

POLITICO

Ex-gov. emerges as next Ron Paul

By: [Jonathan Martin](#)

December 17, 2009 04:38 AM EST

Former New Mexico Republican Gov. Gary Johnson is a teetotaling triathlete who looks the part of the laid-back Mountain West politician.

But don't let the jeans and black mock turtleneck he's sporting on his new website fool you: Johnson is starting to sound like a mad-as-hell populist with an eye cast on 2012 and the building fury aimed at Washington.

"I'm finding myself really angry over spending and [the deficit](#)," he said in an interview with POLITICO this week. "I'm finding myself really angry over what's happening in the Middle East, the decision to stay in Afghanistan indefinitely. I'm angry about cap and trade. And I've been on record for a long time on the failed war on drugs."

Is that enough to design a presidential campaign around? It might be, at a time of tea parties, rage at bailouts, job loss and general voter discontent. And there is plainly an opportunity for some politician to harness the anti-establishment, populist grass-roots fervor that is right leaning but untethered to any party at the moment.

It's what [Ron Paul](#) tried to do in last year's presidential campaign, but Johnson may better positioned to ride the populist wave than the longtime Texas GOP congressman. For one thing, the anti-establishment energy was not at the fever pitch then that it's nearing now. And, unlike the unlikely

Paul, a 73-year-old who got interested in elected politics when Richard Nixon abandoned the gold standard in 1971, Johnson is telegenic, is media savvy and, equally important, has twice been easily elected to statewide office.

A libertarian-leaning Republican, Johnson this month launched "Our America," a group that aims to draw attention to the principles of limited government at home and noninterventionism abroad.

But as the subtitle on the website indicates, "The Gary Johnson Initiative" is also designed to elevate the profile of the ascetic and unconventional former governor, who is known nationally — if at all — for his support of legalizing drugs.

Johnson is doing little to knock down the idea that he may be looking toward a 2012 presidential run.

"Is there room for something a little different?" he replied to a question about whether there was an opportunity for a new GOP voice emphasizing a different

Advertisement



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

POLITICO

approach. “I’d like to think I’m putting that to the test.”

Johnson is extremely cautious in responding to direct questions about his prospective White House ambitions, citing the legal restrictions on his 501(c)4 group, but he didn’t hesitate when asked if he’d soon be seen in such first-in-the-nation states as Iowa and New Hampshire.

“Yeah, you will [see me],” he said.

So could Johnson be the burgeoning [tea party](#) movement’s preferred candidate in the next presidential election, the tribune of the disaffected and disgruntled?

He’s certainly on the same page when it comes to the fiscal issues that have galvanized activists. In the interview — and in a high-production-value video on his group’s snazzy website — he touts his small-government record in Santa Fe, where he vetoed 750 bills, a total that at the time was more than that of the other 49 governors in the country combined.

And he embraces the outsider spirit of the tea party movement, noting that he was a construction business owner before winning election as part of the much-heralded Republican class of 1994 governors.

“I had a ‘Mr. Smith Goes to Washington’ experience as governor,” he said.

But Johnson is no political rube — as he demonstrates by offering the same sound-bite-friendly quotes in an interview that he voices in the video, exhibiting the well-honed skills of a new-media-age pol.

And while he’s an admirer of tea party energy — and has actually attended a few rallies himself in [New Mexico](#) — he’s cautious about their politics.

He said he’s uncertain about what exactly they stand for out of fear that he “may not get that right.” But without prompting, the former governor brings up the hot-button issue of immigration — an issue on which he takes a far less restrictive view than many on the populist right.

Word about Johnson is already circulating among grass-roots activists. A handful of draft-style websites have popped up to urge him to consider a presidential bid. And some [tea party leaders](#) say they like what they see.

Citing the five limited-government principles that adorn the side of the Tea Party Express buses, Joe Wierzbicki, a national coordinator for the Tea Party Express group, noted that Johnson is in agreement with the group on those issues and had a record to back it up.

Advertisement



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

POLITICO

“He championed personal liberty and a smaller, less intrusive government, and we applaud both his record and his efforts to continue his fight at the national level,” said Wierzbicki, adding that Johnson has “generated a lot of excitement in the Ron Paul constitutionalist and libertarian sect, which is furious about the policies of both Bush and Obama and the Congress of the last three sessions.”

Johnson actually endorsed Paul for president last year, and he shares some of the Texas congressman’s libertarian alarmist views — but without the penchant for gold standard wonkiness.

David Boaz, executive vice president of the Cato Institute, said Johnson could find some overlap in support between the younger Paul adherents and a broader libertarian-leaning demographic.

Plus, Boaz said, the New Mexican might also be the only Republican giving voice in [2012](#) to a noninterventionist national security message.

“By the time of the first Republican primary, there will be two more years of these wars, and I would guess support for them will drop,” said the Cato thinker. “And every month that passes, they become Obama’s wars, not Bush’s.”

Johnson, for his part, noted his early opposition to the Iraq war and said the mission in Afghanistan had crept away from finding Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda.

“I don’t believe that our national security

interests are being threatened in either location,” he said.

What seems clear is that for now Johnson has no plan to leave the GOP. He resisted a draft effort from the Libertarian Party leading up to the 2000 presidential race and now, while noting his disillusionment with the party’s fiscal record during the Bush years, says: “I am still a Republican.”

Wes Benedict, executive director of the Libertarian National Committee, said he suspects Johnson is trying to nudge the GOP closer to libertarianism.

“It would not bother me one bit if both the Republican and Democratic parties move towards the Libertarian Party positions,” Benedict quipped. “If Johnson fails to convince Republican candidates to support ending the U.S. occupation of Iraq and to legalize marijuana, his results will probably benefit Libertarian Party candidates.”

Drug decriminalization is no small matter in a prospective Johnson bid. An admitted former marijuana user whose construction

Advertisement



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™

POLITICO

firm was known as Big J, Johnson is a vigorous advocate for decriminalizing drugs — an issue that no serious presidential candidate has ever embraced.

“Why continue to arrest 1.8 million people each year on drug-related crimes?” he asked, unprompted.

While legalization could help raise national money among others who feel as passionate about the issue, New Mexico political analyst Joe Monahan notes that it could also turn off some voters who might be otherwise sympathetic to Johnson’s small-government agenda.

“That’s what he’s identified with here,” said Monahan, when asked about Johnson’s legacy as governor. “Is his campaign going to be about legalizing drugs or a broader agenda?”

Advertisement



Print Powered By  FormatDynamics™