



Gene Healy: Libertarian Gary Johnson: Spoiler alert?

May 07, 2012

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As a small-"I" libertarian, it's not often I can say that National Public Radio cheers me up on my way into work. But it did the trick yesterday morning with an "All Things Considered" feature titled "Libertarians Find Their Voice in 2012 Race."

"Somewhere on the path to the White House this year," the announcer declared, "a powerful set of ideas began to creep into the mainstream debate over which direction the country will takefree and open markets and extremely limited government. Those ideals are now becoming more mainstream." Case in point, according to NPR, was the Libertarian Party's decision Saturday to make former Republican Gov. Gary Johnson of New Mexico its nominee for president.

When the federally funded voice of urbane, upper-middle class liberalism says we're on the verge of a "libertarian moment," that's what the lawyers call an "admission against interest," and it's worth paying attention.

Watching the Libertarian Party over the years, I've sometimes had the feeling that, as George Bernard Shaw once snarked about socialism, "we should have had libertarianism already, but for the Libertarians."

In 2004, the LP's presidential standard-bearer was Michael Badnarik, a freelance constitutional lecturer who taught that the federal income tax was optional and refused to obtain a drivers' license despite campaigning by car. In 2006, the Montana LP nominated 67-year-old Stan Jones for the U.S. Senate. Because of his odd pallor, Jones quickly became known as "the blue guy." A survivalist who in the 1990s was worried about the impending Y2K crisis, Jones began taking a homemade antibiotic laced with colloidal silver that permanently changed his complexion ("a true blue libertarian," the Washington Post called him). This weekend's LP convention, televised on C-Span, was a relatively buttoned-down affair, with most of the delegates in suits (though the irrepressible, omnipresent Starchild, libertarian activist and male exotic dancer, opted for a bare-midriff miniskirt number).

But Johnson is a far more appealing advocate for radical cuts in government than the LP has had in quite some time. And he got off some good lines in his convention speech Saturday. My favorite: "The libertarian candidate for president is the only candidate that's going to be talking about slashing welfare spending and warfare spending in the same sentence."

But to be a libertarian is to be eternally fractious and dissatisfied, refusing to take yes for an answer. So, of course, I have a bone or two to pick with the governor.

First, Johnson has gone on the record supporting President Obama's deployment of U.S. Special Forces to Uganda in a manhunt for Joseph Kony, murderous leader of the Lord's Resistance Army. This race deserves at least one candidate who won't send the U.S. military abroad in search of monsters to destroy.

Second, Johnson has told reporters he intends to seek millions of dollars in federal matching funds. If so, he'll be the first LP presidential candidate to have the taxpayers underwrite his campaign. That's a deviation that the self-styled "party of principle" should avoid.

One anti-Johnson argument that shouldn't get a lot of traction, however, is fear that the LP candidate will be a "spoiler;" that he will siphon off votes from Mitt Romney in a "lesser of two evils" race between the guy who practically invented Obamacare and the guy who passed it. If the major-party race is a battle between a president who's violated most of his campaign promises on civil liberties and a candidate who's already promised to do worse, then this election has arrived "pre-spoiled," through no fault of Gov. Johnson.

At the very least, Johnson's presence on all 50 state ballots could offer what a more libertarian GOP candidate once called "a choice, not an echo," in 2012.

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