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Military Times' Q&A with Gary Johnson: How he'd lead as commander in chief

Leo Shane III

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Libertarian presidential candidate Gary Johnson has spent much of his campaign struggling to get noticed in the shadow of his major party competitors, but appears to be making inroads with at least one segment of the population: American military personnel and their families.

The 63-year-old former governor of New Mexico in recent months has polled better with veterans and service members than the general population, including earning support from 13 percent of respondents to the most recent Military Times reader survey.

He credits that in part to his “not isolationist, but non-interventionist” foreign policy platform, and to his willingness to speak honestly about reform throughout government. He has been working with the Cato Institute, a Libertarian think tank in Washington, to help refine and expand his defense platform.

Military Times met with Johnson on Thursday, during a campaign stop here in Milwaukee. The discussion focused on his views about military spending, reforming the Department of Veterans Affairs, and what type of leadership he would install at the Pentagon in order to balance national security with his goal of avoiding disastrous conflicts overseas.

MT: We've seen higher support for you among members of the military and veterans than among the rest of the general population. Why do you think that is?

Johnson: I hope that it's based on what I'm saying about judicious use of the military, that if we're attacked we're going to attack back. But the fact that we get involved in regime changes, which in my lifetime I can't think of one example of regime change making things better. And of course that's (affecting) our military, our men and women on the front line.

I get incensed over politicians that beat their chest over going out to fight terrorism at the cost of our service men and women ... those that lose their lives, or get hurt or are maimed for their lives.

MT: You've talked about the libertarian viewpoint as not isolationist but non-interventionist. How does that work in today's world, when you look at a situation like Iraq or Syria. What kind of lines would you draw as commander in chief for how we get involved?

Johnson: In this case, we get involved in Iraq, we get rid of Saddam Hussein, we cause al-Qaida to flee, they eventually become ISIS, we create a void ... I do believe we are going to defeat ISIS, but let's not be naive. We are going to create a void that's going to get filled with the name of some other organization.

With regard to Afghanistan, I think that's a great example of we were attacked, we attacked back, and I fully supported going in to get al-Qaida and Osama bin Laden. But after we were in Afghanistan for seven months, we got al-Qaida. Obviously we didn't get bin Laden, but we could have left our options open to come back and deal with that.

I would get out of Afghanistan tomorrow. For all the consequences that come from (that), those same consequences are going to exist 20 years from now if that's when we decide to get out. So I guess we're going to stay there forever.

When you think about consequences, those (locals) that have supported our military in Afghanistan, you would think that many of them potentially could be in harm's way. We could offer those individuals asylum, if that's the right term, refuge in the United States. That is not without precedent.

MT: If we were to pull out of Afghanistan tomorrow, that would go against the advice of military commanders. Is that a realistic step? Is that something potentially destabilizing?

Johnson: What I have found regarding military commanders, or anyone, is that I'm willing to guess there are those qualified to be in (command) positions that if I sent out a (question), I'm willing to bet I'd have dozens (of advisors) who would be qualified to fill that role and would agree with me on (withdrawal).

MT: As president, what kind of qualifications would you be looking for in your military advisers?

Johnson: Just good human beings that philosophically would align with what I am saying. Based on my experience as governor of New Mexico, I was amazed at the process of hiring people that presented themselves as "I'm aligned with you philosophically" with qualifications. I was just taken aback at how qualified the people are seeking these positions. I have a sense it would be the same in the military.

... I reject that we're isolationists. We are non-interventionists. And when we involve our military in regime change, in my lifetime, I can't think of one single example of when that has worked out.

In terms of military advisers, I've talked to the Cato Institute more than anyone else.

MT: Would a Johnson presidency mean an upheaval at the Pentagon?

Johnson: I'm not an upheaval kind of a person. If it were an upheaval, I'd like to think my ears

are open and convince me otherwise. It's not my way or the highway. If I am presented with evidence that would say categorically, "this is not something we should do" ... I'll listen. I do listen.

MT: You have talked about keeping the military the strongest fighting force in the world, but you've also talked about cutting government waste and having a 20 percent cut of government agencies. Does that apply to the departments of defense and Veterans Affairs?

Johnson: Not to the Department of Veterans Affairs, no. We need to draw a line with regards to the obligation we have to those who are serving and have served. That's not a cut ever.

But with regard to closing military bases, we had the (base closing round) in the mid 90s. I was part of that process. I believe (the Pentagon) recommended 25 percent more bases could have been closed. So I would reimplement BRAC. There hasn't been the political will to see those bases closed.

I'm under the belief that if we don't get our fiscal house in order, we're not going to have a strong government or a strong military moving forward, keeping in mind we're spending as much on our military as the rest of the world combined. The ramifications of that in Europe is that Europe has not picked up its fair share of this.

I intend to honor all treaties and obligations that are in effect. That is something that has to be projected by the incoming president. But with regard to Europe, they've had this free go of being able to grow their welfare programs on the back of us coming in and covering their back with our military.

