



Gala brings American political pundits to town

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TORONTO — The 2012 annual Spirit of Hope Benefit Gala held by the Friends of Simon Wiesenthal Center for Holocaust Studies (FSWC) broke all previous years' records, raising an astounding \$2.58 million.

But it wasn't just the fundraising that made the benefit, co-chaired by Judy and Paul Bronfman, memorable. FSWC brought in well-known American political pundits for a spirited debate.

"The theme for this evening is based on one question, and that question is: has [U.S.] President Barack Obama made the world safer," said CNN chief political analyst Gloria Borger, who moderated the debate.

Democratic political strategist and campaign manager Donna Brazile and Democratic political commentator and media personality James Carville, arguing in favour of Obama, were pitted against past Republican presidential candidate and Fox News host Mike Huckabee and former deputy chief of staff and senior adviser to former U.S. president George W. Bush, Karl Rove.

More than 2,000 guests crowded into the Allstream Centre at Toronto's Exhibition Place on May 29, including many high school students invited by FSWC. The audience used a text-to-vote system, allowing them to use their cellphones to answer "yes" or "no" to the question of the evening.

The final tally showed a competition as tight as the current presidential race in the United States, with 51 per cent voting that the world is not safer under Obama, and 49 per cent voting that it is.

The topics of the debate ranged from the economy to Syria, Pakistan and, ultimately, to Iran and Israel. Both the Republicans and Democrats voiced support for Israel, although the Republican debaters were quick to state that they feel Obama has not been nearly supportive enough of the Jewish state.

“The policies of this administration have not been friendly to Israel,” said Huckabee, criticizing Obama’s policies on the Middle East. “I don’t think Americans understand that Israel is fighting for its existence, not for its prosperity,” he added, to loud applause.

Brazile responded, insisting that Obama has been helping Israel, both in the United Nations and through military funding. “President Obama has been tough. He has been relentless, and he has been a champion and supporter of Israel,” she said. She also noted, to audience applause, that “Israel really doesn’t have a reliable partner to make a peace deal at this time.”

When it came to the issues of a nuclear Iran and to the violence in Syria, Rove called the president “naive,” in his initial dismissal of the Iranian threat and in his strong opposition to any kind of military action. “This president walked away from the Iranian problem for some very vital years,” he added, explaining that only with this summer’s incoming sanctions, is Obama taking some appropriate action.

Carville disagreed with the Republicans’ criticism, adding that the Middle East faces very complex issues that defy simple solutions. “I like a guy that thinks before he shoots,” he said of Obama.

The debate ended without a firm winner, at least as far as the text-to-vote system displayed, but it served to entertain and enlighten the large audience. All parties finished their speeches by commending the work of FSWC in fighting racism and antisemitism in Canada.

Also that evening, there was a major gifts dinner and a concert by Canadian musician Kim Mitchell. During the dinner, FSWC honoured Lt.-Gen. Charles Bouchard, the commander of the NATO mission in Libya, as well as six other members of the Canadian Forces. Dean and founder of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, Rabbi Marvin Hier, and president and CEO of FSWC, Avi Benlolo, also addressed the guests. The funds raised at the benefit will go toward education programs that are designed to counter antisemitism and racism and to promote human rights and social justice.