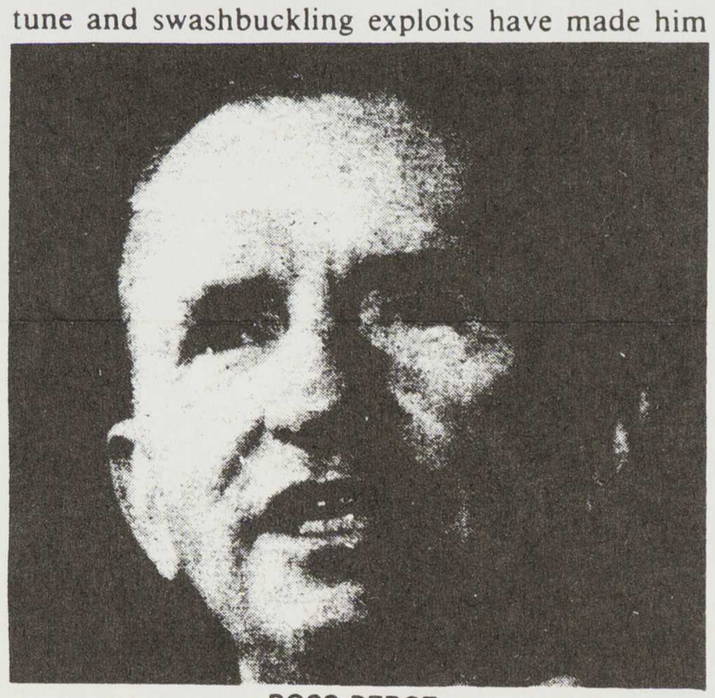
Conservatives Wary of Billionaire

Perot for President?

In recent weeks, the visage and ideas of Texas billionaire H. Ross Perot have become increasingly familiar to many Americans.

Through appearances on such televised formats as "Larry King Live," C-Span, and the "Phil Donahue Show," Perot — whose $2.5-billion fortune and swashbuckling exploits have made him



ROSS PEROT

something of a folk hero — has offered a deal to viewers: if volunteers will collect enough signatures to get him on the ballot in all 50 states, he will run for President as an independent this fall.

As a volunteer headquarters in Washington eagerly sets out to meet this goal and responses to the would-be candidate's television pitches pour in, just the scenario of an independent bid by the Texan casts a long shadow over presidential politics in 1992.

In a year when six members of Congress have so far been defeated for renomination and political outsiders Pat Buchanan and Jerry Brown have scored well in their respective presidential primaries, Perot's own image as outsider and folk hero could easily play well in the fall campaign.

With the 61-year-old Perot's themes of business-like balancing of the federal budget and "a new Gramm-Rudman with no loopholes" likely to woo conservative voters, the White House is clearly concerned that Perot could peel off more votes from the GOP, thus putting Clinton in the Oval Office.

Indeed, Jim Oberwetter, the President's campaign chairman in the Lone Star State, sought a meeting last month with Dallas attorney and longtime Perot retainer Tom Luce, so concerned was he about a possible Perot bid.

The early public response to Perot's talk of an independent run has hardly eased the fretting among Bush's re-election folk. Citing the estimated 10,000 calls of encouragement generated by his appearance on the "Larry King" program, Perot recently set up a 100-line phone bank to handle such calls for his Dallas business office.

Moreover, during a recent C-Span program in which correspondents from the *Nation* and the *Wall Street Journal* opened by belittling Perot's potential presidential bid, the torrent of pro-Perot call-ins was so strong that both journalists agreed by the end of the program that Perot could well be a potent force in the fall.

Indeed, one veteran GOP activist from Fort Worth flatly told HUMAN EVENTS that Perot could conceivably win Texas' 28 electoral votes or certainly take enough popular votes from Bush to toss Texas into Clinton's lap — which, of course, would be devastating to the President, whose political experts are counting on the Lone Star State to help return Bush to the White House.

At first glance, Henry Ross Perot, Sr., would appear to be a candidate possibly worthy of conservative support, particularly in light of the obvious dismay on the right with the incumbent President.

