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POLL Bushes in Naples: George W. and Jeb show personal side in appearance

By LAURA LAYDEN

NAPLES — The Bush brothers packed the house at the Naples Grande Beach Resort.

Former President George W. Bush and his brother Jeb Bush, the former governor of Florida, spoke Tuesday night as part of the Naples Town Hall Distinguished Speakers Series. They talked issues _ everything from health care and the Iraq war to budget deficits and Social Security reform.

George W. Bush, the 43rd U.S. president, has stayed out of the spotlight, limiting his face-time in public since leaving the White House about a year ago.

He and his brother – the state’s 43rd governor – addressed a crowd of more than 1,000 who purchased tickets to see them. Tickets to hear the duo speak started at \$200.

The brothers had the crowd laughing, clapping and sighing with heart-felt emotions as they showed their more personal side. A few times, George W. Bush fought tears as he talked about the support of his wife in the Oval Office and how his decisions to send more troops to Iraq hurt families in the U.S. who lost their sons, daughters, husbands and wives to the war.

“It’s an interesting combination to have the two of them together,” said Naples resident, John Scot Mueller, a benefactor of the Naples Town Hall series. “I think it was a real coup for the Town Hall here in Naples to be able to put that together as joint speakers.”

The moderator was veteran journalist Jim Angle, who covered both men while they were in office. He was named the senior Washington correspondent for Fox News in 2005.

Angle described the Bush family as “warm and loving.” The crowd gave the brothers a standing ovation when they were introduced.

When Angle asked George W. Bush what the biggest change had been in his life since leaving the White House, he responded: “Traffic jams.”

“Life in the White House is incredibly comfortable,” he said.

He said it was amazing to go from “100 miles to zero.” He quipped how now domestic policy means taking out the garbage.

Jeb Bush said shortly after leaving the governor’s office he was spotted in Publix by a woman who said, “I know you. You used to be Jeb Bush.”

While there were plenty of jokes in their speeches they also addressed many serious topics, sharing their political views about the changes in Washington, D.C., with a new Democratic president. They did not directly criticize President Barack Obama.

George Bush said he’s not coming out slugging.

“I’m through with politics,” he said. “I had my run. I gave it my all.”

Jeb Bush said he sold his Chrysler after the change in administration because he was so upset about government bailouts for the auto giant. He said he went out and “bought a Ford that was not owned by the federal government.”

Angle asked about the gridlock in Washington and the inability to get anything done because of partisanship. Former President Bush said he tried hard to reach out to Democrats and encourage the two parties to get along. The war in Iraq made that very difficult.

“It’s hard,” George W. Bush said. “Nobody wants war.”

He said it was tough to hear criticisms of his father while he was in office. Jeb Bush agreed.

George W. Bush said more competitive congressional districts are needed so that politicians have to work harder on their campaigns. That, he said, could help diminish the partisanship as political leaders would be forced to focus more on the issues.

He said those who call names shouldn’t be elected.

Jeb Bush said the partisanship seems to get worse with each presidency. He hopes this year’s congressional elections will bring change.

What’s needed are elected officials who think more long-term, the brothers agreed, and they hope that can start this year.

Former president Bush discussed how he tried to reform Social Security. He said bills for Social Security and health care reforms should be proposed and voted up or down, without the ability to attach amendments.

He said the government needs to do something to slow the rate of growth for medical costs. The answer to the uninsured crisis is not to expand Medicaid and seniors should be given more choices with health care and prescription drug plans, he said. His brother agreed.

“Right now the federal government wants to do everything, I think,” Jeb Bush said.

He said the Republicans have good ideas that should be presented and deserve to be heard. Republicans should defend themselves, not step out of the way.

George Bush said when he was in office it was hard to keep federal spending down when “we got attacked,” referring to the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks that toppled the World Trade Center towers.

“We had the deficit under control,” he said, saying there was 53 consecutive months of job growth before the attacks.

The former president is writing a book about the many hard decisions he’s made in life, personally and professionally. One of his toughest was going to war in Iraq and “putting kids into harm’s way,” knowing that someone’s heart would be broken forever.

“I met a lot of families of the fallen,” he said glumly.

He doesn’t regret going to war. “I believe in the universality of freedom,” he said.

He hopes his book will give historians a better perspective of his time spent in office.

Jeb Bush said he didn’t have it nearly as tough as Florida’s governor. “Being governor was a blast,” he said.

After hearing the two brothers speak, many commented about how they showed their personal side and were very humble.

“It was the most thrilling moment I’ve ever had in my life when I shook hands with George Bush,” said Fritzie Seger, 71, who lives in North Naples. Tears welled up in her eyes when she met him in person.

“He was just unbelievable,” she said.

His speech showed his loyalty to family and to the country when he was president.

“I really think historians will treat him better in the future,” said George Seger, 71, Fritzie’s husband, who was impressed by how much the former president opened up.

“This was just so amazing,” Fritzie added. “I’ve been looking forward to this.”

Students from Florida Gulf Coast University attended and volunteered to help out with the event.

“I think it’s something special. I’m sure this doesn’t happen very often,” said Wilson Bradshaw, FGCU president.

Harry Stephenson, a Lely High student, was invited to attend to cover the speeches for his school newspaper. He came with his dad.

Most of the Town Hall tickets are sold in advance. Many year-round and seasonal residents purchase season tickets.

The program was in the works for about a year, said Rick Borman, president/producer of the Naples Town Hall series. Organizers thought it would be fun to have the two brothers speak candidly together, like they might in their own living room.

“They’ve never done anything together in this format,” Borman said. “It was really good timing.”