



Donald Trump is a rock-solid, totally orthodox NRA conservative on guns

By Jeff Stein

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To Donald Trump, the fact that there was an armed officer with a gun outside the **Pulse nightclub** in Orlando, Florida, wasn't enough. He wanted everyone inside to be carrying weapons as well.

"If you had some guns in that club the night that this took place, if you had guns on the other side, you wouldn't have had the tragedy that you had," Trump **said** on CNN Monday. "If people in that room had guns with the bullets flying in the opposite direction right at him ... right at his head, you wouldn't have had the same tragedy that you ended up having."

This is gibberish, both in this specific instance and as a matter of principle: The "good guy with a gun" myth **has been repeatedly proven false**, according to Vox's German Lopez.

But this rhetoric is also very much at the center of the conservative worldview. Republican politicians have **largely** reacted to mass shootings by calling for more bystanders to carry arms. After an **Oregon shooting** left nine people dead in October 2015, Ben Carson went as far as to **suggest** the shooting victims should have gathered and taken down the gunman together, potentially putting themselves at incredible personal risk in the process.

On multiple issues, Trump has taken conservative policy in new directions — promising to go far beyond what other party members had advocated by calling for a ban on all Muslims entering the US, for instance, or building a literal wall along the US-Mexico border, or breaking with conservative orthodoxy on free trade as inherently good.

On guns, however, Trump doesn't represent a break from the party at all. Instead, he's safely within the lane of how conservatives feel about guns.

Donald Trump's positions on guns amount to an NRA wish list

Back in the early 2000s, Trump articulated a fairly centrist position on gun control, publicly criticizing both the Democratic and Republican stances on the issue and calling for a middle-ground solution.

Here's what he wrote in *The America We Deserve*, which was published in 2000:

I generally oppose gun control, but I support the ban on assault weapons and I also support a slightly longer waiting period to purchase a gun ...With today's internet technology we should be able to tell within 72 hours if a potential gun owner has a record.

But that mixed position has been entirely jettisoned for Trump's presidential campaign, says Adam Bates, a Cato Institute expert on criminal justice.

Trump has now taken the maximally anti-gun control position essentially across the board. Protecting the Second Amendment is a standard part of his stump speech, and the second policy paper he released as a presidential candidate looked to many observers as if it could have been ripped from the National Rifle Association's website.

"Trump's platform on gun control is virtually indistinguishable from the NRA's agenda at the federal level," **wrote** Vox's Jonathan Allen back in September 2015. "If he loses, he can always go the Charlton Heston route and become the group's public face."

Trump's key positions on guns — which Allen said come "straight out of an NRA briefing" — include:

- Ending all **gun-free** school zones.
- Rescinding all **of President Obama's** executive actions on guns, including his decision to streamline federal background checks.
- Implementing a nationwide system that would allow concealed carry permits to apply to all 50 states, like a driver's license, according to the New York Times. (Trump's website **calls** it a "national right to carry.")

- Promising not to enact any new gun control measures. "Gun and magazine bans are a total failure," his website **argues**.

The fundamental priorities here are simple: More guns will help people protect themselves; restrictions on gun sales will not help reduce gun violence; and the Second Amendment offers absolute prohibition to any gun-related regulation. (For the Democratic Party's positions, read **this explainer** from my colleague Dara Lind.)

Trump's answer to mass shootings: vague promises about mental health fixes

Beyond calling for more bystanders to carry guns, Trump has responded to mass shootings by urging the need to fix America's mental health system. This, too, largely reflects the conservative response to gun violence.

"When you see the mental illness problem in this country, that's what it is. It's not a gun problem," Trump has **said**.

Unless the shooting can be tied to terrorism, this is Trump's go-to move: He said our real problem was mental health after two **Virginia journalists** were killed last August, and again after the Oregon slayings last October.

Now, many shooters do have severe mental health problems. But as Lind has **pointed out**, the mentally ill are actually more likely to be victims of gun violence than perpetrators.

Adds **Bloomberg**:

"Surprisingly little population-level evidence supports the notion that individuals diagnosed with mental illness are more likely than anyone else to commit gun crimes," according to an analysis published this year in the *American Journal of Public Health*. "A growing body of research suggests that mass shootings represent anecdotal distortions of, rather than representations of, the actions of 'mentally ill' people as an aggregate group."

