



President Bush had his picture taken with supporters after his speech yesterday in Manchester that was sponsored by the Business and Industry Association of New Hampshire. About 50 people protesting the war in Iraq gathered outside the event. (Bill Greene/ Globe Staff)

Applause, skepticism for president in N.H. Concerns voiced on economy, wars

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By Brian MacQuarrie, Globe Staff | February 9, 2006

MANCHESTER, N.H. -- Before a receptive audience of 450 state business leaders yesterday, President Bush roundly defended his State of the Union vision of a robust national economy buoyed by permanent tax cuts.

But just outside the downtown conference center where Bush spoke -- from Veterans Memorial Park to the barbershop to the used-book store -- many residents reacted to that vision with deep skepticism and simmering concern.

"They say the economy is good, but it's all jobs that are \$5, \$6, \$7 an hour," said Roland Bergeron, pausing between snips of his shears at Granite State Barber Shop. "The \$30,000 to \$40,000 job is gone, and middle-class people are taking a terrible beating."

Lee Freedman, owner of Lee's Spot bookstore, went further. "His fiscal policies are awful," Freedman said of Bush's presidency. "The economy? It's still here, that's about all you can say about it."

In a state where the unemployment rate was a minuscule 3.5 percent in December, below the national rate of 4.9 percent, such concerns might seem off-base to an administration that yesterday touted five consecutive years of economic growth.

But the problems facing Bush nationwide also are evident in New Hampshire, where 57 percent of adults questioned disapproved of his job performance in a December survey, compared with 37 percent who approved. One year ago, the figures were split evenly at 46 percent.

In New Hampshire, which Bush narrowly lost in 2004 and narrowly won in 2000, a combination of the war, the perception of economic malaise, and corruption scandals in Washington appears to have taken a toll.

"I think the poll numbers are unfair to the president because things are attributed to him that are out of his control," said Scott Ellison, a Manchester lawyer who cited sharp increases in the cost of heating oil and gasoline as examples.

Ellison was among the invitation-only guests who gave Bush a warm welcome at the luncheon speech sponsored by the Business and Industry Association of New Hampshire. In a spirited address that lasted nearly an hour, Bush said the \$2.77 trillion budget he sent to Congress this week protects the United States militarily while making tough, sound decisions to spur the economy, reduce the deficit, and curb wasteful spending.

"The first priority of our budget is to make sure our troops in harm's way have all they need," Bush said. With a nod to the

financial choices dictated by that burden, the president added, "No question, the war and the hurricanes have stretched our budget. All the more reason to set priorities."

Those priorities, Bush said, include permanent tax cuts, a curb on Medicare spending, fuel alternatives to Middle East oil, and cutting the deficit in half by 2009.

These goals do not mean the federal government will shirk its responsibilities to the needy, Bush said. "When I think about the budget, I think about people who suffer," the president told the audience.

How Bush plans to address that suffering was of great interest to Robert Tourigny, executive director of Manchester Neighborhood Housing Services, who attended the lunch. "We have a lot of poor people freezing in this state," said Tourigny, adding that he voted for Bush in 2000 but not in 2004.

Tourigny characterized Bush's performance in office as "mediocre." The country, he said, "is very divided right now, and there needs to be more attention to bringing people together."

Bush's speech also drew a sharp response from US Senator Edward M. Kennedy.

"The president today tried to put a high gloss on his harsh budget, but there's no denying the fact that it will make life even harder for millions of Americans already struggling to put their kids through college and make ends meet," the Massachusetts Democrat said in a statement. "If you're already wealthy, then this budget will make you wealthier. But if you're a widow, orphan, or are disabled, you'll see a cut in benefits. Budgets are moral documents, and this one is clearly unfair."

Although New Hampshire's congressional members, all four of whom are Republicans, traveled from Washington, D.C., to Manchester with Bush on Air Force One, their reaction to Bush's budget has not been entirely enthusiastic. However, US Senator Judd Gregg, chairman of the Senate Budget Committee, has said he believes the deficit can be cut in half, and Bush appeared to reward Gregg by mentioning his name several times after the senator introduced the president.

By contrast, US Senator John Sununu, who bucked his president and helped to block a vote to make the Patriot Act permanent, received scant attention from Bush.

The president's appearance attracted about 50 demonstrators, nearly all of whom were protesting the war in Iraq.

Will Thomas, 62, the New Hampshire coordinator for Veterans for Peace, wore a button with the slogan, "Bush lies, who dies?"

"As a veteran, we deplore and even despise the policy that sent our troops to a war of choice, not of necessity," said Thomas, adding that he served in the Navy during the Cuban missile crisis in 1962.

Brad Carr, 55, of New Boston, said he fears "an endless war" that will drain the federal treasury and increase the chances for more terrorist attacks on US soil.

But, in this historically conservative state, the president retains a reservoir of solid support.

Jacky Thomas, 28, who manages Ted Herbert's Music Mart, said she trusts Bush. "He's our president, and we have to respect him as our leader," said Thomas, who didn't attend the speech. "The economy could be better, but it could be worse. He's had a lot of crises that he's handled."

Paul Santich, president of Pilgrim Foods, a small business in Greenville that employs 50 people, adopted a wait-and-see approach to what he heard from Bush. "He needed something to say," Santich said. "Now, if he could do what he said, we'd be in real good shape."

Brian MacQuarrie can be reached at macquarrie@globe.com. ■