MT: So you see a middle ground from Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump's stance? You think they could assume more of a military role without breaking off our alliances?

Johnson: It's important that we honor our obligations, and that's to say we need to be very transparent about that and what our expectations are. I think that expecting 2 percent of gross domestic product spent by European countries on military is a very reasonable figure. I believe there are only two countries in all of NATO complying with that. Amazingly absent from that is Germany.

MT: Jumping back to the 20 percent spending cuts, you mentioned BRAC, but that alone won't be enough to reach 20 percent.

Johnson: Oh, no. It's a reduction in support for military personnel, it's military personnel, it's nuclear weapons. I think nuclear non-proliferation is something that is very desirable. It's research and intelligence. It's a combination of all of those items. And I don't think that anyone can argue that government is 20 percent fat in every category. But I don't think the military is exempt from that either.

I will exempt from that category those that are serving, the resources going to those that are

serving, and veterans. There is no obligation that is too great for those we have asked to do that.

MT: Does that include military pay and benefits? Where does this money come from then?

Johnson: By exempting, I'm thinking in terms of support for military personnel. When you read about things where our troops aren't being supported ... because we're not underplating vehicle carriages and calling that an expenditure consideration. To me, that's not negotiable.

MT: Military commanders are already saying they're at the bone when it comes to military equipment and end strength.

Johnson: And I don't doubt that's what is being communicated. But I'm back to my original premise: The appointments I get to make, I'm willing I can make appointments of qualified commanders ... that would have another view on that.

MT: On the Department of Veterans Affairs, how do you feel they are doing now?

Johnson: My father is a WWII veteran, and he is still alive. He's is about to turn 97. He was in VA a couple of summers ago with a heart attack. He fractured his arm. What I saw was unbelievably dedicated people in VA, doctors, input, the whole nine yards.

But what I understand also is that they are taxed and they often times are not able to keep up with the demand. If that is the case, it would not be difficult to implement a health card or a health services (plan) that would go outside the VA that would make up for deficiencies in VA.

MT: That has been a major fight amongst conservatives and liberals not just on the campaign trail but on Capitol Hill, does the Choice Card count as privatization or just expanding care resources for veterans. So you are comfortable with that program?

Johnson: And if that means expansion, that means expansion. Back to cutting government, there are probably some things we should be spending more money on, and when it comes to the military, it seems to me that we should be spending more money on taking care of those that have served to meet their needs.

MT: What about the concerns we've heard from some veterans groups that if you're routing care to the private sector, you're undermining VA?

Johnson: I can't imagine where that would be the case. But I'm not going to be blind in this office.

One thing about me running along with Bill Weld, we are two former Republican governors that served in heavily Democratic states by being fiscally conservative. We wouldn't have gotten elected or re-elected if we didn't do a pretty good job in the office. One thing I have learned is that you never say never, but you can also state where your heart is at and the direction you'd like to go.

MT: Have you gotten a chance to sit down and talk to the veterans service organizations yet?

Johnson: I have not. But I'd like to believe I stayed fairly well read on this.

MT: And you don't have a veterans issues section on your campaign web site.

Johnson: We're going to remedy that. Nothing purposeful there.

MT: What about cuts to veterans benefits, the GI Bill, health care, even military pay and housing. Is that all in a protected category?

Johnson: Yes. I view that as obligations to those who have served. And I come back to obligations to those who are serving. If that comes down to housing, if that comes down to vocational training in active service, I'm open to all of it. I can't imagine that being cuts.

MT: What are the qualities you're going to be looking for in a defense secretary or a veterans affairs secretary?

Johnson: In the case of Veterans Affairs, it would be someone with experience, and highly regarded. I've made a career out of showing up on time and telling the truth, because if you tell the truth you admit the mistakes you've made. More than anything, I'm looking for people who are qualified and have that kind of a resume similar to my own, which is being accountable.

By being accountable, you make mistakes. But there isn't a quicker way to remedy things than by admitting that things are wrong. As governor of New Mexico, I felt like there were pretty good safeguards in place to see who was doing their job and who wasn't. Having been in business and having 1,000 employees at one point, I think I'm a pretty good judge of who is doing their job and who isn't.

Nothing is easier than hiring people. Nothing is more difficult than firing people. But if you can't fire people, things go wrong and just compound themselves.

MT: Accountability has been a huge issue for VA. Do you think the folks in charge now take that seriously enough?

Johnson: Based on all of what came down (at VA) and my reading of what came down, it was an issue of leadership. As president, I would come in with my own crew, based on all the stories and all of government right now. I'd put Veteran Affairs at the top of the heap for want of leadership.

Maybe I'm unfairly judging those currently in the position, but I'll be the first one to listen to why they think it's an issue of more resources rather than one of leadership. I have a sense I would be replacing all of the hierarchy.