Perhaps because Trump is fingering the wrong problem, he also doesn't seem to have much of an idea of *how* to fix America's mental health crisis.

His website doesn't put forward any specific ideas. In **multiple interviews** about guns and mental health, Trump doesn't articulate support for a policy plan. Back in October 2015, *Meet the Press*'s Chuck Todd **pressed** the candidate on what, specifically, he would do to help the mentally ill in America.

Trump responded by acknowledging that the challenge was a particularly difficult one and by saying that violence would always be with us. "The very tough part is, how do you take that

person and say you'll institutionalize them for the rest of your life?" Trump said. "If you go back 1,000 years, and you go forward 5,000 years, you're always — no matter how good the procedure is — you're always going to have a certain violence."

Trump's **focus** on mental health again mirrors that of the NRA, but critics see his lack of specifics as no accident: Short of the massive and illegal institutionalization of the mentally ill, it's hard to imagine a solution here that genuinely reduces the rate of these killings.

"If your only option is to try to regulate people and predict what they will do, Trump is right: There really is no way to prevent mass shootings," Lind says.

Trump has some positions that break with the Republican mainstream. Not on guns.

Adopting essentially all the positions of a far-right advocacy organization might seem likely to put Trump out of step with most Republican politicians.

Not on guns.

While Trump has hugged the NRA line about as tightly as possible, that actually just makes him more or less a standard Republican politician, according to SUNY Cortland professor Robert Spitzer, the author of five books on gun control in America.

"Trump is very much advancing what the gun control plank of the party would have also been under Marco Rubio or Ted Cruz or any of the other main contenders for the Republican primary," says Spitzer. "He's pretty much saying exactly what all of the other Republicans have said for some time."

Over the past few decades, the gun issue has emerged as a key litmus test for Republican presidential candidates. But unanimity has essentially erased the question from the party's policy debates.

"Gun rights have not been a major dividing issue in Republican primaries lately; they haven't been debated," says Bates, of the Cato Institute. "The disputes tend to be about past positions — about whether the positions people hold are genuine and if they're being genuine in their disavowal of their previous positions."

How Trump has tried to show his gut-level appreciation of guns

But Trump's past apostasies on guns didn't hurt him in the Republican primary — perhaps because his rivals had so many others to choose from, but also because he took such pains to prove that the issue matters to him personally.

As Spitzer noted, Trump has tried to demonstrate that he not only supports the NRA's policy positions but also understands the issue's importance at a more fundamental gut level.

He likes to mention that he has a concealed carry permit. He's told reporters in multiple interviews that he owns a gun. "I like to be unpredictable," Trump once said, "so people don't know if I'm carrying." He routinely touts the fact that his son is an NRA member. Photos of Trump's sons big-game hunting in Africa show the two posing next to animals like elephants, crocodiles, and leopards.

"Trump is saying all the same things [as Republicans] on policy, but he's doing it with this added bravado and layering this macho quality to it," Spitzer says. "That's essential to his base of appeal and what's bringing his gun rhetoric one notch above the rest of the Republicans."

Now, Trump is not, in fact, a hunter from rural Pennsylvania but a billionaire real estate tycoon raised in New York. "He's a city boy: Trump's not putting on camel gear and going hunting for ducks," Spitzer says.

But Trump, Spitzer notes, has worked very hard to cultivate this other image. And it appears to have worked.

Why Trump has broken with the GOP on some issues but not guns

Since winning the nomination, Trump has increasingly aligned himself with conservative orthodoxy. But on some issues, like Social Security and health care, he's continued to drop signs that he doesn't fully buy the standard Republican Party line.

Why hasn't that happened on guns? After all, Trump had a history of supporting the assault weapons ban — and there's at least some polling to back up the idea that most Americans would agree.

The difference, Spitzer suggests, is that guns tie into Trump's broader desire to cultivate an image of toughness. Compromising the conservative line on entitlement reform may not look weak the way compromising on a love of guns might.

"He's boosted himself and behaved like the macho candidate from day one," Spitzer said. "From the stuff on national security to saying, 'I'd punch the guy,' at a rally, his stance on guns is utterly consistent with that."