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Our Nation Turns Its Lonely Eyes to
H. ROSS PEROT

**How the Last
Real Texan
grabbed the
American Dream
by the neck,
wrestled it to
the ground and
made it cry,
"Uncle!"**

BY DAVID REMNICK

Everybody knows about Scouting and the ideals of its action-packed program for red-blooded boys. That's why the nation admires the boy in the Boy Scout Uniform.

—The Handbook for Boys

WHEN HENRY ROSS PEROT ~~WAS A BOY~~ growing up in the border town of Texarkana, his mother tacked a Norman Rockwell print above his desk—a Boy Scout at prayer. The picture was meant to advise and inspire. "It was part of my mother's continuing effort to keep me straight," Perot says. "Rockwell painted what I strived to be."

Among his favorite books was the Scout handbook, the primer of citizenship, righteousness and trees. Many years later, after he had become a million-dollar donor to the Scouts, Perot gave a copy of the handbook to the third-ranking member of the Chinese government. The visiting official examined it

with sociological care, paging past the Rockwell illustration of a young man chiseling a Scout homily into an obelisk at the foot of Mount Rushmore, past Baden-Powell's "Knight's Code," past tips on roasting potatoes, sighting bluebirds and tying tourniquets over spurting wounds. He read the requirements for a "salesmanship" merit badge: "Explain why Truthfulness about an article is one of the outstanding requirements of good selling . . ." Thinking perhaps of Mao's Little Red Book, the Chinese official concluded that this must be the central text for the indoctrination of capitalist youth.

For his part, Ross Perot saw the handbook as something greater still—a code. Clear, direct, practical, it contained the seeds for an idealized American life, and no American life could be more idealized than Ross Perot's. Today his battered boyhood copy can be found under glass—along with his hatchet and beaded belt—at the Ross Perot Scout Center in Texarkana. The display of Perot's Scout handbook has a deliberately iconic quality, like a museum case with Zane Grey's

From the Frederic Remington bronzes to Archibald Willard's "The Spirit of '76" behind his desk, Ross Perot's office at Electronic Data Systems reflects his image as a pugnacious patriot.

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first-grade grammar or Edison's childhood toys. Perot now, in many ways, is Perot then. "He never changes"—it is a sentence repeated by nearly everyone who has known him a long time. His scoutmaster at Troop 18, Sam Shuman, remembers Perot as "the ultimate self-starter. Being small, he always stood up straight and stuck out his little chest as far as it would go. He was a born salesman and a born Scout."

This inner direction, this combination of energy and ego, was so powerful from the start that Ross Perot became much more than the reverent boy above his desk: He became an Eagle Scout, a midshipman, a computer services entrepreneur worth \$2.5 billion, a builder of modern Dallas, a patriotic hero. Perot's wealth—which is surpassed by that of just one other American, Sam Walton of Wal-Mart Stores—is only the foundation of his reputation. There are plenty of rich Texans, but none like him. To Perot, money is merely an instrument of his will, financing his sense of risk and the right thing to do. "Now that I've got all this cash, I've got to figure out what to do with it," he says.

At the very moment when much of the country has become less inclined to worship the once-rosy image of Ronald Reagan, many have found a hero in a businessman. Perot may be the world's first populist billionaire. People meet him in the street, straighten up and say, "Keep it up!" or "Give 'em hell, Ross!"

He first jumped from the business page to front page prominence 18 years ago when, at the request of the Nixon White House, he hired two Braniff jets and tried to airlift 30 tons of supplies to American POWs in North Vietnam. The next mission was even bolder. During the Iranian revolution, his team of private commandos freed two of Perot's overseas employes from a Tehran jail. Perot soon became known as a new sort of corporate raider, the man who succeeded where Jimmy Carter and the military had failed. At Perot's invitation, novelist Ken Follett wrote a best-selling account of the Iranian rescue mission, *On Wings of Eagles*. Television, sensing a hero on the rise, made "Wings" into a five-hour mini-series and hagiography.

And yet, Perot is such an unextraordinary-looking man that when the late Filipino opposition leader Benigno Aquino met him in Dallas, Aquino was stunned.

"I thought you'd be . . . huge!" Aquino said.

