

# Crazy in Dallas

BY TERRY FITZPATRICK

**A**S THE CAMPAIGN JOKE goes, Ross Perot won't have to worry about moving into a smaller house in a minority neighborhood. His bid for the White House didn't carry a single state. He didn't even carry his home precinct in north Dallas.

Of course, people weren't in the mood for jokes on election night at the Perot rally in the Dallas suburb of Addison. Most supporters ignored the giant television screens that flashed the bad news. Even before the party began, the guests knew that their man had lost. The only suspense was what Perot would say in defeat. Perot conceded at 9:30 p.m., before the television networks had predicted a winner. "The American people have spoken," Perot said. "They have chosen Governor Clinton. Congratulations." The crowd booed and hissed. Perot quickly gave them something to cheer about.

"Spend about 10 minutes getting over being frustrated that your candidate didn't win, then take all of this enormous talent and ability that you have displayed and let's make our country work at the national, state, country and city, local and neighborhood level and in every single school across the country," Perot said. "And please don't feel, 'gee, I'm powerless again.' As long as we're together, nationwide, you have enormous voice in this country. So we will stay together and you will be an enormous force for good for our country and our children."

The crowd howled. Perot waltzed across the stage as a Dixieland band played the campaign's adopted theme song, "Crazy." The man who has never been a gracious loser in business was in rare form after losing his bid for President. A supporter handed him a "Perot in '96" bumper sticker and Perot held it high with an ear-to-ear grin. He promised to go "anywhere, anyplace, anytime to help the new administration," but he left open the possibility of another presidential campaign. "We always got the safety valve, right? You can bring that old stray dog out from the pound again."

Perot supporters left the ballroom optimistic that election night marked a new beginning, and not the ending, of their effort to transform American politics. "Until I came to the rally and heard Perot, I was disgusted and discouraged," said Pat Robinson of Abilene. "But how can you stay that way around Ross Perot? He's so up and optimistic, it's hard to stay down. So hopefully Clinton will keep his promises and we'll turn this country around."

*Terry FitzPatrick is a documentary producer for KERA public television in Dallas.*

"Mr. Clinton has won the White House. Mr. Perot has won the nation," said John Battey of Lewisville who had spent election day monitoring the polls in Denton County, and credits Perot with the high voter turnout in his region. "I watched a precinct that turned out less than half of its registered voters four years ago turn out 95 percent of its registered voters in this election. If we've got that high a percentage of people voting, it doesn't matter who gets inaugurated to what office. They know they're going to be held responsible or we're gonna be on them like bees on a bear."

The Perot campaign stressed deficit reduction and political reform, but after the rally his supporters were uncertain how they could influence national policy without an election campaign to focus their efforts. Perot's volunteers and paid coordinators had promoted a one-man ticket. Vice Presidential candidate James Stockdale was invisible. The United We Stand organization didn't endorse down-ballot candidates. Most of the money came from Perot, leaving his campaign with little experience in raising money. "A volunteer movement is a wonderful thing but without the emotional appeal of one individual it sometimes lacks the glue to hold it together," said Orson Swindle, executive director of United We Stand. "We've got a lot of work to do to solidify it."

The biggest question now is what Ross Perot will do to ensure that United We Stand survives. He's been involved in public policy issues in Texas for more than a decade, but his pattern is to disappear long before the problem is solved. Perot didn't stick around to find a place to put drug dealers who were arrested as a result of his 1981 package of legislation known as the War on Drugs. Perot didn't stick around to find the money to pay for the state-mandated education reforms that he bullied through the Legislature in 1984. Perot tried to broker a compromise between Dallas police and the city council during the height of racial tensions in 1988, but police/community relations are still tense (and are getting worse) and Perot is no longer involved. About the only issue Perot has stuck with is the search for prisoners of war in Vietnam.

Will he stick it out in hardball world of national electoral politics, where he's been labeled a nut case, a quitter, a liar—and now, a loser? On election night, Perot told his supporter he would. "My role in life is that of a grain of sand to the oyster. It irritates the oyster and out comes a pearl. It has been an honor to be your grain of sand in this process, and we will continue to work together to make pearls in the future, fair enough?"

However, the paradox of the Perot phenomenon is that the candidate and the cam-

paign compete for attention. The more that Perot stays involved, the more likely it is that United We Stand will be viewed as a front for Perot's political aspirations. The less he's involved, the less likely it is that United We Stand will be seen as a political threat. Perhaps Perot sensed this when he broadened the scope of his advertising in the final days of the campaign. His initial 30-minute, low-tech lectures introduced the country to Professor Perot who used a brilliant appeal to reason that didn't insult the voter.

But his final infomercials featured stump speeches and soundbites from bright-eyed supporters. These commercials contained the message that consultant Hal Riney recommended early in the campaign: Show Perot supporters and not just Perot, portray the growth of a grassroots movement and not just the ideas of its leader. Perot rejected the Riney commercials in July, but seemed to remember his advice. It remains to be seen if Perot's persona will continue to overshadow the campaign that he inspired.

If voters perceive United We Stand as a true independent political party in the making, it could deliver on its promise to revolutionize the two-party system. And will prompt serious opposition, even as the group tries to define its post-election mission. At least that's what Dallas City Councilmember Jim Buerger predicts. He spent election day answering phones at the Perot boiler room, and expects the major political parties will seek to disarm Perot by recruiting his organization. "The Republicans and Democrats will attempt to absorb these volunteers and will attempt to modify their positions in an attempt to bring them into their fold," Buerger said. "These are very motivated and active American citizens right now, and they won't be left unchecked."

On election night, one Perot volunteer suggested that the 1994 congressional campaigns could be the next test for United We Stand. "I mean if it's business as usual in two years, we're gonna have to fix it with just the Congress," said Eric Tangen of Dallas. "And I don't think that will be as difficult as getting a guy into the presidency. We can affect a mid-term congressional race far better than a presidential race."

The Perot phone banks are still ringing and Orson Swindle says United We Stand will draft a charter and begin to raise its own operating funds. On election night he thanked the volunteers for sticking with the campaign. "We've gotten people involved for the first time in their lives," Swindle said. "We can continue to play an important role if we will simply stand by our convictions." □