

H. Ross Perot, billionaire third-party US presidential candidate, dead at 89

By Fred Mazelis
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H. Ross Perot, the Texas billionaire whose 1992 presidential campaign reflected growing instability within the capitalist two-party system in the United States, died in Dallas on Tuesday at the age of 89.

Perot's 1992 vote total of just under 19 percent was the biggest for a third-party candidate since ex-President Theodore Roosevelt ran on the Progressive Party ticket in 1912 and garnered 27 percent of the vote.

An eccentric right-wing gadfly who had made a fortune in the field of computer services, Perot spent nearly \$65 million of his own money, a huge amount for that time, on a campaign pitched to a nostalgic appeal to small town America. His television infomercials, trumpeting his main slogan of "United We Stand America," were ubiquitous in that pre-Internet age.

Perot, looking and sounding like a shorter and smaller Harry Truman, ran against the Washington establishment, assailing corruption, waste and, above all, government budget deficits. None of this was new, but Perot capitalized on the recession that had begun in the last year of the first term of George H.W. Bush, who had bitterly disappointed his right-wing supporters by going back on his pledge not to raise taxes.

Democrat Bill Clinton won the election with 43 percent of the total votes cast, with a lopsided margin of 370 to 168 against Bush in the Electoral College vote. Perot, while winning no electoral votes, nevertheless attracted significant support from every region of the country. Though some Republicans accused him of costing Bush the election, exit polls showed that he won almost equal backing from disaffected supporters of the Democrats.

Perot was born into a lower middle-class family in the small east Texas town of Texarkana, on the Arkansas border, in 1930. Growing up in the years of the Depression and the Second World War, he won admission to the US Naval Academy, from which he graduated in 1953. Following four years in the Navy, he left the military and soon got a job with IBM. He swiftly became a top salesman of computer hardware, but Perot left the company in 1962,

branching out into the growing field of computer services for such tasks as billing and payrolls.

The young businessman, having founded Electronic Data Services (EDS), had the good fortune to win numerous federal and state contracts in the next few years in connection with Medicare and Medicaid, among the last of the social programs associated with Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society."

Within a short time, Perot had become a multimillionaire. He eventually sold EDS to General Motors in 1984 for \$2.5 billion in cash and stock and held a position on the automaker's Board of Directors for a number of years. He and GM soon parted company, however. By the late 1980s, Perot had founded Perot Systems, which was sold to Dell Computers in 2009 for \$3.9 billion. At his death, the Texas tycoon's total wealth was about \$4.1 billion, making him approximately the 170th richest US citizen.

More than 50 years ago, soon after he had amassed great wealth, Perot began to turn his attention to public affairs and the political arena. In 1969, he financed two private jets to bring food, medicine and gifts to US soldiers held prisoner during the Vietnam War. While the Vietnamese National Liberation Front and the government in Hanoi rejected this publicity stunt, it won Perot some attention in right-wing circles back home.

Ten years later, in 1979, Perot, backed by his large fortune, once again engaged in his own foreign policy. He financed a raid on a prison in Tehran to free two of his employees, who had been jailed in a commercial dispute. This was on the very eve of the Iranian Revolution, and Perot reportedly helped orchestrate a riot by supporters of the Ayatollah Khomeini outside the prison, leading to the escape of more than 11,000 inmates, including his two employees. This episode was later turned into a book and a Hollywood movie.

The Iranian venture was followed by a Perot campaign during the 1980s on the question of US MIAs ("missing in action") in Vietnam. He boosted various conspiracy theories alleging that, a decade after the end of the war, hundreds of

US soldiers were still being held in Vietnam against their will. The administration of Ronald Reagan, engaged in its own private contacts with the Vietnamese at this time, objected to Perot's interference.

Perot chose to focus his 1992 campaign on domestic and not foreign policy. Despite the rapid US victory in the first Gulf War, as well as the brief invasion of Panama in late 1989 for the purpose of deposing and capturing Panamanian leader Manuel Noriega, there was no appetite within the US population for new imperialist adventures. The third-party candidate instead concentrated on themes of trade, the budget deficit and corruption, appealing to layers of the middle class and to workers worried over the loss of good-paying jobs. Political and social anger was growing, particularly in the wake of the union-busting of the 1980s, assisted everywhere by the AFL-CIO bureaucracy.

The candidate, while seeking to take advantage of these concerns, had nothing to offer any section of workers except reactionary economic nationalism. He won attention for his quip about "the giant sucking sound," referring to the alleged loss of US jobs to Mexico. Perot also no doubt drew on the contrast between the "folksiness" of Reagan, whom he tried to occasionally imitate, and the persona of the patrician Bush, with his long Washington résumé. Sections of the ruling class backed the Perot candidacy, using it to set the agenda of the campaign, with the emphasis squarely on the need for budget-cutting austerity.

Perot abruptly pulled out of the campaign in July, claiming later that he acted because of a threat to use fake photographs to sabotage his daughter's forthcoming wedding. Just as abruptly, he reentered on October 1, in time to qualify for three televised debates. In the final weeks, there were indications that the momentum of the contest was shifting toward Clinton. While Clinton eventually won in November, the Perot campaign and the wide support it had won were used to warn the incoming Democrat that no reforms and no concessions to the working class would be permitted.

Perot had little success in his second campaign, in 1996. This time around, in the middle of the speculative 1990s boom presided over by Clinton, his message had worn thin, nor was it much needed by the ruling elite. He won only 8 percent of the vote as Clinton coasted to reelection against veteran Republican Robert Dole.

After the 1996 campaign, Perot retreated from direct participation in capitalist politics. He supported Republican candidates Bush in 2000 and Romney in 2012, but sat out the 2016 campaign that propelled Donald Trump into the White House.

Perot's 1992 campaign, the most successful third-party bid in the past century, and the most successful in the whole

post-Civil War era with the exception of Roosevelt's 1912 "Bull Moose" candidacy, contains some important lessons on the role of the two-party system, so often trumpeted as the source of political progress and stability.

Roosevelt, of course, was a popular former president, associated with the emergence of American imperialism in the first years of the 20th century, when he broke with his successor William Howard Taft. He went on to outpoll Taft in the 1912 election, losing to Democrat Woodrow Wilson but winning 88 electoral votes.

Perot's campaign for the presidency took place after the Reagan years. American capitalism was facing increasing challenges. Despite its apparent victory in the Cold War, accompanied by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, there could be no disguising the growing crisis of the world capitalist system. These were the conditions under which he won nearly 20 percent of the vote.

Perot's 1992 campaign foreshadowed in several ways the triumph of Trump in 2016, at a far more advanced stage of the collapse of American bourgeois democracy. Despite the current US president's ignorance and lack of even the most basic historical knowledge or curiosity, he recognized that the path to the White House would be much easier by taking over one of the existing political parties of the ruling class rather than challenging them as Perot and others have done.

Above all, he and his closest advisers sensed that popular disgust with the entire political establishment and both parties, and increasing social desperation among sections of the working class and lower middle class, opened the way for a campaign that, while in some ways built on the slogans of Perot, went much further in the direction of fascism. Trump added to Perot's populist appeals to the "little man," his anti-establishment rhetoric and his economic nationalism a social demagoguery that made far greater and unvarnished use of warmongering, xenophobia and racism.

Under conditions where the Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton, was widely despised in the working class and ran as the candidate of Wall Street and the military/intelligence establishment, and the supposed "socialist" Bernie Sanders threw his support to Clinton, Trump was able to win the Electoral College vote, even though he lost the popular vote by a substantial margin.

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