"Aquino probably thought I'd look like John Wayne or something," Perot says now. "But there I was, just a Filipino-sized businessman." He is 5-foot-6 and 56 years old. What there is of his hair is shaved close and combed military neat. His nose is an unholy affair, a lumpy wreck busted a couple of times when he was breaking horses for his dad. His Texarkana speech is as high and twangy as a plucked ukulele. His shirts are always white, the suits blue or gray, the ties muted. He has worn a uniform nearly all his life: the Boy Scouts, Annapolis, the Navy, IBM, then his own company, Electronic Data Systems. Where he is not known, he blends in. Blue suits, he says, are "camouflage for the corporate jungle."

Dallas is the City on the Hill of American business. Businessmen built the city and they have always run it. Of all the neat, middle-aged men in blue wool suits driving boxy American cars to glass office buildings off the Dallas Toll Road, Ross Perot is not only the richest, he is the purest of the breed, reminiscent in bearing and speech of the old wildcatters. He is unembarrassed by the sort of rough edges that the Dallas gentry believes it lost years ago. Ross Perot may be one of the last real Texans.

The Rockwells that line the walls of his office suite at EDS in Dallas are genuine. He bought them at tremendous cost not simply because he admires their craftsmanship; they are moral emblems, stories of American ideals and optimism. In one, a



Sometimes memories of Texarkana reel in his mind like a film. "You ever see that movie 'Places in the Heart'? That's the town I knew."

Father and son seem lost in their own thoughts, but they are close, they understand each other. The father's face says everything in the world to Ross Perot: the pain of the Depression days and the hope that his son will find happiness in the greater world. "Those were my times," says Ross Perot. "That's my life."

FOR YEARS, PEROT'S COMPANY WAS TYPECAST AS SECRETIVE, arrogant, military, and his interviews were, like an admiral's, rare and remote. No more. Perot long ago abandoned the one-dimensional role of private businessman; without running for office, he has become the most public of men. He is not shy about discussing his foreign missions, business battles or charitable deeds. When I first asked to visit, Perot just said, "When?" and orchestrated an itinerary that might be called "This Is My Life." One day his son Ross Jr. would fly me around Dallas and Fort Worth, Ross Sr. said, "to look at the lands. You can see our buffalo and longhorns. I don't have much use for 'em but I sure love to go look at 'em." The next day, I would tour some of his civic contributions: a women's hospital, a new symphony hall, an arboretum. His daughter Nancy would provide "personal stuff. She'll give you the 'Daddy Dearest' angle." Then his sister Bette would explain all the details of the family's charitable works; since 1969, Perot says, he has given away \$100 million to projects for education, battered women and the homeless.

"That'll give you the picture," he said. "Show you my interests."

But part of his essence is the boy-above-the-desk grown up, the past that shaped Ross Perot and the ways he has shaped his own history. "Texarkana's just a teeny town," he said. "You sure you want to go all the way out there?"

"Absolutely."

"Well fine, that's fine. Now I got a bit of business to attend to 'fore I see you, but I'll send Bette out with you in the helicopter. She can show you where I delivered papers and all that."

Many times in the course of talking, Perot would grow stern and shoo away a question as if it were a gnat. "That's more philosophical than I like to get," he would say about questions with the slightest hint of psychology. "You like to go deeper than I do. With me, it's what you see is what you get." Once I asked him about his height, and he just said, "I never spent any time thinking about it." If Perot is introspective at all, he saves it for his most intimate friends and moments. Entrepreneurs make poor Hamlets. What he will admit to, here and there, is "that it must all go back to Texarkana," that what he does is rooted in the East Texas of the '30s and '40s. Sometimes mem-

sailor on leave lounges in his parents' backyard hammock. The grass is brilliant green, the sun high. His hound sleeps by his side. In another, a Marine home from the Great War shows his friends at the local garage his captured Japanese flag. They listen with absolute reverence.

"And this here may be my favorite," says Perot as he stands before a painting called "Breaking Home Ties." A world-weary father, in an old set of work clothes, and his fresh-faced son, wearing his Sunday suit and argyle socks, sit together on the running board of the family car. The boy's valise has a sticker on it reading "State U" and his collar rests its head on the boy's lap.

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ories of Texarkana unroll in his mind like a film. "You ever see that movie 'Places in the Heart'? That's the town I knew."

Perot used to take his wife, Margot, his son and four daughters back home fairly often. Now he goes rarely—to dedicate a theater he's restored or to visit an ailing relative. When he does go to Texarkana, Perot does not care to see it changed. His mother, Lulu May, sold the family house in 1958 and moved to Fort Worth. When Perot discovered the new owners had painted the brick on the house, he was not happy. It was as if youth itself had been whitewashed. Perot has a firm idea of the way things should be, and frequently money can set things right. He bought back the house in 1969 and told the workers to scrape off the offending paint.

