



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

GOP: Gun Owners' Party

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After today, the Republican hopefuls for the Presidency will leave the Granite State, some disappointed by their showing in the New Hampshire primary while others energized as they move on to the next preliminary. Over the past week or more, political operatives have been busy arranging TV spots and campaign stops for their candidates, endeavoring to win over the surprisingly sizable pool of undecided voters.

Selections of media-targeted photo opportunities tend to say a lot about a candidate. And in Saturday's *Boston Globe*, two of the contenders were unabashedly playing up to gun-loving conservative voters in New Hampshire and elsewhere.

Newt Gingrich toured the Sturm, Ruger & Co. arms factory in Newport, N.H. and was photographed as he inspected a rifle taken off the assembly line. Meanwhile, Rick Santorum visited a Jeffrey, N.H. sports shop where he posed for the camera standing in front of a display rack filled with firearms.



Not surprisingly, the rest of the Republican field, if prompted, would launch into a well-practiced monologue about the sanctity of the Second Amendment as a core value underlying our freedom. Even John Huntsman, the most moderate of the lot, has cutely pointed out that his name says it all when it comes to his dedication to gun rights. If I didn't know better, I'd think that GOP stood for "Gun Owners' Party."

Four years ago, just prior to the April 2008 Pennsylvania primary, then Democratic candidate Barack Obama made an off-handed remark expressing frustration over his inability to reach working-class voters who cling to their guns and religion. It was an ill-advised and careless comment for which he was soundly

criticized by both Democratic and Republican rivals. But when you examine the positions of the remaining Republican field for this election season along with the ongoing political rhetoric from NRA leadership, Obama wasn't all that wrong in substance even though his delivery was far from politically smart.

On this year's campaign trail and in the endless rounds of debate, Republican candidates have continually challenged each other on who is the toughest amongst them and would stand up to threats against our nation's physical and/or economic security. However, I wonder which candidate, if any, would stand up to the NRA?

I don't question the legitimacy of the NRA or its right to take whatever position it wishes. My concern is with politicians who seem more concerned about what grade they receive on the NRA report card than about what represents the soundest public policy for the nation in terms of firearms licensing, registration and commerce. Legislative action regarding the critical balance between gun rights and gun control should be guided by scientific evidence, not political expediency. Political advantage should never trump public safety.