The son of a poor cotton farmer in Texarkana, Tex., Perot has a genuinely all-American story to tell: graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, seven years as a top-flight account executive with IBM in Dallas, and then founder of the EDS computer company in 1962, which he sold to General Motors for $2.5 billion 22 years later — making Perot by most estimates the second-richest man in the United States (behind Sam Walton of the Wal-Mart Stores) and leading *Fortune* magazine to dub him "the fastest, richest billionaire."

Along with his rags-to-riches story, Perot's public persona is based on his adventurous international exploits, often on behalf of Americans held captive overseas. In 1969, at the request of Henry Kissinger, Perot spent $1.5 million to rent two airplanes in an attempt to bring Christmas turkeys and letters from home to American POWs in Hanoi.

Denied entrance into the enemy camp, Perot made public confrontations with the North Vietnamese throughout Southeast Asia that dramatized the plight of the POWs. Since the war's end in 1973, Perot has invested considerable sums of money on efforts to find and rescue Americans still listed as Missing in Action in Southeast Asia.

Perhaps the Texan's most-ballyhooed adventure was in 1979, when two EDS employees working in Teheran, Iran, were captured by the new Moslem regime and jailed. Utilizing a private commando team, Perot was able to stage a distraction at the prison and rescue his men in a daring raid — one which was later contrasted with the Carter Administration's failed attempts to free the 52 Americans imprisoned at the U.S. Embassy and dramatized in the book and television film, *On Wings of Eagles*.

In the words of former Secretary of State and Perot critic Cyrus Vance, "The privatization of foreign policy is a dangerous matter and I was troubled by that mission [but] it codified the legend of H. Ross Perot."

It is that legend, as well as his proven reputation as a man who knows how to manage a mammoth organization, that fuels the budding Perot-for-President movement.

In offering to run "if those 50 states are signed up," Perot sounds a decidedly conservative message on fiscal issues. Graphically delineating the dangers of a mounting federal deficit, Perot noted that "On the trend we're on now, it'll be $12 trillion by year 2000.... We can't afford it because the interest alone on a $12-trillion debt would be approximately $1 trillion a year. And guess what the gross receipts in our country are right now: one trillion dollars a year. You'd just be spending it all on interest."

His answers to the deficit include calling for a line-item veto for the President, his stricter version of Gramm-Rudman, and the removal of Congress' power to raise taxes and government salaries, leaving that to a decision by national referenda.

Perot also calls for ending private airplane flights for all government officials save the President ("let everybody else that's up there go to the airport, get in line, lose their luggage, eat a bad meal, and get a taste of real life") and the elimination of perks — "free haircuts, the big gymnasiums, free prescription drugs, parking places, and so forth" — for members of Congress.

The Perot fiscal manifesto is also meshed with a touch of high-tech populism. "We've got to have, using television, an electronic town hall where we explain each of the issues," he said, "and with the current technology we have today, you can respond by congressional district and send a laser-like signal to every congressman in Washington about what you want as a way of clearing their heads. You just wade around the special interests."

Perot has even borrowed from the Book of Buchanan with his calls for laws "making it a criminal offense for foreign companies or individuals to influence U.S. laws or policies with money." Along with Buchanan, Perot is also a harsh critic of foreign aid and, as President, "would go very nicely and very politely and positively to our friends in Europe [and Asia] and say, 'Folks, we just can't do it anymore, but if you want to pay us $100 billion a year, we'll be glad to stick around."

But if such a vision attracts some conservatives, there are other sides and views of Perot that make many conservatives wary of his prospective candidacy.

Many skeptics on the right immediately question

Jerry Brown Versus The Special Interests

Ex-California Gov. Jerry Brown, who insists he's fighting the special interests, has become a union toady as he seeks his longshot goal of upsetting Arkansas Gov. Bill Clinton for the Democratic presidential nomination. He has embraced virtually the entire AFL-CIO agenda, including repeal of the Hatch Act and an end to the business practice of hiring permanent replacement workers for striking union members.

At an AFL-CIO meeting in Philadelphia last week, Brown lashed out at Clinton for his supposed "anti-union" reign as governor. "When you look at presidential candidates," Brown told the appreciative union members, "I want you to compare the record of a right-to-work, union-busting, scab-inviting, wage-depressing, environmental-disaster governor versus the labor governor and someone who's on your side."