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'What is Aleppo?': Gary Johnson's misstep exposes shortcomings of his presidential candidacy

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Libertarian presidential nominee Gary Johnson has doggedly sought the spotlight in his long-shot presidential bid, but on Thursday he got an unwelcome jolt of notoriety when he blanked on the name of Aleppo, a city at the heart of the protracted and bloody war in Syria.

The gaffe, which was instantly and widely mocked, threatened to taint Johnson's still-unformed reputation among most voters and undermine his effort to establish himself as a viable option to the two major parties' historically unpopular nominees.

"The question is, does this become the one thing that people know about him?" said David Boaz, executive vice president of the **Cato Institute**, a libertarian think tank.

The episode also exposed the limitations of Johnson's quirky persona as he tries to woo voters from Republican **Donald Trump** and Democrat Hillary Clinton. And it came at a particularly crucial time as Johnson seeks a spot in the three presidential debates, a milestone that would offer an immense credibility boost to his candidacy and the Libertarian Party as a whole.

The former Republican governor of New Mexico, Johnson has an awkwardly affable mien that is well-suited to discussions of his extreme athletic pursuits or recently halted recreational use of marijuana, but he has proved less adept at offering crisp, specific answers on policy.

Such was the case Thursday morning, when Johnson was asked on MSNBC what, as president, he would do about Aleppo.

The city has borne some of the harshest consequences of Syria's 5-year-old civil war, including recent attacks believed to involve chlorine gas that affected dozens of residents. It is also home to the young boy, Omran Daqneesh, who drew widespread attention last month after images spread online showing him in the back of an ambulance after an airstrike, covered in dust and blood and wearing a shell-shocked expression.

Johnson clearly appeared at a loss by the query.

“What is Aleppo?” Johnson asked, prompting his interviewer to ask if he was kidding.

When told of the city’s significance in the Syrian conflict, he tried again to answer the question, advocating for the U.S. to work with Russia to find a diplomatic solution. He also made a broader point against foreign entanglements, reflecting the noninterventionist philosophy that is a key tenet of libertarianism, along with limited government and social liberalism.

"I do understand Aleppo," he said. "And I understand the crisis that is going on. But when we involve ourselves militarily, when we involve ourselves in these humanitarian issues, we end up with a situation that in most cases is not better and in many cases ends up being worse."

Later, in a statement, Johnson said the blunder resolved “any doubt that I’m human.”

“Yes, I understand the dynamics of the Syrian conflict — I talk about them every day,” Johnson continued. “But hit with ‘What about Aleppo?’ I immediately was thinking about an acronym, not the Syrian conflict. I blanked. It happens, and it will happen again during the course of this campaign.”

Supporters found an upside to the instantly viral exchange: a surge in attention for the lesser-known candidate.

“This can only help Johnson in the long run with dramatically increased name recognition, which is what he has needed,” said Kerry Welsh, a Palos Verdes-based entrepreneur who has hosted fundraisers for Johnson.

But Dan Schnur, director of the Jesse M. Unruh Institute of Politics at USC, said he doubted the episode offered a silver lining.

“If he had made a controversial comment that offended some people but motivated others, then that's the type of story that can help in the polls,” Schnur said. “This isn't a point of controversy. It simply displays an extraordinary lack of knowledge on his part. It might not cost him a lot of votes, but it's impossible to imagine it will gain him any.”

The Libertarian ticket has consistently averaged around 9% in polls – far more than the 1% Johnson received in his first presidential run with the party in the 2012 election, but also well short of the 15% threshold for participating in the televised presidential debates this fall. Despite the increased attention he has received in the last couple of months, and the continued unpopularity of Trump and Clinton, Johnson’s support has not grown significantly during the summer.

Johnson has struggled to demonstrate policy fluency. A proponent of gun rights, he has said he’s “open to discussions” about keeping firearms away from potential terrorists or the mentally ill, but skirted any specific proposals.

In a podcast interview last week with the New Yorker, Johnson squirmed on a question about raising the retirement age for Social Security benefits, saying he would not be “elected king or dictator,” before ultimately proposing raising the age threshold to 72 years.

“I often wish he gave crisper answers on public policy,” said Boaz, who noted that Johnson was a political novice before being elected New Mexico governor in 1994. “It is an indication that politics and policy have not been his whole life the way they are for a Jeb Bush or Ted Cruz or Hillary Clinton.”

Johnson’s upstart candidacy had garnered some promising signs of support in recent days. The Richmond Times-Dispatch, the capital city newspaper of the key swing state of Virginia, endorsed Johnson and his running mate, former Massachusetts Republican Gov. William Weld, last weekend, breaking with a 36-year streak of endorsing Republicans. And on Wednesday, former GOP nominee Mitt Romney, who has expressed interest in the Libertarian ticket but has stopped short of an endorsement, weighed in on Twitter.

“I hope voters get to see former GOP Governors Gary Johnson and Bill Weld on the debate stages this fall,” Romney wrote.

Welsh, the Johnson supporter, said he was not concerned that Thursday’s misstep could halt that momentum.

“I can’t imagine anybody changing their vote because of missing a ‘Jeopardy’ question like this,” he said.

But Johnson’s comment made an impression on Diana Coronado, a 27-year-old registered Republican from Pomona.

“If you had asked me this time yesterday, I would say, ‘I’m voting for Gary Johnson,’” said Coronado, who said that as a Latina, she was alienated by Trump. But she said Johnson’s answer showed a “disheartening” ignorance on foreign affairs, making her reconsider her vote.

“I don’t think I can vote for him,” she said, “especially because national security is the No. 1 issue for me.”