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The Spoiler?

STEPHEN MOORE | August 30, 2012

There's at least one politician at the Republican convention this week whom the party leaders undoubtedly wish would stay away. That's Gary Johnson, the former Republican governor of New Mexico, who ran briefly in the Republican presidential primaries but is now the Libertarian Party candidate for the White House.

I bumped into Mr. Johnson in Tampa, and he was guns ablazing against the deficiencies of both President Obama and Mitt Romney. "Neither will truly tackle the overspending problem, and you know it," he says, repeating his central campaign message, though he agrees that Mr. Romney is less of a big-government menace than the president.

Mr. Johnson's agenda? "Well, I balance the budget next year with a 43 percent reduction in spending in 2013," he boasts. He wants deep slashes in the military, and would abolish the departments of education; homeland security; and housing and urban development. He also would block-grant Medicaid to the states. "When I was governor [from 1995 to 2003] we could have cut one-third of our Medicaid costs if the feds would have let us," he recalls. He was a popular and tight-fisted governor who cut state spending and got an "A" grade on the Cato Institute fiscal report card.

He says he doesn't know for sure how he's polling because "of the 18 major polls, only three even mention my name." His best guess is that he's nearing 5 percent—which is no doubt an overestimate—but he insists that he's "picking off a lot of Ron Paul voters."

Mr. Johnson is also sensitive to the obvious question of whether his candidacy is going to hand this election to Mr. Obama. He assures me that he takes "more votes from Obama." He tells me that in several battleground states where the question has been asked, including in Colorado and New Mexico, Mr. Romney does better with him on the ballot. Perhaps younger social liberals who see Mr. Obama as an economic bust but are uncomfortable with cultural conservatives are attracted to Mr. Johnson's views on gay issues and legalizing marijuana. Mr. Johnson hopes to steal away the "cool" vote from Mr. Obama.

He dons a wrinkled suit and jokes that he not only flies coach but carries his own luggage. "We don't want to waste the \$30 checked-luggage fee," he says. This is a fiscal conservative who practices what he preaches.