



## H. Ross Perot and the Federal Debt

by Doug Stout

In 1992, Texas businessman H. Ross Perot shook up the political world and received almost 20 million votes for the Presidency of the United States of America. To be more exact, he received 18.91% of the popular vote and 19,743,821 votes. In two states, Maine and Utah, he actually finished second in the three-man race for the Presidency. The race ended with a plurality victory for challenger Bill Clinton who received 43% of the popular vote, with 370 Electoral votes. Incumbent President George Bush received 37% of the vote and 168 Electoral votes.<sup>1</sup>

He was dismissed by most in the media as an aberration and by many as an erratic and odd political figure. He ran again in 1996, and went on to create an alternative “Reform Party” to challenge the traditional Democrat and Republican monopoly on elected federal officials. The effort eventually fell apart. Perot disassociated himself from the organization prior to the 2004 elections and dropped out of the political environment. However, for one lingering moment in the summer of 1992, he had everyone’s attention and at one point polled in first place at 39%, ahead of President Bush at 31%, and Governor Clinton at 25%, in the three-man race.<sup>2</sup>

The aspect of his campaign most remembered is his earnest focus on the dangers of the growing federal debt and its implications for our future. In half-hour infomercials, paid for on prime-time network television, he used charts to try to explain the dangers we faced by not dealing with our spending habits and by allowing a political process that year after year, gave us deficit spending. He asked for sacrifices by the American people and a smaller role for government to bring the deficit under control. He brought a whole series of fiscal charts to his television lectures; one of his shows on a Friday evening had over 10.5 million viewers watching his classroom-like presentation of federal budget issues and projections.<sup>3</sup> If you missed the informative charts and visual projections of his campaign for the Presidency, they are back again in internet form.

Mr. Perot is now 79 years old and his days of seeking political office are long past. He serves as Chairman Emeritus of the company he founded, Perot Systems Corporation, Inc. But last summer, he once again added his voice to the political arena on a familiar topic. He called on the American people to “rise up to fight the budget deficit,” which he described as a deadly cancer devouring our nation’s future.

In June of 2008, when the deficit was “only” \$9.4 trillion dollars, long before the current Administration had sharply ratcheted up the speed and scope of federal spending, he launched the web site [www.Perotcharts.com](http://www.Perotcharts.com), which in its first week garnered 300,000 hits. It is still active and available on the internet. He also spoke once again in public about the site. “I wanted something that Forrest Gump could understand,” he described. In typical fashion he tried to put the debate in terms that would mean something more than the mind-boggling string of zeros we are usually accustomed to seeing in deficit debates. He said that the 9.4 trillion dollar bills placed end-to-end would reach to the moon and back 1,900 times.<sup>4</sup>

In September of this year, David Walker, former head of the General Accounting Office used the same type of language. He described the United States as “suffering from a fiscal cancer.” He also tried to put the staggering numbers into more understandable terms to describe the fiscal crisis we are rapidly escalating. When describing the \$1.8 trillion dollars that we will ADD to the deficit in this year alone he broke it down as follows: “A deficit that large is \$3.4 million dollars a minute, \$200 million in an hour, \$5 billion a day.” That just describes the \$1.8 trillion we will add to the deficit this year, and maybe gives some clue just how out of control our spending has become.<sup>5</sup>

As Mr. Perot said last year: “The ideal time to treat a cancer is when it’s small.” “Well this has gotten way past small, but there is still time to treat it. We’re trying to discuss it now to keep it from going to \$12 trillion, to \$15 trillion to \$20 trillion.”<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, in last year’s Presidential election, and in most Congressional races around the nation, the issue of the spiraling deficit was not a major issue. In fact, rather than just continuing the cycle of

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irresponsible spending, we have now taken it to an entirely higher and completely unsustainable level. The current spending spree is only scheduled to escalate further if the President's ambitious agenda, always calling for a bigger and for a more assertive federal government presence in our daily lives, is adopted by Congress. In the interview with the *Dallas Morning News* last year, Mr. Perot referenced a Norman Rockwell painting on his wall of a farmer sitting on the running board of his pickup truck sending his son off to college:

