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Rove: Bush hardly worst president

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NEW YORK | Karl Rove -- the architect, the one-time senior White House adviser to President Bush -- walked into the lion's den Tuesday night to argue that his former boss is not the worst president of the past 50 years.

He appeared at a formal debate on New York City's notoriously liberal Upper West Side as the most famous, and infamous, member of a four-member panel there to hash out the outgoing president's legacy.

"I'm going to make an appeal to the open-minded people of the Upper West Side," Mr. Rove said during his opening statement to the sold-out theater of 700.

Because of Mr. Rove's presence, the two-year-old debate series had to be moved from the 400-seat Rockefeller University auditorium to the 700-seat Symphony Space at 95th Street and Broadway.

"This is the largest debate crowd we've ever had," said moderator John Donovan, an ABC News correspondent.

And the New York crowd did not disappoint. At the first mention of Mr. Rove's name, a member of the audience hissed at him, and more hisses followed as the bespectacled political strategist took the podium.

But the setting was not entirely hostile to Mr. Rove and his fellow conservative, New York Times and Weekly Standard columnist William Kristol.

New York financier Robert Rosenkranz, whose conservative-leaning foundation organized the event, opened the debate with a statement that President Carter was in fact "a truly awful president" and credited Mr. Bush with preventing a second terrorist attack on U.S. soil after the Sept. 11 attacks.

Although Mr. Rove and Mr. Kristol may have been unable to dissuade anyone in the crowd who believed that Mr. Bush is the worst U.S. president of the past 50 years, they did seem to pick up more of the undecided members of the audience than their opponents.

Mr. Rove and Mr. Kristol were paired against Jacob Weisberg, editor in chief of the Slate Group, and British columnist Sir Simon Jenkins, of the Guardian.

In a vote taken at the beginning of the debate, 65 percent of the audience sided with Mr. Weisberg and Mr. Jenkins, 17 percent disagreed with the proposition, and 18 percent were undecided.

At the end, 68 percent said the Bush presidency has been the worst in the past five decades, while 27 percent agreed with Mr. Rove and Mr. Kristol and 5 percent remained undecided.

The most heated moments came during the debate over Mr. Bush's biggest decision - the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The president himself said in an interview this week that his "biggest regret" is that the intelligence upon which the invasion was based wrongly concluded that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction.

Even Mr. Kristol said that Mr. Bush has done "a horrible job of explaining what he's done and what the choices were."

But he and Mr. Rove both maintained that while the initial occupation was mismanaged, the surge of troops begun in 2007 has placed the U.S. on the cusp of victory in Iraq.

"We've won the war," Mr. Kristol said.

Mr. Rove was incredulous at Mr. Jenkins' assertion that the Vietnam War was better managed than the Iraq war.

"We ended Vietnam in defeat, for which the families of 55,000 fallen heroes had reason to ask themselves if their sacrifices had been made in vain," Mr. Rove said.

Mr. Rove ended by saying that the deck was stacked against Mr. Bush from the beginning.

"To suggest he's not interested in ideas is a peculiar form of Bush hatred that causes people to lose their rational senses," Mr. Rove said. "This president has been on the receiving end of this kind of attitude from the moment he took office."

"I will defend the president," said Mr. Rove, who added that Mr. Bush will be vindicated "over the long scope of history."