

● The Progressive Review

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● Third party time

It is a sign of the growing enthusiasm for a new politics that at one point last summer three national conferences on the subject were planned for the same fall weekend. It is also a sign of how difficult it may be to bring together the forces seeking such a new politics. Still, there are undeniably crocuses sprouting in the front yard of progressive America. There is a sense of things beginning, the thrill of commencement, a feeling that the status quo is too unstable, untenable, and ultimately anti-human to rest secure for long.

● Three decades ago, America was run by laws that denied rights and services to citizens because of their race. Now America is increasingly being run by laws that would deny rights and services to nearly everyone. Three decades ago, majority Americans were shocked by Bull Connor's dogs on TV; today even Robert Novak complains in print of his treatment by police. Three decades ago, both the incomes of Americans and the jobs

to provide them were increasing; today this is no longer true.

The only things that can maintain such conditions are lies and force. There are, of course, plenty of both. Politics has become a phantasmagoria of distorted reality, ideas appearing to be where in truth there are none, crises mysteriously emerging and dissolving in the dimness, facts changing their shape with the swing of the magic lantern, all performed with certainty that the media will not reveal the illusions' secrets. And where propaganda does not work, we have 100,000 more cops, a counter-terrorism bill, a curfew here, forfeiture without trial there, the paramilitary occupation of deep urban America, the repeated assurance from the White House down that all of this is done on our behalf and the mayor of New York saying, "Freedom is about the willingness of every single human being to cede to lawful authority a great deal of discretion about what you do."

Now, though, even the elites are worried that force and lies will not be enough. For the first time in more than a lifetime, media and establishment icons are publicly willing to consider jettisoning the two party system entirely, replacing it with some "centrist" fabrication that will mystically squeeze into the thin slot between rightist Democrats and rightist Republicans.

In truth, what these establishment leaders want isn't really a new party at all, but merely a temporary fan club to sweep their agent into office next November. Ironically, they find themselves engaged in such considerations precisely because, at about this same time four years ago, they were similarly attempting to decide which candidate would be best for the American public. They settled upon William Jefferson Clinton.

After such misplaced and counterproductive interference in the normal processes of democracy, one might hope for some reticence or humility or even, in the best of times, an abject apology. Instead, some of the same people who gave us Clinton are at it again.

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Their most frequently mentioned candidate is Colin Powell, a man who has built a career on clichés, caution, conventionality, and saying yes to the right people. Like Clinton four years ago, he has the singular advantage of being an enigma. Because he has no political record he is immune from attack. Powell is a sort of black Eliot Richardson, the man with the golden curriculum vitae. Like Richardson, his accomplishments consist of a long series of titles, and like Richardson, few can remember what he did while holding them. Richardson's finest hour was when he resigned from the government; Powell's finest hour, they say, was pursuing a war that he initially opposed, then pursued with capricious brutality, and finally never quite got around to finishing. In fact, many of Powell's veterans, thanks the Gulf War syndrome (just one of the grotesque results of this misadventure), are in a lot worse shape than the supposed target, Saddam Hussein.

Powell has spent most of his life as a military organization man, rising through his mastery of the mundane. Where he has had to face some major choices, he has little to show for it. In Iran-Contra, the prosecutors concluded, for example, that Powell made "inconsistent" and "misleading" statements, although not enough to warrant prosecution. He was in charge of a war marked by unprecedented secrecy and by excessive civilian casualties. We don't know the scope of the latter for sure because of the extent of the former. We do know that Powell's Pentagon misled the public on a number of points, including the accuracy of Stealth fighters and Patriot missiles. It is fair to say, from the record of the Gulf and Iran-Contra, that Powell is not to be trusted.

None of this seems to be of much interest to an obscenely obsequious media. The liberal Robert Kuttner even suggested that Powell "would co-opt a great deal of the dangerous anti-system feeling in the country that might otherwise go to real kooks. As a military man, he's the one candidate with the credentials and the nerve to face down the militias and the armed right." Presumably Kuttner wasn't thinking of Powell's troops barbecuing large numbers of Iraqi soldiers on the retreat to Baghdad, but one never knows for sure any more.

