

Fi, Fie, Foe, Perot: Populist Giant or Grim Illusionist?

*A close analysis of a Texas
Twister.*

by **Richard Purcell**

Ross Perot. The billionaire. The presidential candidate. The man who made three references to the Tooth Fairy and the Easter Bunny in a recent debate with the Vice President. However one chooses to think of him, Ross Perot is an amazing individual. He simply did not exist as a national political figure two years ago. Yet his simple, down-to-earth approach to economics and government ("just plain talk"), his successful business background, and his stated desire to "do what's right for my country" landed him nearly 20 million votes in last year's presidential election—19 percent of the electorate—without the support of any major party (Fineman 34). A year later he remains the most potent political force in the United States outside the Beltway. This kind of popularity by a single, independent individual is unusual, to say the least.

But contrary to Perot's own often used expression, it's just not that simple. Ross Perot is a skilled political operator, to be sure, but there are larger social, political, and economic forces sustaining his popularity. White House pollster Stan Greenberg is right when he says that Perot is largely a creation of the voters. The Texas billionaire has reached his current level of popularity because the public is dissatisfied with the nation's leadership.

This voter discontent has been building up for some time. Although the 1980s witnessed the longest period of economic growth since World War II, many voters—indeed, many economists—worried about changes in the underlying structure of the U.S. economy. In 1981 the U.S. had a budget surplus of \$8.2 billion and a foreign trade deficit of \$34.6 billion dollars; by 1987 the federal budget was running an annual deficit of

\$143.7 billion and a trade deficit of \$170.3 billion (Phillips Appendix H). American industry seemed to be losing out to foreign competitors. The increase of foreign-made products in the United States and the falling wages of factory workers fuelled these worries. And despite considerable prosperity experienced by the upper-middle class, many less wealthy households were unable to maintain their standard of living unless both parents were employed. In fact, after-tax median family income (in 1987 dollars) had actually fallen from \$25,518 in 1977 to an estimated \$23,508 ten years later (Phillips Appendix C). As political economist Kevin Phillips wrote, during the 1980s "many Americans on the lower half of the economic ladder had been losing ground. And even the affluent, enjoying their champagne and raspberries, wondered how real the good times were." (Phillips 5) Toward the second half of the decade, with the national debt continuing to climb and the stock market crash in 1987, fears that the U.S. economy was in a permanent decline abounded. Many of these fears were exaggerated. Some were not.

Compounding these concerns were worries about the fabric of American society and the ethics of its government. During the 1980s and early 1990s Americans watched corruption and ineptitude appear to overtake their government, with such scandals as Iran-Contra, the S&L failures, the Keating Five, and the House banking scandal. Meanwhile, the percentage of Americans living in poverty grew to 13.6 percent by 1986, up from 11.4 percent in 1978—an increase of eight million people (Famighetti 371). Crime also spread unchecked; the number of murders in the United States increased by 25 percent over a five year period, from 17,971 in 1988 to 22,540 in 1992 (Famighetti 967). AIDS, drug abuse, teen pregnancy, and other societal problems further helped undermine the security and stability of America's all important middle class. In the face of this uncertainty, the federal government appeared gridlocked, unable or unwilling to act on any of the nation's ailments.

Yet there was no political upheaval during the 1980s for several reasons. One was that, despite long-term fears, the overall economy was performing well. Many Americans prospered during these years or, at the very least, held their own with a reasonable amount of job security. The popularity of Ronald Reagan also helped forestall political upheaval. Reagan stood for clear principles: less government, Christian morals, and a strong military. He was a likable man and a likable leader, optimistic, jovial, and resolute. His confidence served as a counterweight to the uncertainty of the Eighties boom. The reality of the Cold War and its assurance of American importance in international matters—reinforced by Reagan's patriotic, anti-communist image—also made many voters reluctant to make great changes in their government. Thus, in the 1988 elections Americans chose a Republican president and a Democratic Congress, reinforcing the status quo.