"We can't do that," they told him.

"Then take out all the bricks and turn them around," he said.

And so when his sister Bette and I drive up to 2901 Olive Street, the place is just as the Perots left it. Surrounded by spiky St. Augustine grass, holly bushes and spreading pecan trees, the house has a cement porch, a rocker and a swing. Out back is a garage which was once a playroom for Bette and Ross. The Perots let a tenant family live in the house rent-free now. "When we change tenants, I stay here until I find someone," Bette says. "I make sure there won't be any dope-smoking or strange living."

Texarkana sits in both Texas and Arkansas—the Texas side was dry, the Arkansas side wet. As fate would have it, the Perots lived on the liquor-less side of town. Railroad tracks divided the haves from the have-nots. Schools were segregated.

In addition to helping his father break horses, Ross made extra money selling garden seeds and pushing subscriptions to the magazine that made Norman Rockwell famous, the Saturday Evening Post. His Christmas card business was profitable for a month or two, but he soon learned that those profits were only seasonal. Years later when brokers tried to sell him the Colorado ski resort of Vail—an investment he could well afford—Perot recalled his days in Christmas cards. "I don't do seasonal business anymore," he said, and refused the deal.

The job that seems to fire Perot's imagination most was . . . "Dad's paper route. We were raised on that story," his daughter Nancy says. "It was like a childhood myth, a fairy tale." When he was 12, Ross approached the Texarkana Gazette and asked to sell papers. No jobs, they told him. Times were so bad that grown men and women were competing for routes that would bring in just a few dollars a week. Perot offered to deliver the paper in the black slum of New Town. No one had ever done that before. He asked for just one thing in return. While most paperboys kept about a third of all the money they collected, Ross thought he should keep two-thirds. "The people at the paper said to go right ahead," Perot says, smiling. "They figured people out there didn't read and had no use for a newspaper."

Norman Rockwell could not have painted "The Route" any better than Perot lived it. Rising every morning before dawn, Ross climbed aboard his pony and delivered paper after paper. The poor black workers and farmers living in their ramshackle "shotgun" houses in New Town badly wanted the Gazette, and subscriptions blossomed. Many read the paper, others had it read to them. And almost everyone made use of old copies. "They papered their walls with it," Perot says. "They used it for extra blankets. It was a precious thing."

"Ross always knew where he was going," says J.Q. Mahaffey, who was a reporter at the Gazette at the time. "In fact, it was said, though I never believed it, that Ross was making so much money on his route that the paper tried to cut his commissions."

Perot says the story is true—as do many others—and he made an appeal to the publisher. "Mr. C.E. Palmer was his name. I said to him, 'Sir, we made a deal on my commissions. We should keep to it, I believe.' And he did. From then on, I always went straight to the top with a problem."

Perot learned his "home lessons," too. Ross Perot Sr., who made his living selling cotton, was known around town as a broad-minded man, and when his workers, "guys like Jesse and Uncle Mose," got too old to do their jobs, he took care of them anyway. Once a year he'd load up the car with friends, black and white, and visit the country fair. "Dad didn't care what people thought." Weekends he'd visit black friends, sitting side by side with them on the porch, often to the horror of the neighbors.

The streets near the old Perot place are lined with trees, the houses are big and well-kept, the cars new and polished. It is a calm, pleasant place. But during the Depression, scruffy, half-starved hobos used to jump the trains and come to the Perot house asking for food. They always seemed to come to 29th and Olive. One day one of the men explained to Lulu May why the Perots were singled out.

"You're a mark," he said, showing her a white mark etched into the curb.

"Momma, do you want me to wash it off?" Ross asked.

"No," she said. "Leave it be."



Breaking horses for his father in Texarkana 40 years ago, Perot broke his nose. Twice.

Once, during a conversation about Wall Street, Perot said, "I think greed is human nature."

"But not your nature?" I asked him.

"We're all what we were taught to be," he said, shaking his head no. "You sit there in that little house in Texarkana and see your mother doing things like that when you're a child, that's the greatest lesson in the world. She didn't have to go and share it with other people or make a lecture of it. She just did it."

Perot's parents lost their first child. Ross Jr. was born in 1924 and died three years later of spinal meningitis. "They always said that made their marriage stronger," Bette Perot says as she pulls up to the rusted, crumbling gates of the Stateline Cemetery. "Mother always said that not a day goes by that you forget a child you've lost. The doctors told her she couldn't have any more without risk, so of course she went out and had two. First me, then Ross."