There has also been, of course, the slight matter of what Powell believes, but we are assured that if we just hang in there, we really will find out. At last reports, he was morphing into a moderate Republican. The clues, however, are not encouraging. For example, in an interview with Henry Louis Gates, Powell offered this solution to the problems of the inner cities:

Once these kids come out of school, there has got to be a capitalistic entrepreneurial system that is just burning up the place to create the jobs for these kids. And therefore you've got to get the tax burden off business. You've got to lower the capital gains tax.

If reason mattered, such a discussion of the complexities of urban America would be considered puerile and infantile. But no worse, I suppose, than Our General's Maxims, of which number eleven is: "Have a

vision." As the *New York Times*' Maureen Dowd asked recently, "Are we craving the sort of leader who needs to write himself a note to 'have a vision'? . . . Do we really want a president who talks like a Nike ad, an embroidered pillow?"

Who knows anymore? It seems, however, the overclass thinks so. And there are signs of big money, moving quietly behind the big tent, with Wall Street and Hollywood figures such as Felix Rohatyn, Steve Rattner, Barry Diller and Michael Eisner reported working for a Powell or Bradley type of candidacy. Apparently, they imagine a sort of Disney Prez. Hell, they bought ABC, why not the White House, too?



Meanwhile, in the face of such disingenuous and dangerous impersonations of political change, more and more Americans are seeking the real thing, an honest transformation towards a decent and democratic politics in which individuals and communities matter. A group of us in the Green Politics Network tested the possibilities of such a politics at an unusual national conference held last June. The Third Parties '96 conference, coordinated by Linda Martin, brought together over a hundred activists and leaders from a broad range of political groups. The conference was run on the notion that we should discuss what we had in common, not what divided us. There were greens, marxists, former Perot backers and conservative libertarians. The mood was gentle, the technique was consensus and the outcome generally encouraging. At one point several of the libertarian attendees even offered to leave so that consensus could be maintained; instead it was agreed to simply to accept different levels of consensus. More than a dozen points found full agreement, including issues of democratic process and the reduction of the military. The results were pleasing enough that another gathering, perhaps to plan a third party presidential bid, is planned for January.

The third parties' conference was only the first of several during the summer months. A conference spearheaded by Ron Daniels' National People's Progressive Network couldn't agree on a third party bid as a number of delegates opposed a break with the Democrats. There was support, however, for emphasizing local elections, with or without a national run.

There are clearly considerable opportunities at the local level. As *Ballot Access News* has pointed out, for example, there were 6,100 state legislative seats up for grabs in 1994. In 2200 of them, one of the major parties did not field a candidate. At present, only three of the seats are held by members of third parties. To those progressives favoring strong decentralization of government, it makes sense to take the battle to the communities they wish to empower.

The summer was further enlivened by a national Green Party conference in New Mexico and a compelling

Over the past year, I have been a participant and partisan in various discussions concerning progressive politics in 1996. I remain among those unconvinced that a presidential bid is the best use of a progressive's time next year. Instead, I have suggested an approach along these lines:

- The creation of a multi-party alliance similar to that formed in New Zealand.

- Emphasis on local and state races such as the large number of unchallenged state legislative seats. High profile races (such as for governor or senator) should be teamed with a less important contest (such as secretary of state or treasurer) so that those sympathetic to a third party have a way of expressing it if they can't bring themselves to vote third party in the main contest.

- Ballot access and proportional representation should be high priority issues. Without progress in these areas, third party efforts will not get far.

- A progressive shadow government should be formed.

- Progressive should cooperate with the Libertarians on such issues as the drug wars and election reform.

- The creation of a populist movement along the lines suggested by Ronnie Dugger.

- The creation of a culture -- as well as a politics -- of decency and transformation. This should not be a counter-culture but rather a new mainstream culture, spurring a social paradigm shift such as occurred before the American revolution or with the contemporary environmental movement.



- Those seeking a more presidential approach to 1996 politics, should contact *Linda Martin*: Lindamartin@igc.org: Linda Martin was the coordinator of the Third Parties '96 Conference and is a member of the Green Politics Network.