VOTER REVOLT. By the fall of 1991, however, the state of the nation had changed considerably. George Bush had taken over the White House and Ronald Reagan had departed for his California ranch once and for all, taking his eternal optimism and his firm leadership with him. The Soviet Union and its communist allies no longer existed, leaving America questioning its position in a radically changing world. Worst of all, the United States found itself in a

nationwide recession. Although not as deep as previous economic downturn, the recession unmasked the country's concerns which had gone unaddressed during the previous decade. An entire litany of accumulated national ailments, coupled with economic and social problems, quickly rushed to the forefront of the nation's consciousness. As unemployment rose to 7.4 percent and a gripping economic uncertainty took hold of the nation, Americans began to worry not only about their job security, but also about how they would be able to afford such basic things as health care, college for their children, and owning their own home (Famighetti 133). Frustrated with a government that seemed incapable of decisive action, the electorate became consumed with an anger toward conventional politics that knew no ideological bent.

And so the anti-incumbent movement began. President Bush's approval ratings plummeted from almost 90 percent in the spring of 1991 to below 40 percent by the end of the year, and conservative commentator Pat Buchanan declared that he would run against Bush in the Republican primary. Simultaneously, Harris Wofford, a dark horse candidate for Senate in Pennsylvania, defeated former attorney general Dick Thornburgh, a Bush appointee who was considered by many to be a virtual shoe-in. In Louisiana, former Ku Klux Klansman David Duke edged out reform governor Buddy Roemer in the state's open primary and gained 39 percent of the vote (and 55 percent of the middle class white vote) in the general election (Maginnis, 342). It was also around this time that the idea of term limits for elected officials began to gain in popularity. The electorate was showing unmistakable hostility toward conventional politicians.

What made this voter discontent distinctive was the fact that it had little to do with specific government policies. Rather, it stemmed from a deep feeling among voters that government simply did not belong to them any longer, that instead it was controlled by lobbyists and politicians out for their own personal gain. The populism of the 1992 campaign reflected this feeling. Jerry Brown, with the campaign slogan "We the People," and Pat Buchanan, running on the idea of "America First," ran surprisingly successful grass roots campaigns in the 1992 primaries. The advent of "town hall" discussions of national

issues between candidates and ordinary citizens was another indication of the election's populist nature, as was the emphasis on "outsiders," candidates with few connections to the Washington establishment. As a result, Princeton history professor Sean Wilentz explains, this mood among voters "has no specific location on the political spectrum . . . And because it is a mood, it is a singularly effective tool for politicians who would build their careers out of the accumulated social injuries of an uncertain time." (Wilentz, 35)

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LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION. Enter Ross Perot. All it took was a casual appearance on Larry King Live by the folksy Texan in February of 1992 to send droves of private citizens into action, collecting signatures across the country in an effort to put him on the presidential ballot in each of the 50 states. By early June, 37 percent of the voting public said it would vote for Perot if the election were held then, even though he had not even formulated a clear set of proposals indicating how he would govern (Barrett 33). Far more than Jerry Brown or Pat Buchanan, Perot filled a void left by more conventional political figures: he would get things done for the people. In an interview in April of 1992, Perot said, "The point is whether the American people want to talk about it or do it. All Washington does is talk about it. If you want to talk about it, I'm not your man." (Carroll 27) Unlike most other politicians, Perot appeared as a man of action and he made action look easy, at one point claiming the country could get rid of its budget deficit "without breaking a sweat." (Church 39) Confident and decisive, he ignited unhappy voters by appearing as someone other than an ordinary politician.

Thus, Ross Perot became Opposition, the opposition to everything that Washington had come to stand in the minds of many Americans. Yet defined as much by who he is not as who he is. He is not a Washington operative, nor is he affiliated with political party. Perot's apparent lack of political experience is an asset to him where it would be a liability for many candidates. As he likes to say of himself, "I don't have any experience running a four trillion dollar debt." Disaffected voters like to hear such statements. They don't care so much about specific proposals for fixing the country's problems as they do knowing that Perot wants to fix them. The more detailed becomes, the more he sounds like average politician. His explosion on the national scene as the anti-Washington movement gathered momentum was not mere happenstance. Ross Perot is as much historical phenomenon as a product of his own genius.

His political talents, however, should not be ignored. He has a keen understanding of the alienation voters feel from their government and he makes use of this knowledge to sustain his popularity. His explanation of why Washington no longer serves the American people, for instance, dovetails with this feeling of disaffection. Perot says, "The one thing I know at this point, if I ever get stuck [in Washington], I can stay inside the Beltway. It's like living in a bubble. If you want to serve the people, you've got to listen to real people, you stay inside the Beltway, the special interests become the real people." (Carroll 27) Perot demonstrates his loyalty to "real people" by emphasizing the fact that his wealth frees him from the control of special interest groups. He also emphasizes his overriding desire to set his country, that he is only acting on the wishes of his grass roots supporters.