The graveyard is badly kept except for a few plots. The Perot plot—G. Ross Perot 1899-1955, Lulu May 1897-1979, Ross Jr. 1924-1927—is trimmed and strewn with flowers. Bette stares a while at the names.

"Father was up at six," she says. "He ate breakfast standing up at the kitchen counter. He came home every day at noon or so to eat lunch with the family and at six for dinner. There was always a blessing: 'Gracious Father, make us thankful for all these blessings we humbly ask, for Christ's sake, Amen.' At dinner he'd talk about business, or my mother would talk about church or the garden club. But mostly they were interested in what we were doing."

"Mother believed in reading to us by the hour. Ross was absorbed in *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, the Hardy Boys stories, *Boys' Life*, the Horatio Alger stories. We had the *World Book*, the *Book of Life*, *Gone With the Wind*, *The Life of Will Rogers*, and always the Bible. At night we listened to a big old radio we had. You know the kind—rounded at the top, made of wood. My father controlled what station we listened to. We all loved Red Skelton, 'Fibber McGee and Molly,' 'Amos and Andy.' Gabriel Heatter gave the news. 'There's bad news tonight,' he'd say when the war broke out. I can hear him now."

"Dad made it through the Depression pretty well. But it wasn't easy, I can tell you. He paid cash for everything. He



Perot's family joined him for his graduation from Annapolis in 1953—from left, sister Bette, father Gabriel Ross, mother Lulu May, and wife-to-be Margot.

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watched money very carefully, and so does Ross. You don't break the habits of a lifetime. I think it must have thrown Father to have to borrow a little to pay the \$4,000 for our house, but he paid it off in a year.

"At Christmas we got one present—a toy, clothes, fruit was always big. When we got older, we got a bike. Christmas was the finest time in our family. Mother would make the same meal every time. Turkey, English peas and carrots, cranberries, cornbread dressing, fruitcake and a Christmas ambrosia of coconut, pineapple and oranges. It was the greatest feast in all the world, don't you know?"

Later, Ross Perot would remember another Christmas, a holiday story that sounds like nothing less than a Boys' Life tale—at once true and mythic: "One year my father sold one of his horses in order to have enough money for Christmas presents and Christmas dinner. That really bothered me because I knew how much he loved that horse. But it also showed us how much he loved us."

IF THE ROCKWELLS SPEAK TO HIS SENSE OF ORDER and affection, the Wild West bronzes by Frederic Remington speak to his image as a pugnacious patriot. They are everywhere in Perot's office. Cowboys firing Colts. Stallions rearing on the plain. There are also battle flags and gifts from the families of POWs. On one wall is one of Gilbert Stuart's portraits of George Washington, and behind his desk hangs Archibald Willard's "The Spirit of '76." Perot is a man given to national verities, and his surroundings reflect him. He is unlikely to buy one of Jackson Pollock's drip paintings any time soon. Abstractions do not become him.

"I bought 'em, because I like 'em," he says of his collections. Apparently, he likes the Magna Carta, too, for he spent \$1.5 million to buy one of the four original copies. "My lawyer Tom Luce found it for me in England. When he was getting ready to come home with it, he asked me if I wanted security guards on it and all that. I said, 'Hell, stick it in your briefcase.' When he was at Heathrow, one of the guards said, 'What have you got there?' Tom said, 'The Magna Carta.' Guard never missed a beat. He just said, 'That's very well. Have a nice flight.'"

The patriotic part of Perot's "myth" (as he so cheerily calls it) developed after high school. While he was at Texarkana Junior College, he wrote repeatedly to his senators and congressman asking for an appointment to the Naval Academy. It seemed that would never happen. But in 1949, a retiring senator was reminded that he had yet to send anyone to Annapolis that year. An aide remembered that a boy in Texarkana had been badgering them for an appointment for several years.

"Well, then, give it to him," the senator said.

When Perot arrived at Annapolis, he had never seen an ocean, never been on a ship. His hair was so short that the required military buzz-cut was redundant. Lyle Armel, who would be his roommate for four years, was not in the least impressed. "Who is this little fella?" he asked himself.

It didn't take forever to find out. Perot ran for junior class president with the bulldog vigor of a Chicago alderman. "He went out and saw everybody," says Armel. "He visited every square inch of that place. Once he won, he aspired to every leadership position that was available." Perot's reelection senior year came at the expense of Carlisle A.H. Trost, who is now an admiral and chief of naval operations. "I think Ross was born a leader and a straight-arrow," says Armel, who joined EDS after a career in the Navy. "He was always neat, always fit. It never made sense for him to get drunk, but he wasn't prudish about it when someone else did."



