



Bush and Clinton talk Iraq, Afghanistan in Toronto speech

BY JOSEPH BREAN, NATIONAL POST MAY 29, 2009 COMMENTS (2)

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Former Canadian Ambassador to the U.S. Frank McKenna (unseen) moderates a discussion on global affairs between former U.S. Presidents George W. Bush (L) and Bill Clinton at a convention center in this handout photo released by TD Bank from the event in Toronto, May 29, 2009.

Photograph by: Handout, Reuters

TORONTO — The "Bill and George Show," as former U.S. president George W. Bush called his public conversation with Bill Clinton Friday in Toronto, was a cordial affair, full of mutual deference and folksy humour.

Outside were accusations of war crimes by noisy protesters. But inside a downtown convention hall, there was not even a sneeze of interruption, let alone dissent or protest, from the largely corporate audience.

Instead, over two hours, the men traded compliments, cracked jokes, reflected on successes and failures, and dodged questions about Barack Obama.

Both told cute stories about post-presidency, such as the little boy who identified Clinton as "Hillary's wife."

But like Bush's joke about a guy at a store in Dallas who said, "Did anyone tell you that you look like George Bush? It must make you mad," it was humour of the gentleman's club retirement speech variety, and the laughter was polite.

"It takes a while to figure out you are not president any more," Clinton said. "All of a sudden, nobody plays a song (Hail to the Chief) when you walk into a room. It was the number 1 thing I noticed. It is totally disorienting."

Only Bush acknowledged the hundreds of thousands of dollars the two will receive for the event, saying "Clinton and I used to believe in free speech, so thanks for coming."

On Afghanistan, Clinton thanked Canada, calling the mission an "endeavour of uncertain outcome, but it is important . . . I hope you'll stay with us a while longer." He said that, with al-Qaida in Pakistan, it is an "inherently difficult situation" but "the right people are on the case."

Bush was more combative. "I don't buy the premise that our attention was diverted (by Iraq). I know it wasn't. I was there," he said. He said it is in America's best interest to spread democracy, and that to oppose it as an impossible goal for dictatorships is "the ultimate form of elitism."

The most heartfelt moment came in response to moderator Frank McKenna's blunt question to Clinton on Rwanda, "Why didn't you stop the killing?"

Clinton called this decision one of the two or three greatest regrets of his presidency. He said it caught his foreign policy establishment by surprise, and intervention would have been awkward because of the looming shadow of Bosnia and the lingering debacle of Somalia.

"By the time we got around to doing anything, it was basically over," he said. "I have no defence. We did not even have a meeting on it in the White House . . . I wish I had not been inactive."

Bush, likewise, explained his reluctance to send Marines into Darfur during the Janjaweed raids. "It would be like another invasion of another Muslim country," he said.

Both spoke of the problems of building international consensus in such situations, once unilateral action is ruled out.

"The UN is a vital institution, but it is not really meant for problem solving," Bush said.

The second-most emotional moment was McKenna's final question, and his plea that, because of our long and peaceful history of co-operation, Canadians feel a "profound sense of sadness" that we will now require passports to cross the U.S. border.

Bush replied that he tried to get an easy-pass into law, but did not know where that stands. Likewise, Clinton said he does not know anything about it, but that the question "got my attention, so I'm going back home to see if there's anything that can be done."

"No one believes that there is a terrorist cell in Toronto made up of Canadian citizens that wants to destroy Detroit," he said. But he also cited Millennium bomber Ahmed Ressam as a reason to keep the border as secure as possible.

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