Perot likes to further distinguish himself from other national figures by emphasizing issues that the two political parties have merely glossed over. For instance, during the presidential campaign he seized on the budget deficit as a major focus of his campaign, linking it to the severity of the recession while the other two candidates paid it only lip service. This strategy made him look like the only one of the three willing to tackle the country's fundamental problem. After Bill Clinton's deficit-cutting budget was enacted this past August, Perot shifted his emphasis to attacking the No-

American Free Trade Agreement. In doing so, he again sought to portray himself as the lone champion of the people, uninfluenced by big companies or foreign lobbyists wanting to transfer American jobs to Mexico. Similarly, his continued harping on the need to curtail the influence of Washington lobbyists underscores his image as a man trying to return government to the voters.

'THONT HAVE A POWER DRIVE" figuring out Ross Perot's motives is no easy feat. His supporters believe that he is acting purely out of patriotism, just as he claims, and certainly he has done a lot to strengthen the political process. His focus on the deficit during the 1992 campaign alerted voters to its tremendous importance to the American economy. He is also right to raise the issue of special interest influence in Washington. His most important contribution, however, has been his psychological effect on the electorate. The petition drives that placed him on the ballot energized citizens—many of whom had long since given up on government—into participating in the democratic process. He reminded many Americans that the government belongs to them. Regardless of what one thinks of him personally, these things must be counted in Ross Perot's favor.

Nevertheless, it is easy to question whether or not Perot's actions have been examples of complete selflessness. His manipulation of facts and issues indicates that he enjoys the attention and power his recent notoriety have conferred upon him. "I don't have a power drive," he told an interviewer once, yet his actions indicate otherwise (Parker 26). Not long after the election, Perot said he hoped he didn't have to run again in 1996, that he would prefer to see Bill Clinton's face on Mt. Rushmore. Then, just a few months after Clinton's inauguration, Perot claimed that the new President wasn't suited for any job above a "middle-management position" in a "medium-sized company." (Fineman 24) But this was not the only time he contradicted himself. After arguing loudly for reducing the budget deficit during the presidential campaign, the Texas billionaire was wholly unsupportive of President Clinton's effort at deficit reduction. During this summer's debate over Clinton's budget, he criticized the Clinton for relying too much on tax increases, even though his own plan

would have raised taxes twice as much. Perot was simply unwilling to allow the President to steal the issue away from him. To endorse Clinton's budget proposal would have diminished his own importance in national politics, and that was something he was unwilling to do.

THREATENING THE ESTABLISHMENT. Whatever his motives, Perot is undeniably a threat to the two political parties. During the 1992 election he siphoned off votes from Bush and Clinton roughly equally, and his loyal following composed of roughly one fifth of the voting public allows him to play the two parties off

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against one another without committing to either. This ability gives him considerable leverage in national politics. Moreover, the fact that Perot is a manifestation of voter opposition to traditional politics forces him to keep anti-politician sentiments alive. Thus, he must continually point out and even exaggerate the flaws in the nation's leadership if he is to remain a political figure. Ultimately this is counter productive democracy, since it makes the electorate even more divided than it already is and reinforces grid lock. Yet despite this threat from Perot, neither party seems sure how to deal with him.

It is clear, however, that responsibility for discrediting Perot (and sole power to do so) rests with Bill Clinton and the Democratic Party, since they are the party in power. In order to undermine him, the Democrats must not be afraid to attack Ross Perot personally. Clinton has been reluctant to do this so far, primarily out of fear of offending Perot's supporters, although the November debate between Al Gore and Perot indicates that this reluctance is abating. Polls show that Perot's followers are more dedicated to what he stands for than Perot himself. Attacking Perot would likely dislodge more of these supporters while making it easier for Clinton

to popularize his own policies.

