

## Reflections of the Class of 2001

### The Night American Politics Stood Still

By Christopher Karlesky

During our first three years at F&M, members of the Class of 2001 witnessed some of the most significant news events of the late 20th century. We were shocked to learn of the death of Princess Diana during Orientation Weekend in September 1997. We were saddened by the massacre at Columbine High School in 1999. And we waited with great anticipation to see what, if anything, would happen when the calendar switched to Jan. 1, 2000. Would the dreaded Y2K bug leave us without working computers for the spring semester of our junior year? Luckily, we—and our hard drives—survived the turn of the century.

So it was fitting that another major news story took place during our senior year: the most contentious and divisive presidential election in our lifetime, and perhaps in American history. Vice President Al Gore and Texas Governor George W. Bush vied to become our 43rd president in a political atmosphere already divided by the impeachment of President Bill Clinton. One of our classmates remembers the late Professor of History John Andrew providing an impressive prediction the week before the election, just days before the professor passed away unexpectedly. “It’s going to be so close,” Andrew said, “that it might depend on the weather.”

As Election Day became Election Night, several television networks called the state of Florida for Gore, giving the vice president an advantage that seemed sure to put him in the White House. Then came the first in a series of astonishing developments. The networks were wrong, and Florida was too close to call. In the early-morning hours, they called Florida for Bush, only to pull the state back into the undecided column an hour later. “I was working in the psych building that night,” one classmate remembers. “There was no TV over there, so I kept calling my roommate to get updates. I remember him telling me Gore won Florida, then retracting it on the next call!”

By sunrise the next morning—and many mornings after that—we still didn’t know the results of the election. Recounts, “hanging chads” and court battles dominated the news. By the time the U.S. Supreme Court ruled for Bush in a 5-4 decision, 36 days had passed, and we were in the middle of final exams. It marked the beginning of a new era in American politics. And for the Class of 2001, it was another momentous event during our time at dear old F&M.