

BUSINESS INSIDER

Gary Johnson's 'Aleppo moments' don't erase his solid foreign-policy platform

Emma Ashford

October 2, 2016

Gary Johnson did it again. Upon being asked to name a world leader he admired, the Libertarian candidate for president flubbed, unable to name a single one. “I guess I’m having an Aleppo moment,” he admitted, harking back to his last big misstep, when he proved unable to identify the besieged Syrian city of Aleppo, site of one of the world’s worst ongoing humanitarian crises.

Though Johnson’s gaffes are not unique — politicians have committed worse sins of ignorance in this election and in past ones — they continue to undermine his campaign’s attempt to present a pragmatic foreign policy alternative. For a politician, it’s not enough to have great ideas. You also have to sell them.

Johnson’s gaffes appear so damning partly because they weren’t really “gotcha” questions. No one asked him to name the new president of Uzbekistan, or the capital of Eritrea. Most Americans can’t point to Aleppo on a map (including, infamously, various *New York Times* reporters chastising Johnson) but with consistent media coverage of the Syrian crisis, most could probably identify why it’s important. Even Donald Trump has been able to identify a world leader he admires, though his choice of Russian strongman Vladimir Putin admittedly leaves a lot to be desired.

Despite that, it’s not clear that these missteps render Johnson “unfit” to run for president, as many have suggested. It’s easy to forget that former presidents and candidates alike have made similar mistakes. President Gerald Ford’s insistence that there was “no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe” ranks high among the most memorable blunders of past presidential debates, while Sarah Palin’s short-lived stint as John McCain’s running mate saw a plethora of errors, including the improbable assertion that Vladimir Putin might want to singlehandedly invade Alaska.

This year's election has seen foreign policy gaffes from both Republican and Democratic candidates, most notably Donald Trump's highly questionable statement that there are no Russian troops in Ukraine. His campaign has been riddled with implausible plans and inaccurate assertions, from his belief that the United States should simply "take all the oil" in Iraq and Syria, to his contention that Hillary Clinton has spent her entire adult life fighting the Islamic State. Clinton has done better, undoubtedly a result of her tenure as secretary of state, but even she has made errors, including a garbled response in one town hall event that suggested Libya isn't experiencing a civil war.

In the case of the Libertarian candidate, foreign policy was always likely to be problematic: the focus of many libertarians on non-interventionism seems to suggest that you don't need a great amount of knowledge about the world to conduct foreign policy. Indeed, Johnson has shown himself to be much more knowledgeable on core domestic issues like taxation or drug policy.

But even if most libertarians are as skeptical about interventions abroad as they are about government intervention at home, in order to make a coherent case for restraint in America's foreign policy, you have to explain *why* it will work better. Johnson, it turns out, is generally correct in his approach to Syria: U.S. intervention to alleviate suffering, in Aleppo or elsewhere, is unlikely to work and may well make the situation worse. It's the same approach the White House is taking today. But without knowledge of detail, he struggles to explain why.

The big tragedy here is that the foreign-policy approach offered by the Johnson-Weld campaign is not only a compelling alternative to the current orthodoxy, but is increasingly popular among Americans. A more restrained approach to foreign policy would see the United States involved in fewer unnecessary conflicts around the world, and a much stronger emphasis on diplomacy and other non-military solutions to global problems. In contrast to Clinton's liberal interventionist approach, it would avoid getting bogged down in civil wars like Libya and Syria. In contrast to Trump's curiously aggressive isolationism, a restrained foreign policy sees trade as a positive, security-enhancing factor.

Polling throughout the election campaign suggests that many of these ideas resonate with voters. In one recent Chicago Council survey, only 27 percent of Americans believed that the United States does too little around the world, while 41 percent of respondents think the United States does too much. More than half of respondents think that other countries should solve their own problems rather than relying on the United States.

Indeed, it's likely that some of Johnson's strongest bases of support come from his foreign policy leanings. Polls show that 36 percent of active-duty troops, many of whom have witnessed first-hand the foreign policy follies of the last decade, intend to vote for Gary Johnson, while 29 percent of millennials — a generation with a strong tendencies towards restraint — are planning to vote for him.

Yet even with growing public support, Johnson's gaffes encourage the media to dismiss his foreign policy ideas as unimportant or fringe. many have been quick to argue that Johnson's gaffes render him — or any libertarian candidate — unqualified to run for president.

But each gaffe made by the Libertarian candidate represents a missed opportunity to persuade voters. After Johnson's recent brain freeze, his running mate Bill Weld went on to cite Germany's Angela Merkel worthy of admiration, but provided few details. In fact, Merkel's focus on diplomacy in conflict resolution in Ukraine and elsewhere, her record of restraint in military interventions like Libya, and her efforts to resolve the Syrian refugee crisis are a wonderful example of what a restrained foreign policy might look like in practice.

Ultimately, these gaffes raise the question of the Libertarian campaign's goals in the election. Is it simply the infinitesimal chance of getting elected as a third-party ticket? Or is the goal instead open debate, to present an alternative for voters disillusioned with other parties, and shift America's foreign policy in a more libertarian direction? Johnson and his running mate have repeatedly emphasized debate participation as a key goal of the campaign, even after they missed the 15 percent polling threshold to participate in the first debate. If he does get debate access, Gary Johnson will have the potential to enrich the national foreign policy debate with ideas no other candidate is presenting. But if he can't avoid further Aleppo moments, that influence might well be squandered.

Emma Ashford is a research fellow at the Cato Institute with expertise in international security and the politics of energy.