

Romney sails through Republican debate
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GOFFSTOWN, Jan 8 — Republican Mitt Romney fended off attacks on his business record yesterday and sailed through a high-stakes debate that his rivals used to jockey for second place in New Hampshire and look ahead to South Carolina.

Romney, the former governor of neighbouring Massachusetts with a big lead in New Hampshire, repeatedly positioned himself above the fray. He stuck to lines from his campaign stump speech and trained fire on the man he wants to replace in November's election, Democratic President Barack Obama.

"I don't want to be critical of the people on this stage," Romney said at the first of two back-to-back debates that represent the last chance to sway large numbers of voters before New Hampshire votes in its Republican primary on Tuesday.

The expected attacks on Romney by his rivals did not materialise for the most part at the debate, an acknowledgement by the candidates that Romney has a big lead in New Hampshire and that a more closely fought battle will be on Jan 21 in South Carolina, where conservatives dominate.

Romney could still face more aggressive attacks from his fellow contenders at a second debate on Sunday.

Former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum, who soared as the conservative alternative to Romney when he came in a close second in Iowa's caucuses last week, is battling for second place in New Hampshire and to position himself for South Carolina, where his conservative message has a greater chance of being heard.

He may have helped himself with conservative voters by displaying a wide range of policy views and sticking to his opposition to gay rights and the Supreme Court's 1973 Roe v. Wade decision that legalised abortion.

"I am for overturning Roe versus Wade. I do not believe that we have a right in this country, in the Constitution, to take a human life. I don't think that's — I don't think our founders envisioned that," Santorum said.

At the beginning, the debate looked like it could turn out as advertised, a free-for-all against Romney in hopes of slowing him down.

As Romney's leadership of the private equity firm Bain Capital comes under scrutiny, Santorum said just because Romney has business experience does not mean he is qualified to serve as the American president.

"We need a leader, someone who can paint a positive vision for this country," said Santorum.

Former speaker of the US House of Representatives Newt Gingrich, bitter about losing his front-runner status after he was subjected to massive attack ads by Romney and his

supporters before Iowa, questioned Romney's leadership at Bain Capital.

Romney points to his business experience as a selling point during troubled economic times, but his opponents see his leadership of Bain Capital as a negative. The company bought troubled companies and restructured them, sometimes resulting in layoffs and facility closures.

"The governor has every right to defend that," Gingrich said. "But I think it's a legitimate part of the debate to say OK on balance are people better off by this particular style of investment?"

Romney said in the world of private-sector business, sometimes investments work, and sometimes they do not.

Libertarian Congressman Ron Paul, hoping to thwart Santorum's rise, tried to raise doubts about his conservative credentials by pointing toward his predilection for securing massive amounts of government aid for his home state.

Santorum has come under scrutiny for a long history of obtaining taxpayer dollars for Pennsylvania for what critics call wasteful projects like US\$500,000 (RM1.6 million) for a polar bear exhibit at the Pittsburgh zoo.

"To say you're a conservative is a stretch, but you've convinced a lot of people," Paul told Santorum.

Santorum defended his practices, saying he made sure Pennsylvania got a fair share of the money its taxpayers sent to the federal government and "I don't apologise for that." — Reuters

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