



The L Word

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In a time when the two major political parties are not held in high esteem by a large portion of the voting public, you'd think a viable third party would stand a good chance of making headway, if not usurping a major role in American politics.

Ross Perot's spoiler candidacy in 1992, and to a lesser degree in 1996, and the bipartisan populist groundswell of the Trump era would indicate there is a sustained market for an economically and culturally conservative, socially moderate party that could attract voters into a winning coalition. An American Thatcherite party.

Strangely enough, we have such a party with that general ideological profile. It is a party that raises millions every four years for a presidential run, perennially loses, but that can't get a dogcatcher elected in any county in America. Conversely, in poll after poll a majority of Americans, especially boomers like me, seem to agree with their overall philosophy in every category save national security.

Yes kids, the Libertarians.

I know well of this, as during my years as a political operative in the mid-90s I worked with the LP (Libertarian Party) in the Mid-Atlantic region and had some dealings with them at the national level. Fine people, but more the Cato Institute's dorky little brother than any semblance of a political party. Ran a couple of political ops training exercises with their national staff, called it *War and the Art of Politics*. Kind of a Sun Tzu/Lee Atwater weekend in the deep end of the pool for novice political operatives. We put them through marathon paces in a bourbon and adrenalin-fueled simulated last weekend of a neck-and-neck congressional general election. The LP staff were sharp, quick, and woefully uninformed of the basic tenets of how to get anybody elected to anything.

Oh sure, they could quote Rand by heart and would wax ecstatic over the potential legalization of prostitution and dope. And whatever you do, don't get them started on the Fed. But policies that didn't have their genesis on Planet Omicron X, things that matter to average Americans, or operational campaign expertise? Uh, no. Every curveball we tossed them, and there were many, was answered with overly earnest ideological protestations, not sound combat tactics. Even the party name is clunky. These sad things were proved by the 2016 presidential election.

You'd think it would have been the perfect setup for them: two major candidates with negatives through the roof. A public divided. A win for the LP? Very unlikely. But a siphoning off of enough votes to throw the thing to the House where the LP could have extracted a high price

indeed for their support? Doable. How? With a strategy I recommended to their national leadership in 1997.

Modeled after MacArthur's Pacific island hopping strategy of WWII, the LP would have forsaken presidential races for several cycles and instead focused on training a farm team and getting them elected to local, county, and state offices across the nation. A sort of LP GOPAC. The targeted millions in cash spent in that, instead of in unwinnable presidential races, could have resulted in victories and thus a chance to govern. Actually governing, with its basis in the real world, would have tempered their message and expanded their tactical knowledge. It also would have introduced the LP to the public as a viable political option. But where to find the locales that would elect the LP?

It has had some limited success in New Hampshire and Alaska. Also college towns have been friendly to them. Nevada would seem like a good bet. So, like Dugout Doug, I counseled to bypass large enemy troop concentrations — unfriendly political territory— and pour fire on winnable races in winnable places. By my then estimate the LP would be ready for another presidential run by 2012. Certainly by 2016. The LP declined to advance my self-defined strategic genius and decided the status of eternal palooka was just fine with them. As such, and with a dark consistency known too well to all political parties from time to time, they nominated for president in 2016 exactly the wrong person to run in the wrong election. Thus, meet Gary Johnson.

Johnson is a seemingly nice man, and former GOP governor of New Mexico, whose niceness makes him come across as prepossessing as a hamster. His traditional LP focus on dope (previously known inside the LP as the "Save the Bales" strategy) during the populist pitchfork election of 2016 was doomed from the start. When the public wanted red meat he gave them soggy granola. During interviews he looked high. Perhaps nominating another one of the LP contenders, the batguano crazy yet compelling John McAfee, he of computer anti-virus fame, or better, switching roles with the veep nominee, nominating the gravitas-laden former GOP governor of Massachusetts Bill Weld, would have made a positive difference.

Even with the albatross of an uninspiring standard bearer, the LP still managed to garner 4,489,341/3.38% of the votes, but with no Electoral College votes. Someone named Faith Spotted Eagle, no lie, from South Dakota, who had no, not a one, popular votes still picked up a single Electoral College vote. If an LP presidential campaign could have laser targeted just enough potentially friendly states to throw the election into the House, or cut/bluffed their way into a deal with the GOP not to, then it might have earned them a seat at the big table. But not for the poor LP, beaten where and when it counted by a serious fan of speckled predatory birds.

Thus the future of the LP as currently constructed is not bright. If it reformed itself into a political party capable of politics, perhaps Rand Paul, a Libertarian in everything but name, would join the ranks. There are others, no doubt, especially amongst the young, who would seriously consider it.

Until then it will wallow in deserved impotence, an opportunity thrown away by the siren lure of purist ideology over operational professionalism.

Pity.