



Former Presidents Bill Clinton and George H.W. Bush shared a light moment at the commencement for the University of New Hampshire in Durham yesterday. (Globe Staff Photo / Mark Wilson)

Politics reigns, as usual, in N.H. A Bush, a Clinton, and Obama speak

The Boston Globe

By Peter Canellos and Tracy Jan, Globe Staff | May 20, 2007

DURHAM, N.H. -- As he followed his fellow former president George H.W. Bush to the lectern, Bill Clinton's eyes were on the University of New Hampshire's graduating class, but his mind was on the state's upcoming primary.

"Madam President . . . That has a nice ring to it," Clinton quipped, turning to the university's interim president, J. Bonnie Newman. "I've decided women should run everything. George and I could go off and play golf."

The theme of yesterday's historic two-president commencement was bipartisanship. Clinton and Bush each stressed the importance of public service apart from partisan politics. Bush spoke of the "selfish pleasure" he feels when he "transcends politics" to work with Clinton on tsunami relief and aid to hurricane victims.

Bush told the graduates they don't have to hold political office to be a leader. "All you have to do is care, roll up your sleeves and claim one of society's problems as your own," he said.

Clinton said that while the students face a world marred by "inequality, insecurity, and -- because of climate change and resource depletion -- unsustainability" they also have "a great opportunity to change this world of division and divisiveness because it's also a world full of decency and hope."

But the event also served as a renewal of vows between the nation's political establishment -- represented by its two leading families -- and the state of New Hampshire, which appears to have succeeded in its latest struggle to preserve its role as White House gatekeeper.

The state's success was also evident about 30 miles away, in Manchester, where the nation's newest political star, Senator Barack Obama of Illinois, spoke to about 9,000 people at commencement ceremonies at Southern New Hampshire University.

Obama, who is running for the presidency for the first time at age 45, did not have the mellow tone of the two

famous presidential retirees. He suggested that the nation's political establishment has "become more concerned about who's up and who's down than who's working to solve the real challenges facing the next generation."

But he also included a plug for his own ability to galvanize voters -- speaking of his pride at seeing "rallies filled with crowds that stretch far into the horizon" -- and backed it up yesterday by sending hundreds of volunteers door-to-door to whip up support for his campaign.

Obama, who was making his 15th visit to New Hampshire since the start of the year in his bid for the Democratic nomination, is still in the earlier stages of a year-long courtship of Granite State voters, who cherish their personal access to candidates.

"Living in Concord, they're all over the place," said Maura McCann, an alumna who attended the UNH commencement with her 16-year-old son, Conner. "They're constantly on Main Street going in and out of restaurants."

New Hampshire voters tend to see themselves as jurors who have done a good job rendering verdicts in past presidential contests, and they want to keep on assessing future campaigns. This year, other states have attempted to horn in on New Hampshire's traditional role as host to the nation's first primary, and state officials have vowed to keep the primary a week ahead of any other.

New Hampshire leaders believe that their claim to the first primary is backed up by the diligence with which voters attend events and assess candidates. The intimacy of the primary campaign creates a bond between the state and past candidates, especially given the political stakes involved.

Most people interviewed at the UNH commencement believed Clinton and Bush were there because of their own fond memories of New Hampshire primaries past -- and perhaps looking ahead to family members running in future primaries.

"Having two former presidents from different political parties, working together and speaking together, is a great event," said Martie Gooze of Durham. "It's a really great moment for a school that's not exactly at the center of the universe."

But for months leading up to its primary, New Hampshire is the center of the political universe -- as both Clinton and Bush, who have claimed to owe their presidencies to the state, can attest.

Clinton finished second behind former senator Paul Tsongas in 1992. But it could have been much worse: Two scandals -- over his draft status and his alleged relationship with singer Gennifer Flowers -- erupted during the New Hampshire campaign. At one point, he begged the state's voters to rescue him.

"I'm on the ropes," Clinton declared then, with his characteristic blend of emotion and audaciousness. The voters did not oblige him fully -- Clinton tallied a so-so 26 percent -- but he spun it into a victory.

Rushing to greet his supporters before the victorious Tsongas could greet his own supporters, Clinton thanked the state for saving him.

"New Hampshire tonight has made Bill Clinton the comeback kid," he said, and promised to thank the state if elected. He did, and he hasn't stopped.

Yesterday in his remarks to the graduates, Clinton asked them to be aware of everyone in our society. "You think of how many people we never see, or we never see whole or in full because they're part of the other, or they're just invisible," he said. "Someone is going to have to come in here and clean up after us. Will they be seen?"

Bush, at 82, has become so genial and grandfatherly that it is hard to remember that he was one of history's great strivers. Not naturally gifted in politics, he pushed himself to the forefront of the national debate through discipline and will, putting himself before New Hampshire voters three times.

Twice, he came away badly bruised and on the way to eventual defeat. But once, in an odd twist, New Hampshire voters saved his candidacy from ruination.

Bush's first presidential run was in 1980, when he burst out of the pack in the Iowa caucuses to become the prime challenger to GOP warhorse Ronald Reagan. But he received a comeuppance at a debate sponsored by the Nashua Telegraph, when he churlishly refused to agree to allow other candidates to impose themselves on a planned one-on-one with Reagan. On primary day, Bush got buried.

Eight years later, Bush's role was reversed.

Bob Dole, then the Senate majority leader, had whipped Bush in the Iowa caucuses, leaving the vice president to seek redemption in New Hampshire. Bush ditched his coat and tie for a ski hat and parka, delivered a pleading speech, and drove a backhoe to demonstrate his affinity for the average person.

After his victory over Dole, Bush cruised to the presidency -- only to be slapped by New Hampshire voters four years later when they gave an impressive 37 percent to the protest candidate, Patrick Buchanan.

Yesterday, Bush made fleeting reference to his '92 defeat, saying his wife, Barbara, said after a recent parachute jump that she "hadn't seen such a freefall since the 1992 election."

New Hampshireites laughed politely, like friends recalling a shared adventure.

In his remarks to the graduates yesterday, Bush contrasted the education they received with the teachings of radical Muslim schools overseas, saying one of the greatest struggles the nation faces is the "battle for young minds around the entire world."

"On one side we've got civilized institutions like this one -- the University of New Hampshire -- who encourage critical thinking in their students, teach them to embrace the world around them and celebrate diversity," Bush said.

"On the other side, however, there's tens of thousands of madrassas (Muslim colleges) operating in countries like Pakistan and others, many of whom preach a virulent strain of the Quran and encourage open hatred of the United States."

Meanwhile, at Southern New Hampshire University, Obama's adventure was just beginning. Graduates and their relatives attested to his rock-star presence, and expressed gratitude that he steered away from campaign rhetoric.

Some said he was inspiring.

"It's important for us to become engaged, that we step up to the plate and make a difference," said Okendo Lewis-Gayle, 24, the first black president of the student government. "All we have to do is persevere."

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