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Ohio 'ground zero for this election,' former senator tells Lorain

BRIAN BARDWELL , Morning Journal Writer

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LORAIN -- Former senator Max Cleland appeared at Lakeview Park yesterday to call on Lorain to vote for John Kerry, saying that Ohio was "ground zero for this election."

"You have the chance to elect a president," he told the hundreds of supporters who gathered around the stage near the beach. "How Ohio goes is how goes the presidency."

While Cleland was addressing a group gathered in recognition of organized labor, his speech relied just as heavily on a national-security message as it did on the discussion of jobs and the economy.

He touted Kerry's military credentials, calling him "a veteran's veteran," and criticized President Bush's handling of various military affairs, including treatment the war on terrorism and the war in Iraq. Cleland repeatedly compared it to the Vietnam War, saying the country was again trapped in "a war that has no ending."

Cleland, himself a Vietnam veteran - he lost his right arm and both legs in the war -- and former head of the Veterans Administration, also criticized the president for his handling of veterans' affairs, from the assistance provided to soldiers for college to the health benefits available to them after leaving the services.

"I can't believe he's sending kids to war -- some of them killed, some of them blown up -- and at the same time closing 12 VA hospitals across the country," he said, noting that the nearby Brecksville VA hospital was among those being closed.

Halfway through his speech, Cleland shifted gears to talk about the

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unemployment rate. He attacked Bush's handling of the economy because of the overall loss in jobs during Bush's tenure, although the numbers for August showed some 144,000 people coming off unemployment.

"They talk about a jobless recovery; that's like compassionate conservatism -- it doesn't happen," he said.

He also criticized the Bush administration's openness to sending jobs overseas, noting the recently announced layoffs at Ford and GM. According to a study by Policy Matters Ohio, the North American Free Trade Agreement and other trade agreements have cost the state well over 45,000 jobs, including more than 3,000 in Lorain County.

Despite Cleland's strong endorsement and enthusiastic support of the crowd, Sonia Calderon said she still wouldn't be voting for Kerry.

"I'm a Democrat, but I'm going for Bush. I think the first thing should be the safety of our country," she said. She said she wanted to continue with the current leadership in the White House, mainly because of the war in Iraq and the war on terrorism.

"I honestly believe it was necessary. Who knows what else (terrorists) could have done?" she asked, pointing to the recent hostage crisis in Russia.

Amherst resident Bill Stanton, a retired Elyria police officer, praised the mix of national-security and economy issues in the speech.

"Jobs works more here than the military," he said, but he was glad to hear Cleland's message about the war in Iraq. "He makes a better argument that the war was a mess than Kerry does. Kerry ought to start saying something."

After the speech, Cleland said that he wanted to address military issues as well as jobs at the Labor Day festival because "so many people in the labor movement are veterans."


He said that Bush's re-election could mean the end of unions, accusing him of union-busting and diluting laws that have empowered workers trying to collectively bargain for their wages, benefits and working conditions.

"When working people stand up and are counted, traditionally it's always been the Democratic party that's come to their aid," he said. "With four more years of George Bush, there won't be any more organized labor."

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