

Bush Touts Leadership in Strengthening Economy, Notes Kerry's Flip-Flops

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BAKERSFIELD, Calif. – President Bush talked up his economic leadership Thursday, rounding out a California tour that gathered \$5 million for his and other Republicans' campaigns and marked the start of bare-knuckled attacks on presumptive Democrat nominee John Kerry.

"The economy is getting stronger," Bush said from an outdoor stage at a family-owned company, Rain for Rent, an irrigation system business. "One of the reasons why I think we're doing so good here in America is because of the tax relief we passed, is because people have more money in their pockets."

Dems Complain About Job Growth!

Bush's positive picture on the economy was designed to counter criticism from Kerry and other Democrats, who blame the president for job growth that has lagged behind other signs of improvement in the nation's fiscal health.

The Kerry campaign distributed new numbers Thursday showing that the unemployment rate in Bakersfield rose to 13.6 percent in January from 12.7 percent in December. Statewide, the jobless rate was 6.1 percent in January, compared with 5.6 percent nationally.

"George W. Bush has consistently promised that his tax cuts will deliver jobs, but the results are terrible," the Kerry campaign statement said.

Bush, meanwhile, headed to a luncheon in northern California's Silicon Valley to add \$700,000 to his campaign operation. The president has already collected more than \$153 million for his re-election bid.

About \$10 million of that money swung into action Thursday with the first airings of a television advertising blitz by the Bush campaign. The ads, featuring images of the destroyed World Trade Center, drew sharp criticism from some relatives of the victims of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

"It makes me sick," said Colleen Kelly, who lost her brother Bill Kelly Jr. in the attacks and leads a victims families group called Peaceful Tomorrows. "Would you ever go to someone's grave site and use that as an instrument of politics? That truly is what Ground Zero represents to me."

However, Patricia Riley of Staten Island, N.Y., who lost her sister in the attack, said, "The president has every right to point to his leadership during that time."

The White House defended the ads, though Bush himself did not address the criticism.

On his way to Bakersfield's airport, Bush stopped along the side of the road where about 800 cheering elementary school pupils stood with American flags. Bush made his way down the line of children, shaking hands and hugging them.

Flip-Flop Kerry

The president has wasted no time going after Kerry after the U.S. senator assured his party's nomination with this week's Super Tuesday victories. At a cocktail reception benefiting the Bush campaign in Los Angeles Wednesday night, the president made clear he will contrast himself as a straight-talking president against Kerry as a flip-flopping challenger.

"He spent two decades in Congress; he's built up quite a record," Bush told the crowd of 600 that added \$800,000 to his campaign coffers. "In fact, Senator Kerry has been in Washington long enough to take both sides on just about every issue."

Although Bush lost California's 55 electoral votes by a wide margin in 2000, the election of GOP Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, who attended a swanky Bel Air fund-raiser Wednesday night, has the White House hoping for a better result in November.

"With Arnold in the game it's a totally different ballgame," Bush's California campaign chairman Gerald Parsky said.

From California, Bush was going to his ranch in Crawford, Texas, for a long weekend that will include a visit by Mexican President Vicente Fox.

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