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Gary Johnson: Caveat Emptor

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[Gary Johnson](#), former two-term governor of New Mexico, has launched his presidential campaign, the first to so declare – although, to this observer, at least, it seems like he's been running forever. He's been traveling around the country for months, doing interviews, and he recently popped up in New Hampshire, where he made the announcement.

Johnson claims to be a libertarian, but his libertarianism, like his candidacy, is problematic: he is best known, perhaps, for his stance on the legalization of marijuana – and his detailing of his personal experience with the weed. "I *did inhale*," he has said. He's pro-abortion, pro-gay marriage, and wants to cut 43 percent of the federal budget right off the top. So, what's the problem?

Well, frankly, it's [this](#):

"Johnson is open, in principle, to waging humanitarian wars. 'If there's a clear genocide somewhere, don't we really want to positively impact that kind of a situation?' he says. 'Isn't that what we're all about? Isn't that what we've always been about? But just this notion of nation building—I think the current policy is making us more enemies than more friends.'"

At a time when the Obama administration has, [in effect](#), announced a new foreign policy doctrine which avers that we have a "responsibility to protect" the victims of [alleged](#) "genocide" all over the world, Johnson's devotion to [the libertarian principle](#) of [non-intervention](#) in the affairs of other nations is really questionable. Especially now that the Libyan adventure is [well underway](#), and we find ourselves sliding down that slippery slope into full-scale support for the Libyan rebels, Johnson's position is rather too close to the Obama Doctrine.

And it has to be asked: is saving the world, or even a small portion of it, really "what we're all about"? Maybe over at the *Weekly Standard*, where Johnson gave this interview, it is, but not in the libertarian precincts where he hopes to garner support.

Yes, Johnson is against the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan: and yes, he wants to bring the troops home from Europe and other places where they have no business being, but he is clearly tailoring his campaign to suit the softcore sensibilities of the Beltway crowd. For example, he's supposedly against foreign aid – except, perhaps, when it comes to Israel. It's not clear if, like [Sen. Rand Paul](#) (R-Kentucky), he would end that particular boondoggle, but in [this interview](#) he was clear that maintaining our military alliance with Israel is "key" – although key to what, he did not say.

Furthermore, he went on to say that our military alliances in general are also "key" in fighting the "[war on terrorism](#)" that he believes we must continue to wage, albeit not in Afghanistan and Iraq. The vagueness of all this is disconcerting, especially when one senses the echo of Obama-ism in this "libertarian" version of multilateralism.

The problem with Johnson's benign view of military alliances is that they are a [tripwire](#) for US intervention: after all, what does a military alliance mean if not joint defense – or offense – against a common enemy? Johnson emphasizes our alliance with Israel, and yet what does this alliance mean other than a guarantee that the US will come to Israel's assistance in case of war – and that is not to say who will start the war.

Asked what he would do if Iran acquired nuclear weapons, Johnson blithely replied that surely Israel wouldn't just stand idly by and let that happen. So Johnson's position is that the IDF will take care of the problem. That he followed this up with the observation that the Israelis are known to possess [nuclear weapons](#) I find macabre. Would he approve if the Israelis nuked Tehran? As President, sitting there in the Oval Office – his feet up on the desk, toking on the presidential pipe – what would he say when Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu informs him of the imminent strike? Imagine the conversation:

"Mr. President, the day of reckoning has come."

"Well, look, Bibi, you're sure about this now?"

"We face an existential threat: we have no choice."

"Okay, but let's be clear: we're not helping, and I'll say we had nothing to do with it."

"That's fine, Mr. President: we've had all the help from you that we need."

It is absurd to believe that the US would not be [invariably drawn](#) into a war against Iran initiated by Israel: this is the reason Johnson's "key" alliance is so dangerous. With [militaristic](#) right-wing governments in charge in Tel Aviv, the prospect of the Israelis dragging us into a regional conflagration is increasingly likely. In the same interview, Johnson disdains the idea of defending Taiwan against the People's Republic of China on the grounds that it would cause a world war – and yet our alliance with Israel is judged by a different standard. Why is that? It's positively baffling.

Multilateralism, whether carried out by the Obama administration or the Johnson administration, is just the division of labor amongst the imperialist (Western) powers. Johnson wants to represent the decline-ist elite who simply think it's high time other – Western – nations shared the burden of empire. But we already have an administration which is doing precisely that, or [trying to](#), in Libya, and also [in Afghanistan](#), where NATO is supposed to be taking the lead.

