

Bush, Clinton defend each other

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In Canada, talk of global issues



TD Bank Financial Group via Reuters Frank McKenna, former Canadian ambassador to the United States, moderated a global affairs discussion between former US presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush in Toronto yesterday. (Td Bank Financial Group via Reuters)

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Reuters / May 30, 2009

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TORONTO - Former presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton traded jokes about life after the Oval Office and took turns defending each other as they shared a stage yesterday to discuss global affairs.

In a sold-out event billed as their first conversation on stage since they left office, Bush and Clinton disagreed politely about a couple of issues, backed each other on others, and refused to criticize anything current President Obama was doing.

Bush's vice president, Dick Cheney, has emerged as one of Obama's toughest critics and the staunchest defender of the Bush administration's policies after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

But Bush, saying he had hated it when former presidents criticized him after he took office, said, "Anything I say is not to be critical of my successor."

Bush, who has stayed mostly out of the public eye since leaving the White House in January, said he was enjoying the freedom of being a private citizen, but thanked the Toronto organizers "for giving me something to do."

The two-term Republican president from Texas said he had been taking on chores dictated by his wife, Laura, and had discovered the challenges of cleaning up after pets as he walked the family dog, Barney, around their Dallas neighborhood.

"There I was, the former president, with a plastic bag on my hand, picking up that which I had dodged for eight solid years," Bush said to laughs from the audience of 6,000.

Bush said he had phoned his mother to tell her about the Toronto event and she responded that Clinton had been spending so much time with his father, former president George H.W. Bush, in charity efforts that Clinton was "like my son."

Turning to Clinton, Bush joked, "So brother, it is good to be with you."

For his part, Clinton, a Democrat who was Bush's predecessor in office, said his new challenge was not saying anything that would get his wife, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, in trouble.

"No one cares what I say unless I mess up. . . . I have to think about what they will ask Hillary and President Obama tomorrow if I mess up," Clinton said.

A couple hundred people protested the event in downtown Toronto, aiming most of their anger at Bush's policies, including the US-led invasion of Iraq. During the two-hour event, each former president made a short speech and took turns answering questions about global affairs.

The moderator, former New Brunswick premier Frank McKenna, asked the politicians about Afghanistan, Cuba, Darfur, Rwanda, and gay rights. ■