

POLITICS & GOVERNMENT

Perot's Legacy

"The Party Crasher" by Theodore J. Lowi, in *The New York Times Magazine* (Aug. 23, 1992), 229 W. 43rd St., New York, N.Y. 10036.

When Ross Perot suddenly called off his extraordinary independent presidential campaign last July, his many followers were angry and disappointed. Yet the feisty Texas billionaire, asserts Lowi, a Cornell political scientist, still performed a great national service: His campaign (which at this writing may yet be revived) "removed all doubt about the viability of a broad-based third party."

No matter who wins the November election, Lowi believes, 1992 may come to be seen as the beginning of the end of what he considers America's outmoded two-party system.

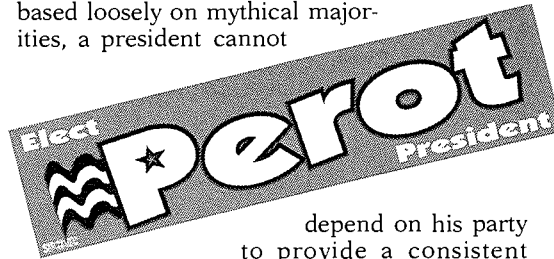
When the federal government was smaller, he argues, the Democrats and Republicans had little need to pay attention to ideology or policy. Acting as "umbrella" organizations for diverse groups, they could focus instead on political mechanics: organizing campaigns and getting the vote out. But that changed with the rise of the welfare state, a fact that became starkly evident in the early 1970s, when the postwar economic boom ended. Such "wedge" issues as welfare, crime, and taxes took on new importance—and they eventually immobilized the parties. Leaders of parties seeking majority status cannot afford to alienate many voters. So they waffled. Because leaders could not lead, the federal government could not act.

Not wanting the major policy issues settled in the voting booth, the parties sought to mobilize their constituencies with "the strategy of scandal." But that has worked *too* well: It has persuaded the public that the system itself is corrupt. Perot was the first independent presidential candidate in recent history, Lowi says, to attract large numbers of moderates disgusted with both major parties, regardless of whom they nominated. Polls last spring indicated that 60 percent of Americans favored the

establishment of a new political party.

Lowi maintains that a third party would have "a liberating effect," freeing all three parties from the need to seek, or pretend to have, a majority. Party leaders and candidates could address important issues forthrightly. Voter turnout and participation would revive.

Defenders of the current system worry that a third party could throw a presidential election into the House of Representatives. That would be fine, Lowi insists: "[A] genuine three-party system would parliamentarize the presidency." Congress would become the president's main constituency. Today, "with two parties based loosely on mythical majorities, a president cannot



depend on his party to provide a consistent congressional majority." He therefore has to bargain with members of the opposition party. If the president confronted a Congress made up of members of three parties who had been elected on the basis of clear policy positions, he could count on the support of his own party, and the third party, often holding the balance of power, could function as an "honest broker."

Ross Perot left his supporters in the lurch, but the pressing need for a third party still exists, Lowi believes. Such a party must field more than a presidential candidate and last more than one election. But a genuine third party, he says, just might be able to break "the institutional impasse in American politics."

LBJ's Secret

"Secrecy and Openness in Lyndon Johnson's White House: Political Style, Pluralism, and the Presidency" by David M. Barrett, in *The Review of Politics* (Winter 1992), Box B, Notre Dame, Ind. 46556.

President Lyndon B. Johnson often is portrayed as a scheming, secretive tyrant who cowed his own advisers into submission and insulated

himself from outside dissent on the Vietnam War and other matters. The reality, however, was quite different, argues Barrett, a Villanova