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American Military Personnel Looking in Libertarian Direction in the Election, Again

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Newly anointed GOP presidential nominee Donald Trump wasted no time in criticizing the foreign policy legacy of Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. For decades the GOP has claimed to uniquely represent American military personnel..

Service members aren't allowed to become publicly involved in partisan politics. However, they do speak indirectly, via polls and contributions.

It turns out that they favor neither Democrats nor Republicans. Rather, they lean libertarian. This campaign a plurality is supporting the least militaristic of the candidates, Libertarian Party nominee Gary Johnson.

The LP is a perennial and distant third place contender. But this election might be different. Johnson has been polling in double digits and could hold the balance of power.

Especially with the help of military personnel. For instance, a July poll found Johnson well ahead of the two major party candidates. Almost 39 percent of active duty members backed him. Just 31 percent supported Donald Trump and only 14 percent were for Hillary Clinton. Johnson carried every service except the Navy.

He enjoyed the biggest margin in the Marines Corps, 44 percent to 27 percent for Trump. Second was the Air Force, 39 percent to 30 percent. Johnson also carried former members of the military and came close among retirees. Clinton typically lagged behind the other two candidates, sometimes receiving barely one-third the share of Johnson's followers.

This isn't the first time a libertarian led the presidential race among military personnel. Republican Ron Paul, a congressman long known as "Dr. No," was a consistent outlier on foreign policy. While the other Republicans consistently advocated more intervention and war, Paul highlighted the problems of "blowback"—terrorism as a response to Washington's

persistent willingness to bomb, invade, and occupy other nations and drone and bomb other peoples.

The conventional wisdom seemed to be that military personnel lusted for war. Yet, wrote Timothy Egan in the *New York Times* in 2011, Paul had “more financial support from active duty members of the service than any other politician.” At one point Paul had collected 87 percent of the military contributions for GOP candidates.

As of March 2012 Paul had received more than twice the amount for Obama, almost ten times the amount for Romney, more than ten times as much as Gingrich, and about 32 times the amount for Rick Santorum, a former Senator. The latter three were inveterate war hawks who themselves never served in the military. In contrast, Obama presented himself as a critic of unnecessary war.

After Iowa Mitt Romney soon effectively wrapped up the GOP race. Military personnel shifted their financial support, but to Obama, not Romney. It turns out that when GOP candidates beat the war drums they were competing for votes from the ivory tower rather than the armed services. In March 2012 Obama collected about twice as much cash as Paul, who in turn received twice as much as Romney.

Paul even led his Republican competitors among military contractors (though he trailed Obama). Analyst Loren Thompson explained that “Just because people work in the defense industry doesn’t mean that they always vote their economic interests.” The GOP’s presumption that war offers political benefits appears doubtful.

While service personnel are willing to serve in combat, most do not want to do so absent compelling circumstances. And few of the interests involved in Washington’s conflicts can be considered serious let alone vital. A Marines Corp veteran who supported Paul told Egan that service members “realize they’re being utilized for other purposes—nation building and being world’s policeman—and it’s not what they signed up for.”

Despite the support of so many military members, Ron Paul was never able to significantly broaden his appeal. Johnson also is not seen as a likely winner, but he enjoys at least three big advantages over Paul.

The first is that as a former two-term governor he has practical governing experience. Second, his running mate, William Weld, also is a serious political figure. Third, the two major party contenders are widely disliked, even despised.

These may allow Johnson to build on the strong backing from those in the military who have suffered most directly from the misbegotten interventionist policies of the last three administrations. Other voters have good reason to take him seriously.

Who can keep Americans safe? That obviously is one of the most important questions this election. Uniformed military personnel are giving a surprising answer.

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