IME was - say, two months ago - when typing the phrase "miserable failure" into the Google search box produced an unexpected result: the White House's official biography of President George W. Bush.

But now the president has a fight on his hands for the top ranking - from former President Jimmy Carter, Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton and the author-filmmaker Michael Moore.

The unlikely electoral battle is being waged through "Google bombing," or manipulating the Web's search engines to produce, in this case, political commentary. Unlike Web politicking by other means, like hacking into sites to deface or alter their message, Google bombing is a group sport, taking advantage of the Web-indexing innovation that led Google to search-engine supremacy.

The perpetrators succeed by recruiting a small group of accomplices to link from their Web sites to a target site using specific anchor text (the clickable words in a link). The more high-traffic sites that link a Web page to a particular phrase, the more Google tends to associate that page with the phrase - even if, as in the case of the president's official biography, the term does not occur on the destination site.

"I'm actually surprised how easy it was to do," said the mastermind of the Bush effort, George Johnston, 46, a computer programmer in Bellevue, Wash., who writes a liberal-leaning Web log called Old Fashioned Patriot (oldfashionedpatriot.blogspot.com). "It took about six weeks to get Bush's biography as the No. 1 result. I had no idea when I started that I'd get people all over the world involved."

Google bombing has quickly become an armchair sport among those who have a message to broadcast and perhaps a bit too much time on their hands. For nearly a year, the No. 1 search result on Google for the term "weapons of mass destruction" has been a satirical Web page made to resemble an error message that reads, "These Weapons of Mass Destruction Cannot Be Displayed."

The Liberty Round Table, a libertarian group, started a Google bomb that linked the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a nutrition advocacy group, with
the term "food Nazis." (As a follow-up, the group is trying to make the Internal Revenue Service site the No. 1 Google result for the term "organized crime.") Other recent Google bombs have sought to associate President Bush, Senator Clinton and Senator Rick Santorum, a Pennsylvania Republican, with various unprintable phrases.

Google plays down the significance of Google bombing, saying the search results merely reflect what is actually happening on the Web.

"We're only seeing it with obscure queries where there's really not that much action on the Web about them," said Craig Silverstein, Google's director of technology. "I don't think it's possible to do this sort of thing on queries with well-defined results like 'I.B.M.' So given that it only affects one query out of the more than 200 million a day we handle, it's hard to see it becoming much of a problem."

But some in the industry say Google may be more worried than it lets on. The company's success, to a large extent, has been built on its search algorithm's ability to return relevant Web pages and weed out irrelevant or outright bogus results. The growing popularity of Google bombing can't be a welcome development for a company that is expected to begin selling stock to the public in a few months.

"Google says they're just reflecting what's on the Web, but they're actually reflecting a very small number of people who are trying to manipulate the system," said Danny Sullivan, who edits Search Engine Watch (www.searchenginewatch.com). "Google bombing will never go away, but Google has got to make it less rewarding for people to spend time doing this."

Google certainly isn't the only search engine whose results can be gamed by users acting in concert. President Bush's biography is also the No. 1 search result for "miserable failure" on Yahoo, which draws on Google's technology and that of HotBot; it's the No. 2 result on MSN Search. All search engines, to varying degrees, analyze links in calculating the relevancy of a page for a particular query. Seed the Web with enough links pointing to the same site using the same anchor text, and you alter the search results. The effect is magnified with less popular search phrases, since there are far fewer competing links.

Some Google bombs may have been accomplished with as few as 20 links. What is important is not the number of links, but rather the popularity of the sites doing the linking and the relative obscurity of the search term.

Bombers aim at Google for the same reason Willie Sutton robbed banks - that's where the payoff is. Google handles more than 200 million requests a day and has a 34.9 percent share of online searches in the United States. The nearest rival is Yahoo, with 27.7 percent, according to comScore Networks, which tracks consumer behavior.
People have tried to manipulate results ever since search engines appeared on the Web in 1995. An industry of "search engine optimizers" has grown up around the practice of tweaking a company's Web site so that it ranks high for certain keywords. Less ethical optimizers create shadow domains that funnel users to a site through misleading redirects or set up bogus doorway pages festooned with nothing but keywords.

