

President's visit draws mixed response

By Daniel Griesemer
THE JAMBAR

One day after outlining a five-point plan to gradually cede sovereignty to the people of Iraq, President George W. Bush's visit to campus Tuesday to discuss healthcare issues drew responses as varied as the day's weather.

On the outside

Despite scattered showers and a stringent guest list, supporters as well as protesters met at Bliss Hall for a symposium on "Strengthening Healthcare" and to voice opinions on various current issues.

While the president and his five-member panel discussed issues ranging from community health centers to medical liability system reform, demonstrators remained vocal behind the security perimeter on the opposite side of Wick Avenue. Some protesters were upset by the focus and exclusivity of the event.

"Why didn't he talk to the real people, the blue-collar people, about the important things like the war and jobs?" questioned Harold E. "Nick" Nichols, a protester representing the IUE/CWA. "He comes here to have a meeting with politicians and doctors about healthcare while we keep shipping off jobs."

Nichols complained that Bush did not address the Mahoning Valley's loss of jobs. "It's the people of Youngstown who are suffering," Nichols said.

Another group created a banner portraying 800 coffins draped in American flags. "Everyone saw the image on TV of 20 caskets draped in U.S. flags. We thought they should see what it would look like with 800 caskets," Adam Draa said.

The project, created by Assistant Professor of Biology Tom Diggins, was intended to remind observers of the conflict in Iraq. Draa said he believes healthcare is an important issue, but he and the others involved in creating the coffin banner said they do not want to lose sight of the plight of U.S. soldiers.

"We're here to make sure people are aware of the people that are dying over there, over in Iraq,"

Draa said.

Other protesters used the presidential visit to draw attention to specific causes they said need to be addressed in Washington.

John Beatty, a retired minister dressed in a rain smock and a gas mask, said, "I'm very concerned for peace, justice and the environment. Bush scores a 'zero' on all of them."

Valley residents also braved the rain to show their support for the president, waving signs that read, "We love you, Mr. President" and "Bush Cheney 2004." Campaigners handed out flyers and buttons while onlookers discussed and debated election-year issues.

On the inside

Reactions were also mixed among the approximately 150 attendees of the 40-minute forum. Though some were surprised at the minimal and subtle mentions of the conflict in Iraq, one panelist viewed Bush's focus on the topic of healthcare as a shining example of the president's ability to manage both foreign and domestic challenges.

"I think this is one thing he [President Bush] has up on his father," said Dr. Compton Girdharry, a physician at one of the Valley's three community health clinics. "He's been able to focus on our conflict abroad but hasn't forgotten about the challenges at home, such as healthcare."

Girdharry also applauded the president for recognizing the importance of community healthcare programs and rallying support for initiatives that promote the expansion of community health clinics.

Carol Esenwein, the Clinical Site director at the Good Samaritan Medical Clinic, agreed that the visit was a great success. "It was all very encouraging," Esenwein said. "I'm glad he's got all spectrums of community health included in it; there were the doctors, the nurses, the patients and the president."

University Provost Tony Atwater also praised the event. "This was a great thing for YSU and the community, and highlighted the great work of the Youngstown Community Health Center," said



▲ Protesters hold a banner displaying 800 coffins draped in American flags. They said the banner was intended to remind attendees of the many U.S. soldier casualties in Iraq.

Atwater. "This also aligns itself well with the 'civic engagement education' we strive to provide at Youngstown State University."

Not all in attendance, however, were as impressed with the president and his message.

"Honestly, I was a little disappointed," said Charity Pappas, student representative to the YSU Board of Trustees. "I didn't think he was very informed, or that he was very informative... I wanted him to tell us things we didn't already know. I

wanted him to tell us what he's going to do on a broader scale."

Pappas said she was still glad to have attended. "It was an opportunity of a lifetime," said Pappas. "Especially for me, being in education, I'll get to tell my kids about when I shook hands with the president."

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