

By Jeffrey Jones Tue Mar 17, 5:59 pm ET

CALGARY, Alberta (Reuters) – More than 100 protesters chanted "war criminal" and flung shoes in Calgary on Tuesday, angry that former U.S. President George W. Bush was in the Canadian city to give his first speech since leaving the White House.

At least two demonstrators were hauled away by police after brief skirmishes, as 1,500 business people in the oil patch city waited outside a convention center for an hour to pass through tight security and enter the C\$400-a-plate (\$315) luncheon.

Media were barred from covering the invitation-only event, during which Bush had been expected to reflect on his eight years as president.

According to sources who attended, he conceded that his administration spent its final days "bailing water" to keep the U.S. economy afloat.

However, the Obama administration should not let government become a substitute for the free market, and it should also avoid becoming more protectionist on trade matters, he was said to have remarked.

Although he was not Bush's first choice as president, Barack Obama has his full support, he said.

The luncheon crowd was friendlier than the one outside.

"He is a war criminal who fought an illegal war, and there are some who say he was never elected democratically, so there are some who say he should be arrested as soon as he comes here," said a woman dressed as a Guantanamo Bay prisoner, who called herself Ivana

Nomobush.

She had brought with her a makeshift "shoe cannon" that catapulted footwear, but complained that security personnel were not letting her use it.

The shoe theme is an homage to Iraqi reporter Muntazer al-Zaidi, who was sentenced last week to three years in prison for hurling his shoes at Bush in December.

The reaction was in stark contrast to President Barack Obama's first official visit to Canada last month, when he was fawned on by citizens and politicians alike.

A handful of demonstrators came out in support of the former president, who left office in January, having suffered plummeting popularity due to more than five years at war in Iraq and an economic meltdown.

"We wanted to welcome George W. Bush and let him know that everyone's not opposed to his presidency," said Jeff Willerton, who held up a pro-Bush placard. "I think under the circumstances he was one of the better presidents we could have asked for."

As center of Canada's oil industry, Calgary is known as one of the country's most conservative cities.

By the turnout among its business community for the speech, it is clear that Bush can still draw a crowd, city councilor Joe Ceci said.

"But it's this crowd that gratifies me even more," Ceci said of the demonstrators. "Just to see Calgarians interested, aware, and just kind of speaking up, and speaking up for things anti-war."

(\$1=\$1.27 Canadian)

(Reporting by Jeffrey Jones; Editing by Peter Galloway)