

America's Next Top Libertarian

Gary Johnson wants to be the Ron Paul of 2012. Unfortunately for him, so does Ron Paul.

By David Weigel

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Seventeen years and six months ago, Gary Johnson announced that he was running for governor of New Mexico. His leadership experience? He'd only ever run his Albuquerque construction business; he'd never run for office before. He looked, in other words, like the sort of candidate who runs for office on a lark, gets pulverized, and goes back to building ranch houses.

"I sized him up as a total neophyte and

somebody who had no chance," remembers John Dendahl, who got into the Republican primary later and had much more government experience than Johnson. "I think it would be fair to say he didn't exhibit a great deal of knowledge of how politics worked. But he spent a lot of money. He bought a lot of ads on the sides of buses in Albuquerque, and he acquitted himself very well in the debates."

Dendahl remembers one particular example of Johnson's approach to political blood sport. "At one of the debates," says Dendahl, "the candidates got asked how we'd deal with the Democrats in the legislature. New Mexico is basically two-to-one Democratic, you see. Johnson got that question and said he'd veto them. Now, most of us laughed

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his views on international trade. But Paul tapped into an anti-war, anti-state, pro-gold sentiment that few people knew existed. He raised \$35 million. He came fourth in the delegate hunt.

Johnson studied the Ron Paul campaign. He hired Paul's finance director, Jonathan Bydlak. He ran third in CPAC's straw poll because some Paul supporters made him their first choice, to prop him up. In an interview earlier this year, conducted outside a restaurant in Arlington, Va.—Johnson thought we could save money if we didn't grab a table—he explained that he wanted to expand the GOP's base and do what Paul couldn't quite do last time.

"I just would point out also that he ended up getting 9 percent of the vote, and I'm trying to be astute as to why that was the case," said Johnson. "I mean, why wasn't that a higher number? Because the idea would be—speaking hypothetically—the idea would be to win. And he didn't win. So I try to understand that as well as I possibly can."

The problem is that Paul still wants to run for president. At last check, his advisers said he was 60/40 on a new presidential run. He's RSVP'd to the first Republican primary debate, scheduled for May 5 in South Carolina. He has already raised millions of dollars. The last report for Johnson's PAC, Our America, reported only \$205,000 raised, and most of it spent, in the last quarter of 2010.

Maybe the problem is best explained with an analogy. In *Braveheart*, Mel Gibson's subtly fictionalized account of the 14th-century fight for Scottish independence, William Wallace leads a rebellion. Robert

the Bruce, the King of the Scots, hangs back and watches. Wallace dies. Robert gets the courage to take his place. In the 2011 Republican version of the story, the original rebel leader never fell, and decides he wants one more go at it.

Johnson, understandably, does not like talking about what effect Paul will have on his campaign. "It's not a zero-sum game," he said to me in Arlington. "It can't be a zero-sum game. Nine percent of voters don't just turn to Johnson and Paul—we have to get more than that."

But how? Johnson will need some hook, some crucial showdown, ideally on a debate stage. That's what happened to Paul. At the second Republican debate of 2007, Paul calmly explained the "blowback" theory of foreign policy, and then-frontrunner Rudy Giuliani—who would win far fewer votes than Paul—demanded that he "apologize" for blaming America for 9/11.

"Did Ron Paul get any coverage before Rudy attacked him?" asks David Boaz, the vice president of the libertarian Cato

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Institute. "Before that, Ron was a member of Congress running to get on national television and talk about his issues. It was Rudy attacking him that made him an Internet and cable star."

Theoretically, there is nothing preventing Johnson from having a Rudy Moment. I've interviewed Johnson three times about his campaign. He doesn't seem to know how to evade questions, or that this is typically what you're supposed to do with questions. Gay marriage?

"I support gay unions," he says. "I don't think the government should be involved in marriage."

Should states and cities be allowed to declare bankruptcy?

"I've been talking about that now for a couple months. I think that's a great idea that Congress ought to let them do."

Should marijuana be legalized? That's an easy question—Johnson came out for marijuana legalization during his second term in the governor's office.

"Control it. Legalize it. Tax it. When it comes to all the other drugs, treat drug use as a health issue, not a crime issue."

Again, theoretically, there is a path to Republican success in there. Johnson, unlike every other potential Republican candidate, believes that abortion should be legal "until the viability of the fetus." How many Republicans believe that? According to the exit poll of the 2008 New Hampshire primary, 52 percent of Republican voters (independents and Republicans) said abortion should be

"always" or "mostly" legal. Johnson isn't much of a churchgoer—22 percent of New Hampshire GOP voters said they "never" went to church. Thirty-eight percent of them favored civil unions. Twenty-eight percent favored a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants. And so on. There is a constituency here for someone.

Johnson's struggle will be informing that constituency that he is someone—he exists, he's viable, and would better serve them than Ron Paul. When I saw Johnson in Arlington, he spoke to a fairly crowded room full of young Republicans. He was introduced, glowingly, by Amit Singh, who'd run a Ron Paul-inspired campaign for Congress in 2008 and had switched candidates. Johnson took questions for a half hour. The Second Amendment?

"I don't believe there should be any restrictions when it comes to firearms. None."

Was Citizens United decided correctly?

"Yeah. My issue with campaign finance is 100 percent disclosure. Wear a suit with

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patches from your big contributors. Depending on the size of the contribution, that's how big the patch should be."

One more question: What would set him apart from the 2012 field?

Johnson didn't quite know what to say.

"Really? After all this?"

Yes, still. There's one other candidate he needs to set himself apart from.

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