Search engines forbid this kind of blatant gaming for commercial purposes, and Google regularly banishes sites from its search engine for such practices. But search engines cannot do much to deter groups of legitimate sites and blogs from working in concert to alter search results, as is happening with the Google bombs.

The first Google bomb exploded in the fall of 1999, when a search for the term "more evil than Satan himself" returned Microsoft's home page as the first result. At the time, Google denied that its search algorithm had been a victim of a prank. Rather, the company insisted, the ranking was an accurate reflection of the Web's many Microsoft critics referring to the company, independently of one another, as being more evil than Satan himself. But subsequent bombs made it clear that the Microsoft result was probably no accident.

Adam Mathes, a blogger and computer science major at Stanford, is generally credited with having coined the term "Google bombing" almost three years ago to describe the practice of manipulating Google results through seeding the Web with links. Mr. Mathes started a Google bomb as a joke at the expense of a friend and graphic artist, Andy Pressman, managing to get Mr. Pressman's blog listed as the first result for the phrase "talentless hack." Mr. Mathes later interviewed for a job at Google and felt compelled to confess his campaign.

"It was definitely a big thing for them," Mr. Mathes said. "They told me, 'Yes, we've had many meetings about Google bombing.' I don't think that's why I didn't get the job, but it probably wasn't the best career move."

Lately, Google bombs have taken a political turn. As coalition forces were poised to invade Iraq in March, Steve Lerner, a 22-year-old blogger and student at York University in Toronto, created a parody page of a Google search for "French military victories," which stated that no documents were found and suggested as an alternative search, "Did you mean: French military defeats?"

Mr. Lerner did not set out to game Google; his exploit turned out to be a kind of accidental bombing. Mr. Lerner simply posted the parody page on his blog (www.albinoblacksheep.com), where other bloggers began linking to it. Before long, the expanding lattice of links propelled the page to No. 1 with a bullet. The parody page still enjoys the top Google slot.

"I was just one small factor in the whole thing," Mr. Lerner said. "I put some links to the page and then some other people put links to it, and it just spread."

In late October, Mr. Johnston, a self-described "lefty," started a Google bomb to
tie Mr. Bush's biography to the phrase "miserable failure," watchwords used by the presidential campaign of Representative Richard A. Gephardt, Democrat of Missouri, to describe Mr. Bush's tenure.

Success came just six weeks into the campaign. Mr. Johnston says he is not sure how many links it took to capture the No. 1 spot, but a handful of blogs played a major role, including TalkLeft (www.talkleft.com) and Media Whores Online (www.medialawhotesonline.com).

"The reason it worked is that there were enough like-minded people who thought it was funny and spread it around," Mr. Johnston said. "It has to be something that makes people laugh or captures their imagination."

Of course, not everyone was laughing. When as the president's biography went to No. 1 for "miserable failure," some conservatives were convinced that so-called liberal control of the media had now been extended to search engines. A visitor to the comments page of freerepublic.com, a conservative news forum, suggested a boycott of Google and lamented: "How much longer are we going to have to put up with liberal bias in the media! It's bad enough that they have NPR but Google???

A few tech-savvy posters later explained how Google bombs work, and now forum members are supporting a counterbomb to tie "miserable failure" to Michael Moore. (Mr. Moore is already the No. 1 listing for the term on AOL search.)

Google maintains that such activity still is not hurting the overall quality of its service. The company says it expects Google bombing will soon go the way of most Web fads.

"It's the kind of thing people enjoy doing once because it's fun to be able to put up a page that can have a powerful effect," Mr. Silverstein said. "But it's not something people are going to want to spend their lives doing."

Clearly, anyone who goes through life trying to manipulate search engine results would have to be called a miserable failure. And how many of them can there be?