Newsroom: Presidential Debates, Politics & Gambling

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Newsroom

Presidential Debates, Politics & Gambling

Frank Fahrenkopf -- co-chair of Presidential Debates Commission, former RNC chair, head of American Gaming Association -- kicks off Santoro Business Law Lecture Series.

BRISTOL, R.I., Sept. 28, 2012: It's hard to imagine a more topical speaker than Frank J. Fahrenkopf, Jr., to kick off RWU Law's new Professor Anthony J. Santoro Business Law Lecture Series. The question is: exactly what topic? With Fahrenkopf, you can take your pick.

Want to talk about the paralyzing ideological standoff in Congress? Fahrenkopf is former chair of the Republican National Committee (1983 to 1989), and retains a “let’s find common ground” demeanor reminiscent of those comparatively genial days.

Looking for insight on the rapidly approaching presidential elections? Fahrenkopf is current co-chair of the Commission on Presidential Debates (in fact, he co-founded it in 1986), and was fielding calls on the upcoming Obama-Romney debates (“standing or sitting?” was the issue, he summarized with a smile) until just minutes before his address at Roger Williams.

Concerned about casinos, gaming, and the pros and cons of online gambling? Once again, Fahrenkopf’s your man, as president and CEO of the American Gaming Association (AGA), the national trade association for the commercial casino industry (a position he’s held from its founding in 1995 to the present).
While at RWU Law, Fahrenkopf talked politics with the Providence Journal – and then with an 11-year-old reporter for TIME for Kids magazine (Bridget Bernardo, daughter of Eugene Bernardo ’98; she’ll also be covering the Presidential Debate at Hofstra University on October 16). He addressed students, faculty and staff on campus in the afternoon, and alumni and VIPs at the Providence Westin in the evening.

Fahrenkopf spoke engagingly of his rise to become an “insider’s insider” in Washington. He studied Torts under Professor Prosser himself at U.C. Berkeley; then returned to his hometown of Reno, Nevada, where his clients included entertainer Wayne Newton and reclusive tycoon Howard Hughes.

His formal lecture – titled “Business & Legal Issues for Gaming in the Internet Era” – reviewed nearly 20 years of unsuccessful Congressional attempts to outlaw, or at least regulate, online gambling. One by one, they all became mired in attempts to include or exclude such diverse venues as Indian casinos, state lotteries, dog tracks and horse tracks with the primary target -- and online gambling’s principle staple -- poker.

“This is not a Republican or a Democratic issue,” Fahrenkopf said of those who advocate outright bans on online gambling. “Among Republicans, it tends to be the hard right who believes gambling is a sin, and it’s their moral duty to stop it. Among Democrats, it’s the far left saying government has to paternalistically step in and protect people from themselves. It’s a strange union of people who usually disagree on everything.”
In the mainstream, however, there’s no real divide. At least from a gaming perspective, he said, an Obama or a Romney Administration would be virtually indistinguishable.

Fahrenkopf ended his formal talk with a discussion of the “Internet Gambling Prohibition, Poker Consumer Protection, and Strengthening UIGEA Act of 2012,” sponsored by Sens. Harry Reid (D-Nev.) and Jon Kyl (R-Ariz), which was leaked to the press in mid-September and is widely considered unlikely to pass. If it doesn’t, Fahrenkopf said, the result will be “the biggest expansion of gambling in 50 years.”

Inside the Debates

Fahrenkopf closed with a volley of lighthearted observations about presidential debates – his assessments revealed a human (and appealingly nonpartisan) view of these high-stakes encounters. Kennedy, Reagan and Clinton won his praise for their telegenic debating prowess. Dole and Dukakis were petty and lacklustre. George H.W. Bush was “always the gentleman.” Elizabeth Edwards made John try on multiple shirts in rehearsals to determine which color most complimented him on camera. Nixon’s five-o’clock shadow looked awful on TV; but so did Gore’s sweating and overdone rouge.

If the election were held at September’s end, he said, Obama would win. But the race is so close that Fahrenkopf believes the debates could be decisive. He added that if Bill Clinton were running again – in his new avatar as distinguished senior statesman and master orator – he would probably leave both Obama and Romney the dust. “That guy’s good!” he conceded.

This lecture marked the inaugural event in the Professor Anthony J. Santoro Business Law Lecture Series, funded entirely by the generosity of RWU Law alumni, which will bring leading lawyers and business professionals to our school, presenting on important issues in the field of business law. The series recognizes Professor Santoro’s distinguished career as a legal educator, a past president of Roger Williams University and the founding dean of Roger Williams University School of Law.