This painting is the essence of what we're talking about, that farmer probably never went to college, probably never even finished high school, but he was determined that his son would have opportunities he never had. That's been a driving force of our nation: Each generation would pass on a better, stronger country to the next generation." [But he indicates that dream has gone very sour.] Our children are going to inherit a debt that is unconscionable if we continue in this direction. We want to explain the magnitude of this problem and communicate it to the American people that they can't be gullible to politicians who vote for things that our country can't afford to pay for.<sup>7</sup>

No one, including Mr. Perot, is suggesting that he return to the political arena. The question that needs to be asked is where are the voices of fiscal restraint for this generation? Which candidate ran for President on the primary message of stopping the "generational theft" which is robbing the future of our country and threatens to undermine the very foundation of our democracy; its financial independence on the world stage? Senator John McCain only used the phrase "generational theft" to describe his reasons behind his opposition to President Obama's fiscal spending package in February of 2009, three months after the November election and with the nation's financial future already weighed down with more than \$9.4 trillion dollars of accumulated debt.<sup>8</sup> Since that day in February of this year, the deficit for this year alone has already risen from a projected \$1.2 trillion dollars, to \$1.8 trillion dollars.<sup>9</sup> To provide some context, the largest single-year deficit prior to the current year was the then record \$455 billion added to the debt in 2008. On August 25, 2009 the total national debt stood at an unbelievable \$11.7 trillion dollars. What is frightening is that both the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office and the White House Office of Management and Budget expect that figure to nearly double over the next decade.<sup>10</sup>

The projection for the debt to double does not include the laundry list of additional spending proposed by this Administration. Where are the voices calling for "hope for our financial future" and "change from the irresponsible practices" of big government spenders in both political parties? We have now reached the "perfect storm" of financial irresponsibility. They have already proven their potential by tripling the previous record for deficit spending in a single year. We may have reached the point where we must ask of our elected officials...speak up and be heard...or forever hold your peace. Because at some point, our ability to sustain such fiscal irresponsibility is going to fail...and the American dream of a better tomorrow for our children...will be a dream of past generations.

(Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup>"1992 Presidential General Election Results," Dave Liep's Atlas of U.S. Presidential Elections, 2005, <http://uselectionatlas.org/RESULTS/national.php?year=1992&f=0&off=0>, (September 11, 2009).

<sup>2</sup>"Ross Perot", Wikipedia.org, September 9, 2009 <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ross\\_Perot](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ross_Perot)>, (September 11, 2009).

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Cheryl Hall, "Ross Perot says national debt is off the charts," *The Dallas Morning News*, June 21, 2008, <http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/bus/columnists/chall/stories/062208dnbushall.3096b15.html>, (September 11, 2009).

<sup>5</sup>John Fund, "Warning: The Deficits are Coming!" *The Wall Street Journal*, September 4, 2009, [http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203585004574392620693542630.html?mod=googlenews\\_wsj](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970203585004574392620693542630.html?mod=googlenews_wsj), (September 11, 2009).

<sup>6</sup>Hall.

<sup>7</sup>Hall.

<sup>8</sup>Michelle Levi, "McCain: Stimulus Bill Is 'Generational Theft,'" *CBS News*, February 8, 2009, <http://www.cbsnews.com/blogs/2009/02/08/politics/politicalhotsheet/entry4783514.shtml>, (September 11, 2009).

<sup>9</sup>Fund.

<sup>10</sup>Jim Kuhnhenn, "White House, Congress projects record deficits," *Associated Press Writer- Yahoo! News*, August 25, 2009 [http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20090825/ap\\_on\\_pr\\_wh/us\\_obama\\_economy/print](http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20090825/ap_on_pr_wh/us_obama_economy/print) (August 25, 2009).

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