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Close Encounter of the Finchem Kind

By Mike Tully

Mark Finchem, an Oath Keeper who disputes the validity of any election that doesn't turn out the way he wants, might be Arizona's next Secretary of State. Finchem won the Republican primary. Arizona is a purple state that leans red in mid-terms, so Finchem could wind up in charge of Arizona elections. Henhouse, meet fox.

I interviewed Finchem the day he announced his first candidacy for elective office. He was running for the Arizona House of Representatives and chose a valuable forum for his announcement: the "Inside Track" radio show.

"Inside Track," owned and hosted by Republican political guru Emil Franzi, had been a fixture on Tucson radio for years. The show migrated from station to station and the audience followed. Emil was joined by various co-hosts, including the *Tucson Weekly* columnist Tom Danehy and yours truly. In 2004, Emil asked me to co-host the Sunday edition of "Inside Track." I stayed for two years.

I left the show at the end of 2005, but would return from time to time, which is how I met Mark Finchem in 2014. Emil asked if I'd like to drop in for old time's sake and I said yes. I needed to occasionally scratch my radio itch.

Finchem was a political unknown who hadn't run before. Emil and I had hosted numerous candidates from both parties and some announced their candidacies on the show. We went easy on them. It's a grind to run for office and I respect those who try. At the beginning, our task was to help them launch their campaigns. Once they got some traction, the questions got harder.

After I learned Finchem would be one of the guests, I visited his website to find out what issues he was running on. His primary objective: eliminate unnecessary regulations.

Finchem arrived at the station while the show was underway. Emil and I were joined by a mutual friend, Republican National Committeeman Bruce Ash. Bruce and I sat at opposite ends of the counter and Emil was between us. Finchem took a seat between Emil and me. He was dressed casually. I recall his wearing a polo shirt and cargo shorts, or something very much like that. There was no hint of the B-western cosplay attire he would adopt later on.

After Emil introduced Finchem, he let me ask the initial questions. Since I had looked at his website and took notes, I lobbed what I thought was a "softball" question. I asked him to name two regulations he wanted to eliminate.

Crickets. Blank stare.

I lowered the bar. “Can you name one?” I asked him.

Deer. In. The. Headlights.

Mark Finchem declared on his website that his most important goal was to eliminate unnecessary regulations, but could not identify any. Continuing the interview would be like trying to get a response from a fence post, so I leaned back and let Emil and Bruce try to resuscitate the disastrous appearance. Finchem discussed his political philosophy -- to the extent he was able -- and expressed his admiration for Ted Cruz. We weren’t aware of his affiliation with the Oath Keepers and Finchem didn’t mention it.

New candidates with limited campaign and media experience frequently have rocky starts. Bruce even comforted Finchem during a commercial break, assuring him that campaigning would get easier. I’ve interviewed dozens, if not hundreds, of political candidates over the years and rarely encountered one as clueless and shallow as Mark Finchem in the spring of 2014.

Finchem ran in a legislative district where candidates needed only two qualifications: (1) be a Republican and (2) be able to fog a mirror. He and Vince Leach defeated Jo Grant in the primary and were elected in November.

The rest, as they say, is history. The ill-prepared nebbish I interviewed in 2014 concealed a militia-loving conspiracy monger whose fascination with his own opinions eclipsed his respect for democracy. The casual attire gave way to the low-grade cowboy movie costume.

Finchem seemed like a normal suburban Republican who would not make waves, but he is not that at all. His loyalty to the Oath Keepers, his love of conspiracy theories and his disdain for the democratic process defy the traditional “red versus blue” dichotomy that characterizes American politics. What color best describes Finchem and his particular world view?

To answer that question, I quote the noted philosopher Bugs Bunny:

What a maroon!