But if the Clinton Administration is to thwart Perot's desire to dominate American politics it must do more than attack Ross Perot the man: it must attack Ross Perot the phenomenon, the underlying reasons for his popularity. It must mote d\(\t\c\)\t and more important than engaging in day-to-day verbal sparring. Clinton must show that government can take effective action against the nation's problems. In plain English, this means legislative successes and an expanding economy. The President must get a significant number of his proposals enacted into law and be able to convince the public that his ideas work. If he can do these things, Clinton will put Perot in a lose-lose situation. Should Perot choose to endorse Clinton's actions, he will be admitting that the need for him as a political figure has diminished. On the other hand, if he belittles White House policies which are popular with the general public he will look as though he is only out for personal gain. In order for Clinton to succeed he must not only achieve success in Congress, but also convince the public that his proposals will help remedy the nation's problems. He has yet to do these things, and as a result Perot still looms large on the political horizon.

The Republicans are in a tougher position than the Democrats. Because they are the minority party, they are forced to share their opposition status with Perot. If Clinton proves to be an unpopular president, the Republicans will benefit—but so will Perot. The Republicans would like to see him undermined, but the most likely way for this to happen involves higher approval ratings for Bill Clinton. Currently the Republican Party is divided as to how to handle Perot. Some believe they should accommodate him as a fellow opponent of President Clinton. Indeed, House Minority Whip Newt Gingrich is an official member of United We Stand America. One of the down sides to this approach is that it gives Perot indirect influence with the Republican Party. Others want to keep their distance from him, but this strategy would divide anti-Clinton voters, benefitting no one but the Democrats.

All three participants are already jockeying for position in 1996. Despite a recent drop in his approval ratings, Perot still commands support from roughly a quarter of the electorate. Will he run again? The answer probably

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increase timber allotments, and have indicated that they will seek congressional support to weaken the Endangered Species Act in order to open protected land to the industry.

For his part, President Clinton was disappointed with the final plan because it upset his consensus-seeking sensibilities (Egan 23). He conceded that

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not everyone would be happy with the compromise but he believed it to be the best possible arrangement. "We have to play the hand we were dealt," Clinton said. "Had this crisis been dealt with years ago, we might have a plan with a higher (timber) yield and with more...protected areas. We are doing the best we can with the facts as they now exist in the Pacific Northwest" (Diringer). The implication is that all sides could have seen a better outcome if earlier administrations had tried to resolve the issue.

Though extremists on both sides of the issue insist that the battle over the forests is not yet over, many accept the president's assessment. One example is the community of Hayfork, California, where citizens agree that a compromise must be reached to preserve the forests and reduce the area's 23 percent unemployment rate. As the community closest to the experimental logging area, the town will pioneer techniques to log specific areas in a manner that is less ecologically devastating than the original method and restore environmentally damaged hillsides and streams. While the generated timber will be less valuable than that from big, ancient trees that used to be cut, townspeople are relying on skillful marketing to ensure success. "A lot of people in timber still don't trust the environmentalists," said Jim Bayley, a small businessman in Hayfork, "but I don't think there's much choice. If the mill shuts down, we could lose half the town's population. We should support these ideas while there's still the opportunity. It's probably the best chance

we're going to get" (Martin).

The missing link in this attempted solution is money. According to a spokesperson for an involved senator, most congressional appropriations bills to provide the funds have been passed. While some of the Clinton proposal's components can go into effect, most forests are still being held by court injunction until public comment on the plan is concluded in March. After revisions are made, the plan will be fully enacted by Executive Order.

With the leadership of reform-minded Babbitt and Thomas, the chances for a long-term resolution are brighter than ever before. As a result of the president's leadership on the issue, communities will be stabilized and logging will be curtailed in environmentally sensitive areas. Instead of chaos, peace may finally return to the much-maligned Northwest forests. •

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depends on Clinton's popularity. If his support is lukewarm, Perot will probably throw his hat into the ring once again. He recently told a crowd of supporters/"We're going to go marching down Pennsylvania Avenue one day." (Ayres) Indeed, UWSA could act as an effective vehicle for a second run at the presidency. Newsweek describes it as "a carefully crafted legal entity—a not-for-profit 'civic league'—that allows Perot to raise funds and act the role of an undeclared candidate without having to disclose his list of contributors." (Fineman, "Ross," 24) Even if he doesn't run again, it's unlikely he will leave the spotlight on his own accord. Perot clearly likes being an influential figure, and if the Democrats are unable to demonstrate their ability to govern he will continue to be a headache for both parties for some time to come. •

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