Contrast this with the [foreign policy views](#) of [Ron Paul](#), the only [real libertarian](#) in this race. He doesn't just want to manage the empire: [he wants to end it](#). Paul is similarly [unequivocal](#) about ending [all foreign aid](#), without exception. Paul has never been taken in by the "[collective security](#)" gambit, in which "peace" is supposed to be assured by our network of "defensive" alliances. He adheres to [the foreign policy of the Founders](#), who [warned against](#) "entangling alliances" and "passionate attachments" to countries other than our own.

Indeed, it is fair to ask Johnson: with Ron Paul widely expected to enter the race, why is he even running? He gets asked this question all the time, and will be asked even more often now that he's made his official announcement, and it's time he answered it. Ron Paul's name is synonymous with libertarianism in the GOP, and in general: why try compete with this powerful brand name, unless there's something unique Johnson has to offer?

The Johnson campaign, in my view, is an indirect tribute to [Ron Paul's monumental achievement](#). It was Paul, after all, who brought libertarianism into the public consciousness. That a cheap knock-off has now appeared on the market underscores the real value Paul has created for the libertarian movement – and I doubt many will fall for the counterfeit. Not if, as he says in the above-referenced interview, that he thinks we ought to "save" Social Security by "increasing the amount of withholding." Is the world ready for a "libertarian" in favor of hiking taxes? Only in [Bizarro World](#).

It is all too clear to me what the Johnson campaign represents: the attempt by the so-called "cosmopolitan" ([cosmotarian](#)?) wing of our movement to create "[the next Ron Paul](#)" – and dump all that antiwar, anti-Federal Reserve "kooky" stuff, which the Beltway libertarian organizations funded by the so-called "Kochtopus" look down their noses at. These sophisticates sniff disdainfully at Paul's [Christianity](#), his [country-doctor-bourgeois persona](#), his personal [opposition to abortion](#): they are especially embarrassed by his opposition to the [pernicious role](#) played by the [central bankers](#) of the [Federal Reserve](#) in [destroying our economy](#) because this is something that is *never* brought up at Georgetown cocktail parties.

The last time Paul ran, he got no support from these circles: indeed, [they bad-mouthed him to the Nation](#), and to anyone who would listen, perpetuating (if not originating) a [smear campaign](#) in Koch-funded media and via the Washington gossip mill. [Brink Lindsey](#), the founder of "libertarianism," and others formerly and currently associated with the Cato Institute, were the transmission belt for a whole series of slanders that didn't tarnish Paul but merely boomeranged on the perpetrators, discrediting them in the eyes of most serious libertarians.

This crowd has always underestimated Ron Paul. They thought the newsletter non-scandal would destroy him: instead, he brushed them off as a giant would brush away a gnat, and went on to create a grassroots movement that is growing by the day. Contra Cato's [David Boaz](#), who thinks Rudy "Single Delegate" Giuliani made Paul a national figure, it was the *ideas* in themselves, filtering out through the grassroots nascent Tea Party movement, that catapulted Ron into the limelight – an odd thing for the Vice President of a *think tank* to miss, don't you think? Boaz avers:

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

This is the old Kochtopus fascination with media coverage as somehow being able to create a movement – as opposed to a movement meriting (nay, *demanding*) coverage on account of its indisputable newsworthiness. Some things never change. The Kochtopus types have always believed this, which is why their many organizations and front groups never really succeeded in creating anything but a strictly astroturf "movement," as some of their critics on the left, such as [Rachel Maddow](#), have noted.

Boaz and his crew have it exactly backwards: *first* you create a movement big enough and active enough to actually *do* something, and *then* the media (which is biased against you anyway) is forced to sit up and take notice. This is the road Ron Paul has traveled, and it has been a long one: but his persistence – and [devotion to principle](#) – has paid off. It was Paul who [warned the public](#) about the inevitable economic catastrophe awaiting us if we continued our money-printing, war-mongering, spendthrift ways – and they remembered when the crash came. He has enormous credibility because of this. The Beltway libertarians envy him for that, because credibility is what they crave above all. What they have never understood, however, is that it can't be conferred by favorable press coverage, or created by expensive public relations campaigns. It has to be earned – and Paul has certainly earned it.

The Kochtopus, for all its many criticisms of the Paul movement, was at a strategic disadvantage: they could diss Paul all they wanted, but what was the alternative? They had none. Now they do: Gary Johnson, "the next Ron Paul," or, rather, Paul Lite, Paul without the hard edges, without the "kooky" end-the-Fed stuff, without the social conservatism, without the stubborn devotion to principle and to [Austrian economics](#), specifically – in short, a hollowed out libertarianism, without any style and surely without its soul.

So far, Johnson has raised and spent a minuscule fraction of Paul's war chest, and he won't last through New Hampshire – unless he can get the Kochs behind him. I can't help believing that's what he's counting on.

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