym.

AKM Mazharul Islam writes from the Department of Anthropology, Minnesota State University, USA.

Too close to call

THE US Presidential Election 2004 takes place today, Tuesday, November 2. By tomorrow morning (that is if the many law-suits in several US states being planned by whichever party loses doesn't hold up the results) the world will know whether incumbent George W. Bush retains the presidency or has succumbed to the challenge of Senator John Kerry. What a difference a year makes! This time last year the Democratic party was down and out. The race for the Democratic presidential nomination being so open, as many as nine aspirants took the primary route. The early running had Governor Howard Dean of Vermont in the lead.



IKRAM SEHGAL writes from Karachi

With approval ratings of President Bush hitting higher than 70 percent in the polls, widespread apathy prevailed among the Democratic ranks. Until late 2003, Governor Dean was actually viewed by his Democratic peers as more of a sacrificial lamb to take on the Bush juggernaut. The quick victory in Iraq in April 2003 notwithstanding, the Bush administration soon found its post-war plans had not been well thought through, there were not enough troops on the ground to prevent the situation in Iraq from going awry. With casualties mounting daily, the Democrats sensed a political chink in the Bush armour that could be exploited. Governor Dean's early promise evaporated as the Democratic party establishment turned to an "acceptable" candidate among the nine contenders they thought was most electable -- John Kerry, the US Senator from Massachusetts.

Given the incumbent's job approval ratings and his tough stance on "terrorism," it was always going to be an uphill struggle for the Kerry-Edwards ticket. The Democrats are greater in number, but in the conservative southern states, the Democratic faithful tend to vote Republican, the legacy of Ronald Reagan and his so-called "Reagan Democrats." Part of the grand strategy of putting Edwards on the Kerry ticket was to woo the Southern Democrats with one of their own: A self-made millionaire-lawyer from a humble worker background, Edward's appeal

is to a wide swath of the blue-collar white working class. While favourite son Edwards may not win either North or South Carolina, the critical state of Ohio, which voted Republican for Bush in 2000, has lost a large number of manufacturing jobs, and is up for grabs. While the electorate has focused on Kerry as opposed to Bush, so has the ruthless dirty tricks department of the Republican party.

Bush campaign manager Karl Rove would be an asset to any organisation in any country. Widely credited with planning the campaign that got Bush Junior elected in 2000, Rove is the "eminence grise" in the Republican shadows who plans grand strategy, and then makes sure the strategy is implemented. Kerry's strong suit was his Vietnam-veteran tag -- he not only volunteered, he was wounded and decorated. In contrast, Bush avoided the draft (and Vietnam) by enrolling in the Texas National Guard as a fighter pilot. Americans love war heroes, but living in a very macho fantasy world, they seem to have lost the distinction between real heroes and make-believe movie ones.

Carefully building Bush's image as a Texan macho personality, even landing as a co-pilot of a fighter aircraft on an aircraft carrier, Rove started a campaign to neutralise Kerry's Vietnam advantage. A group called "Swift Boat Veterans for Truth" spent millions of dollars of ads on prime time TV demolishing Kerry's Vietnam record. Even though most of it was outright lies, some of the mud did stick. In the end, instead of repeatedly emphasising the difference between someone who was virtually a draft dodger and himself, a decorated Vietnam vet, Kerry has been only too happy to give Vietnam only a passing mention.

The Democratic convention in Boston gave a boost to the Kerry-Edwards ticket, but it was not the surge that they expected. By the end of August, when the Republic convention in New York came along, the Democratic party campaign had become flat, on the other hand Bush took a commanding lead, opening up a 8-9 percent lead in the polls. Throughout August and September,

AS I SEE IT

All the polls show that Kerry has closed the gap on the very eve of elections, the electorate is almost evenly split, and Kerry might even win the popular vote. However the national popular vote will not dictate the outcome. What matters is the electoral college.

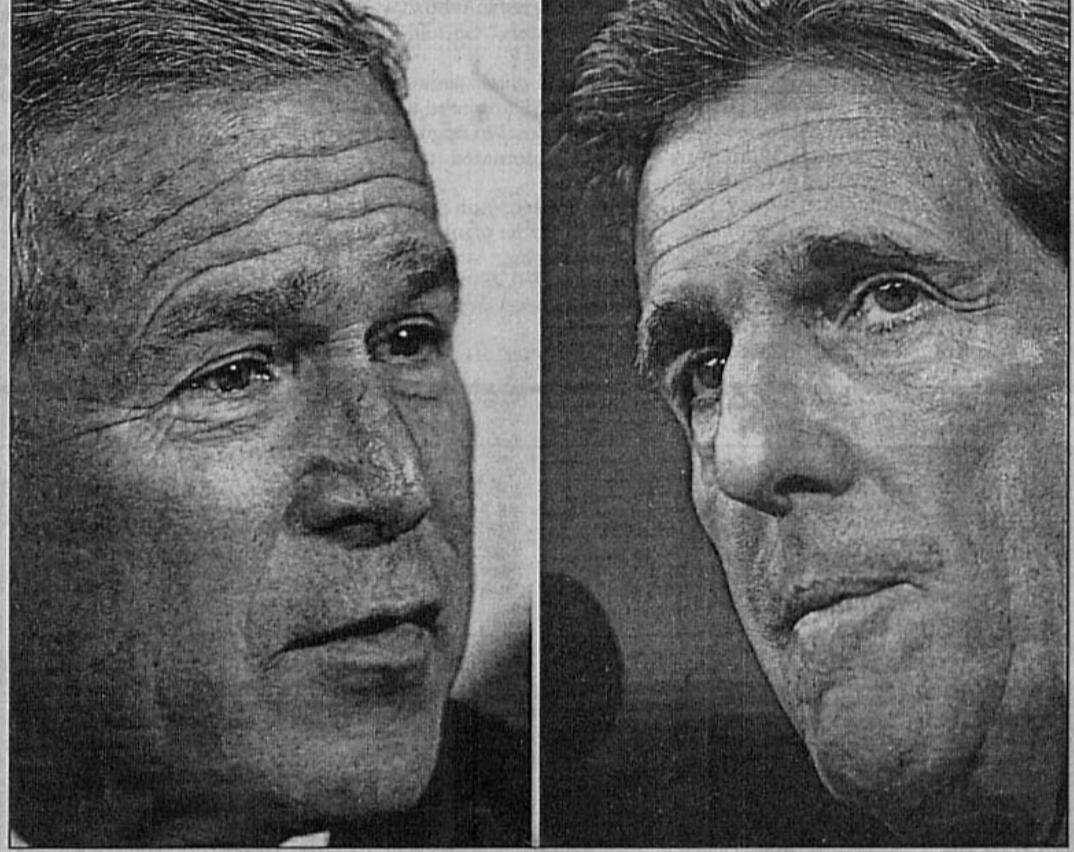
this gap fluctuated only slightly. While the Iraq situation has gone from bad to bloody and Bush's job approval ratings have dropped considerably, Kerry had not been able to close the gap, particularly because of the concentrated attack by the Republican on his perceived (1) "liberal" US Senate voting record, and (2) frequent change of stance on various issues (flip-flopping).

