

Analysts: Bush visit strategic

By Michael J. Balale

THE JAMBAR

President George W. Bush came to the Mahoning Valley in an effort to neutralize some of the support Democratic Presidential Candidate John Kerry already has in the area, local political analysts and others said.

Vice President for Administration John Habat was one of at least three university officials to attend Tuesday's 40-minute panel discussion with the president.

Habat said whether a person is a Democrat or a Republican, attending a speech given by the President of the United States is a great opportunity.

"Regardless of your political affiliation, this is the president of the country and it's not often you have the opportunity to hear him speak," Habat said.

Habat said YSU President David Sweet did not attend the invitation-only gathering in Bliss Hall because he is on vacation. Habat said he was representing the president's office.

One YSU faculty member questioned the wisdom of administrators attending

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Bush's speech.

Associate Professor of Political Science Keith Lepak told a Jambar reporter that administrators who attended would be appearing to endorse the president in the November election.

"The leadership of this university should not give even the impression of an endorsement of a candidate," Lepak said. "They have no business to profit from going and it makes no sense to me."

Habat, however, fired back. "I think it's his opinion but out of respect of the Office of the President, I'm going," Habat said.

After Bush's speech, which focused on health-care reforms, political analysts were quick to point out what they believed to be strengths and weaknesses of the 40-minute discussion.

Greg Paul, an aide for State Sen. Robert Hagan, said he found it odd that the president visited the Mahoning Valley and did not discuss jobs, war or many of the other problems facing Ohio.

"I guess it is kind of interesting because John Kerry comes here and talks about putting more jobs in the valley and the president comes and talks about



Keith Lepak

health care," Paul said. "We're all scrambling around here to find out why."

Mark Munroe, the Republican Chair of the Mahoning County Board of Elections, disagreed and said the president has several issues to deal with and healthcare is important. He said the larger problem with Mahoning County lies within the Democratic Party, which has dominated the valley for decades.

"You look back at Mahoning County and you see Democratic rule over the passed 40 years and all they brought is corruption," Munroe said. "You have the mob, a prosecutor and city engineer in jail and it's all Democrats. That's why the Valley will not prosper."

Munroe said Ohio will play a large role in the outcome of the presidential elections and the president's visit to YSU was probably to increase his chances of winning the state's electoral votes in November.

He said Bush has done a remarkable job rebuilding the national economy that was already experiencing a recession when he took office. Munroe, however, said Mahoning County is still suffering.

"What is unbelievable is that the county continues to lag behind the rest of the country and the one constant is that a Democrat has been in office during these times," Munroe said.

Chair of Political Science William Binning said

Ohio will be a significant state if the November election is close and that Bush's strategy in visiting Youngstown may have been to gain loyalty of Ohio voters.

"As you get closer to campaigning you spend time fishing where you know there's fish," Binning said. "He came to show he is aware of Youngstown and maybe to pick off a couple points before the elections."

Lepak agreed and said he believed Bush's plan was to come to an area that had strong loyalty to the Democratic Party to sway some voters.

"He's testing the waters in an area that has been hostile to him," Lepak said.

Lepak added that Bush's arrival did not create a large media event and said the president couldn't benefit much from the visit because it was only open to those formally invited and members of the press who gained clearance through the White House.

"Only those pre-approved by the White House were able to attend and that may be a downside to this," Lepak said. "The environment is very closed."

Munroe said it is imperative for Bush to

minimize Kerry's success in Ohio and coming to Youngstown on Tuesday may have helped cushion the blow of a county whose roots lie with liberals.

"If he can be successful in minimizing the strength Kerry is going to have in Ohio it would help," Munroe said. "If he can win Ohio he'll probably be the next president."

Several people who were not on the guest list said they were frustrated about the inability to gain access to the event.

For instance, Rich Nagel who works at the Mahoning County Board of Elections, said he had little information about the event.

Nagel said, "The phone's been ringing off the hook for this thing all day, but we're all completely in the dark. It seems that everyone locally is completely in the dark about it, to tell you the truth."

"There's going to be about 200 people invited to this thing, but I can't even seem to be able to get into this damn thing, for Christ's sake, and I'm on the Board of Elections."

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-William Binning

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