- For more on the proposed citizen alliance, contact: *Ronnie Dugger*, *Citizens Alliance*: Rdugger123@aol.com

- To follow ballot access issues, *Ballot Access News* is essential: *Ballot Access News*: ban@igc.org

- For more on the New Party. Contact: newparty@igc.org

-- s.s.



THIS MODERN WORLD by TOM TOMORROW

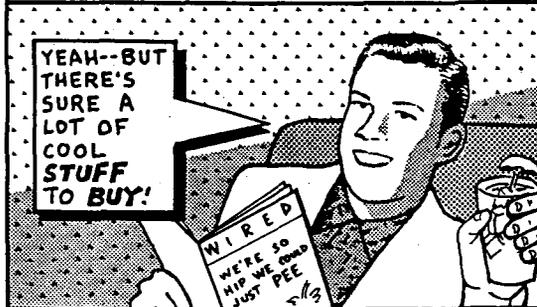
FUTURISM IS A GROWTH INDUSTRY THESE DAYS! MORNING NEWS SHOWS JUST AREN'T COMPLETE WITHOUT A SELF-PROCLAIMED CYBERPUNDIT CHEERFULLY DESCRIBING THE BRAVE NEW WORLD AWAITING US ALL!



OF COURSE, THE FUTURE DOESN'T ALWAYS LIVE UP TO ITS BILLING... FOR INSTANCE, YOU MAY HAVE NOTICED A DISTINCT SHORTAGE OF DOMED CITIES, FLYING CARS, AND MOON COLONIES AS WE APPROACH THE MILLENIUM...



AND FRANKLY, WE DON'T SHARE THE POPULAR FAITH IN TECHNOLOGY AS A CURE-ALL... AFTER ALL, OUR PRESENT-DAY TECHNOLOGICAL CAPABILITIES ARE ASTONISHING--AND YET, MUCH OF THE PLANET IS STILL WRACKED BY FAMINE, POVERTY AND WAR...



STILL, THE FUTURISTS THRIVE... SERVING AS PROPAGANDISTS FOR A SANITIZED UTOPIAN VISION WHICH-- LIKE MANY BEFORE IT-- FAILS TO TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THE MESSY REALITY OF HUMAN NATURE...



TOM TOMORROW © 9-13-95

manifesto by Ronnie Dugger that appeared in the *Nation*, calling for a Citizens Alliance that would revive the spirit and cause of the old populists. Dugger, who was founding editor of the *Texas Observer*, wrote:

The big corporations and the centimillionaires and the billionaires have taken daily control of our work, our pay, our housing, our health, our pension funds, our bank and savings deposits, our public lands, our airwaves, our elections and our very government. It's as if American democracy has been bombed. . .

I propose the emphasis on populism because the nineteenth century populists denied the legitimacy of corporate domination of a democracy, whereas in this century the progressives, the unions and the liberals gave up on and forgot about that organic and controlling issue. . . .

Dugger suggested a national meeting in November in St. Louis to kick off the populist alliance, although at press time it appeared that the meeting will be held sometime later. Meanwhile, others were investigating the possibility of some kind of shadow government, a collection of strong progressive voices that could be part of a presidential campaign or just stand on its own as the voice of a new movement.

There are, of course, enormous impediments to any third party presidential bid. Near the top of the list is the problem of ballot access -- not insurmountable but becoming more difficult as every deadline nears. Then there's the fact that many black progressives -- particularly in the Rainbow -- have been unwilling to burn their bridges with the Democrats. It seems that Jesse Jackson (who has a large campaign debt from his previous efforts) will, for the indefinite future, be content to play a game of chicken with the White House. The urban-based New Party also seems disinterested in a third party run.

There are other questions: What if a presidential bid is mounted but fails poorly -- what effect will this have on progressive politics? Does a national race drain energy from local ones? What if the candidate runs, stirs up enthusiasm, but then loses interest in his or her new constituency as Jesse Jackson did in 1988, and Jerry Brown in 1992? What if we elect Dole? Who should run? Where's the money coming from? The organization?

On the other hand, there have not been many times when conditions have been as propitious for a third party candidacy as is true this year. There is clearly enthusiasm