Almost all neutral observers agree that Kerry won all three debates, the first one at the University of Miami by such a margin it shook the Republicans out of their complacency. Kerry was calm and collected, looking positively presidential, the President himself looked impatient, harassed, and petulant. Kerry scored and scored big, enough to close the gap in the polls. From a one-horse race it became a real contest. In the second debate, Bush came back, but most observers still gave it to Kerry. In the third debate, Bush performed well but it was clearly another outright Kerry win!

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Knowledgeable observers give Bush the clear edge in 21 states having 181 electoral votes while Kerry is leading in 18 states having 168 electoral votes. In 12 states with 168 electoral votes, the race is too close to call. Either one of the candidates has to get at least 90 of those electoral votes to win the election. All said and done, it is the large number of undecided voters who will swing the outcome. A look at the US map state by state will show the blue (Democrat) on both the fringes of the continent enclosing a wide swath of red (Republican) in the middle. The real battleground states are Florida (27 electoral votes), Pennsylvania (27), and Ohio (21). With Pennsylvania leaning towards Kerry, and Florida towards Bush, the fight for the heart and soul of the election will be in Ohio. Whoever wins in Ohio will win the presidency.

Nizam Sehgal, a former Major of Pakistan Army, is a political analyst and columnist.



What Muslims in the US are thinking

FAIZ CHOWDHURY writes from Washington DC at muslimvoice.org

IF Muslims in America can mobilise themselves, they can make a big difference in the today's presidential election. That was the view of the founding Director of the Muslim Electorate Council, Aslam Abdullah: "We have to be realistic, Muslims can not be influential in all states -- only in the states where race

is very tight, such as Arizona, Oregon, Colorado, Minnesota, and Florida." The "Electorate Council," which cross referencing between mosques and county registration lists, estimates that there are two million Muslims eligible to vote in the United States but only 57 percent of them are registered voters.

The total is divided more or less equally among African-American Muslims, Muslims with Arab roots,

and Muslims with South Asian roots. Abdullah sees Muslim influence making itself felt only if 85 percent of eligible voters are registered and at least 70 percent of those eligible come out to vote.

He sees 37 congressional races and five senate races where Muslims could make the difference, should they vote in a block.

Whether Muslims come out to vote, he says, will be influenced by hard-to-measure factors. "If Democratic candidates involve and include Muslims in their campaign, many will come out and vote. A lot of Muslims feel intimidated in light of the Patriot Act and (use of) secret evidence, where anything could happen."

In Michigan, where the race could potentially be close, Arab Americans make up about 100,000 of the state's 4 million voters. Their vote could swing local races as well as the state's presidential vote, but there are also a well established and relatively well-to-do immigrant constituency that could influence the outcome in other ways. "The Arab vote is important and it is important to get them involved because they are willing to contribute financially and contribute workers for campaign," says Ed Sarpoulos, vice president EPIC-MIRA, an independent polling firm in Lansing, Michigan.

"It is a perfect opportunity for people to exercise their responsibility and become more politically aware," says Hassan Mansouri, a government affairs co-ordinator for the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), one of the national groups running the registration drive. "Never before have the stakes seemed so high for Muslim Americans," he asserted.

"There is a sense of crisis in the Muslim community," says Jamal Gabobe, a US citizen born in Somaliland. Gabobe, who teaches comparative literature at the University of Washington, has been in the country for decades, but says he is registered to vote for the first time in 2004.

"There are a lot of issues coalescing, with the Iraq war and war on terrorism. Being a Muslim, even if you are not interested in politics, you have to react to be heard."

A survey commissioned by the Arab American institute and conducted by Zogby International showed that among the electorate, Bush's favourability rating declined to 38 percent in January 2004 from 83 percent in October 2001 (though now it is up in the forties).

Anecdotally, at least, the trend is the same among Muslim Americans. But in absolute terms, the Muslim community is small and their ability to affect the outcome in this year's elections depends on influence in states and local elections where voters are quite evenly divided.

In Florida, where the presidential vote was bitterly fought and contested down to the last vote in 2000, there is a large Muslim population, which could bump the state into the Democratic camp. On the flip-side, say some analysts, many Jewish voters may switch their vote to Republican, cancelling out this effect.

The opportunity of garnering Muslim and Arab American votes has not been lost on the Democratic candidates. Let us see if this has any effect on the election.

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