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Behind the Lines: Randian Ryan

Pat Bagley and Val Lambson / August 20, 2012

Welcome to Behind the Lines, a weekly conversation with Salt Lake Tribune cartoonist Pat Bagley and BYU economist Val Lambson.

Bagley: I have to admit I was surprised at Mitt Romney's vice presidential pick. Paul Ryan is a fine family man, but he isn't a Rob Portman, who might have delivered Ohio, or a Marco Rubio, who could have made the difference in Florida, each state crucial in the electoral college tally. Instead he chose a Randian ideologue who delivers the GOP right wing, which had nowhere else to go anyway. As a libertarian ideologue — and I mean that in the nicest sense possible — what do you make of Ryan?

Lambson: The GOP right wing has nowhere else to go, but they can stay home. In particular, the religious right might be willing to hold their noses and vote for a Mormon with Ryan on the ticket. This could make the difference in some states. Incidentally, you may not have noticed that the Libertarian Party has nominated Gary Johnson, two-term governor of New Mexico, as its presidential candidate. This differs from the past nominees who have had no experience in office. Governing New Mexico is certainly on par with governing Arkansas, I would think. But I digress ...

Bagley: I had to look up Gary Johnson on wikipedia. Last I heard he was running in the Republican primaries, but as you point out, he's since found a warmer welcome with the Libertarians. He seems like a serious fellow with actual executive experience in government. I'm left wondering why he never got his 15 minutes of fame during the primaries, when every screwball with a circus act managed to get theirs. I imagine the answer doesn't reflect well on We the People.

Lambson: Ron Paul was also largely ignored until Jon Stewart made an issue of it on "The Daily Show." I don't believe in a media conspiracy, of course. I do think that most journalists see the libertarian message as falling somewhere between irrelevant and crazy so they naturally ignore it. This may change over time as groups like the Cato Institute and the Institute for Justice continue their work. In the meantime, screwball circus acts sell newspapers (or whatever the modern equivalent is).

Bagley: Cato . . . wasn't he the Green Hornet's sidekick? Speaking of sidekicks, Ryan's budget is something that Romney was for, before he was against, before

he was for it. Despite Romney's herculean efforts to remain vague and nonspecific, both he and Ryan are clearly in favor of more tax cuts for the rich on top of those already in place with the Bush tax cuts. Based on his partially-disclosed 2010 tax returns, Romney's tax rate would be .8 percent (note the placement of the decimal point) under the Ryan plan. No wonder he likes the guy.

Lambson: How clever of Romney to run for president so he can cut his own taxes, although upon reflection it seems like there might be cheaper ways to achieve that.

Bagley: I know, most of the superrich are content just to buy politicians.

Lambson: I guess Romney doesn't believe in outsourcing after all. Irony aside, it is hard to tell what motivates any given individual to seek political office. I highly doubt that anyone runs for president to affect their personal tax rates. I suspect most are attracted by power. Your erstwhile friend Hayek suggested that people motivated by a thirst for power are precisely those who should not have it. A real life Catch-22.

Lambson: Your vacation (which I hope was pleasant) seems to have left many Behind the Lines commentators in a state of withdrawal, exhibiting symptoms of irritability, an increased tendency for name-calling and greater incidence of uncivil discourse. In the middle of it all, Nungwa's top comment reminded us that our greatest influence is local: "If you wish to protect the 'sanctity of marriage', the only marriage you really have any input in would be your own."