

# The Republic Strikes Back

American political discourse, defined as it is by Arthur Schlesinger's ghost and Bill Bennett's ghostwriter, has contracted to such a pinpoint that I half expect a Big

Bang to blow it all apart, as forbidden thoughts—Peace! Liberty! Localism!—bust loose from the thought prisons and the air is filled with the glorious cacophony of patriotic debate as free men and women relearn the language and habits of vigorous citizenship.

Ah, well: dare to dream.

I saw this dream last Labor Day weekend when Ron Paul, the legislative embodiment of John Quincy Adams's gnome—"Always vote for principle, though you may vote alone, and you may cherish the sweetest reflection that your vote is never lost"—threw a "Rally for the Republic" in Minneapolis as a Twin Cities counterpoint to John McCain's zombie dance in St. Paul.

I was a last-minute addition to the rally's roster of speakers and hell-raisers. As I paced antsily, waiting to take the stage at the Target Center, it occurred to me that if my jokes bombed I would hear the sound of 10,000 people not laughing. (Happily, the crowd was terrific; you can find the speech on YouTube, though I must caution you: I am far better looking in person.)

The campaign put me up at a bed and breakfast in Excelsior, Minnesota, whose contribution to Top 40 culture was seeded when, in 1964, Mick Jagger, having played at the Danceland ballroom the night before, was standing in line to get his prescription filled at the Excelsior drugstore. Seems a local character named Jimmy Hutmaker started yapping about how he loved his cherry coke but that morning he was

given a different flavor and y'know, Mr. Jagger, you can't always get what you want...

Call it a suburban legend, skeptic, but no man born with a living soul denies it.

At breakfast the morn of the rally, I sat across the table from a friendly dude wearing a peace-sign T-shirt and looking like an affable old surfer. He introduced himself as Gary Johnson, the former two-term governor of New Mexico. Over the next day, I spent a fair amount of time chatting with Governor Johnson: mountain-climber, triathlete, vetoer of 750 bills.

He told me that he may take a shot at the Republican presidential nomination in 2012 as an antiwar, anti-Fed, pro-personal liberties, slash-government-spending candidate—in other words, a Ron Paul libertarian.

South Carolina governor Mark Sanford seems to be carving out similar space in the GOP. While Sanford's stubborn parsimony within the spendthrift GOP is welcome—he is surely a stream of fresh air in a mephitic party—consider, if you will, Gary Johnson.

Yes, as a congressman Sanford opposed the U.S. intervention in Kosovo under a Democratic president; Gary Johnson opposed a Republican president's war upon Iraq. Sanford reluctantly endorsed McCain in 2008; Johnson emphatically endorsed Ron Paul. Sanford has potential on civil liberties; Johnson, like Paul, has the guts to call for the legalization of marijuana and an end to the drug war.

As this issue went to press, Governor Johnson told me that he was keeping his options open for 2012. Keep an eye out for him, will you?

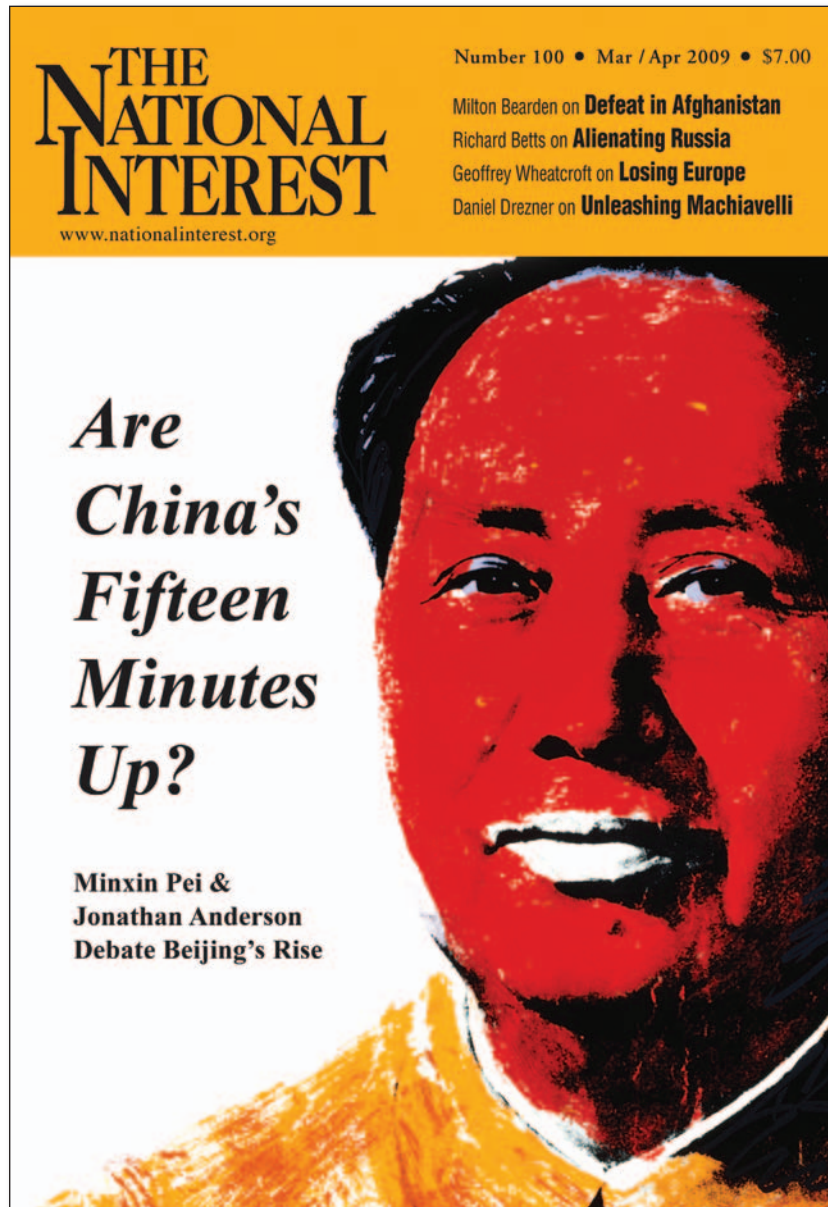
Ron Paul started something. Or, rather, he revealed something: liberty has a constituency. I was heartened mightily by the crowd in Minneapolis, which was overwhelmingly young. What a rousing sight: bright and enthusiastic kids afire with the spirit of liberty, of resistance to regimentation and the tyranny of standardization. Homeschoolers, homebrewers, punk rockers, evangelical Christians, radical Kansans, and reactionary New Englanders. These were American girls and boys, beautifully stained in the American grain, hip to Republican lies and numbing Democratic statism. Hell no, they won't go. They'll not be cannon fodder for the wars of Bush-Cheney or Obama-Biden. They demand honesty and liberty and respect for all things small and smaller; they have nothing but scorn for the liars and whores who run the empire.

They reminded me of Emerson's description of the Loco Foco generation: "The new race is stiff, heady, and rebellious; they are fanatics in freedom; they hate tolls, taxes, turnpikes, banks, hierarchies, governors, yea, almost laws." (Spare me the mewling about "ordered liberty," please—50 years of conservative pieties about "ordered liberty" led to Dick Cheney and a movement full of "men" who dared not open their mouths to defend liberty when she needed it most. Give me disorderly hinterland rebels any day.)

What I mean to say is that even if you can't always get what you want, I think the kids are all right. ■

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