"We're all what we were taught to be. You sit there in that little house in Texarkana and see your mother doing things like [feeding the hungry] when you're a child, that's the greatest lesson in the world. She didn't have to go and share it with other people or make a lecture of it. She just did it."

could make some money and start a family with his new wife. He settled on IBM. And IBM—as if in cooperation with the fast-developing Legend of Ross Perot—sent him to the City of Businessmen: Dallas, Texas.

His transition from the military to IBM was nearly seamless. The uniform of white shirts and blue suits, the code of behavior, the terrific work load—it was all Christmas ambrosia to him. Being a young executive in the early computer industry was not unlike signing up with NASA a few years later. "Things were so good in those days at IBM that a salesman could get rich as long as he didn't get drunk during the day," Perot says. "It didn't take a miracle worker to get somewhere."

Wanting as much action as possible, he approached his branch manager in Dallas, Henry Wendler, and asked to make a name for himself. "How could I forget him?" says Wendler. "Practically on Day One, Ross marched in and said, 'Sir, I know you pay higher commissions for new business and tough accounts. So give me your toughest accounts.'" Perot took on a number of accounts, including Southwestern Life Insurance and Blue Cross-Blue Shield. "They gave him the dogs and he made a fortune," says Thomas Marquez, a colleague at IBM and now one of Perot's closest associates. "Ross was the most creative guy they'd ever had."

"Ross made what we called 'The Hundred Percent Club' and had very high earnings for those days," Wendler says. "A lot of the other salesmen were envious. They thought I'd given him the cream of the crop. But I hadn't." Perot built up his territory to such a degree that he was filling his yearly sales quota faster every year. In his final year at IBM he filled it by January 19th. But IBM would not let him earn more commissions. "They cut

There is a wry cockiness about Perot, and he was that way long before the riches came. Questions and meandering contemplation, he seems to think, are for lesser, more hesitant, souls. He tells the story of being the chairman of the honor committee and being appalled when "the son of someone real famous, I can't tell you who," was on the verge of getting away with a bit of campus burglary. Perot would have none of it. "I went straight to the top and demanded justice," he says with a sharp smile. "Got it, too." It is an early, yet classic, Perot anecdote: He saw a wrong and acted quickly, simple as that. "I don't worry about the way things look," he says. "I see what's right and I act."

When Perot was sent to sea in 1953 on the destroyer *U.S.S. Sigourney*, he was made assistant fire control officer "and just about every other dang thing," including Protestant chaplain. The ship sailed around the world, a broadening voyage for "a simple Texas boy," but he soon felt bored, hemmed in by the Navy's system of lock-step promotions. By 1956 he was looking for a way out, for a "top-flight outfit" where he

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my territory and I had nothing to do," says Perot. "I figured I'd go to the YMCA and swim a little during the day. A few times I had my trunks rolled up in a towel on my desk. The boys in the office thought that was something."

To keep busy, Perot offered, "like a fool," to cut his commissions. "I was just bluffing," he says, "but they took me up on it." In the meantime, Perot tried to sell IBM on the idea of a service branch. In those days, many companies bought huge computer systems without the slightest clue of how to use them or of how long the technology would last. They just knew that to get ahead, they needed hardware. Perot proposed that IBM not only sell hardware, but also provide the customized software and a staff to help operate the new, mysterious machines. IBM—blue, gray and getting a bit fat—said no.

Perot was looking for the door. "It was the old story," he says. "If I had stayed in the Navy, I probably would have retired as a captain because I would have been too controversial. I would have been too direct. If I'd stayed at IBM, I'd be somewhere in middle management getting in trouble and being asked to take early retirement. When I got up to the bite-your-tongue level, that's when I would have gotten in trouble."

At about that time, Perot went to get his hair cut. While waiting for the barber, he found wisdom in the Reader's Digest. His eyes fell on a line from Thoreau's paean to ascetic self-reliance, *Walden*: "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." In school, Perot had been drilled in American literature "by the beautifully educated women" who taught him. But no line, he says, had ever struck him so deeply. There it was, a little filler quote on the bottom of a page, a revelation in agate type. Vintage Perot: at once grand (Thoreau) and populist (Reader's Digest).

"At that moment," Perot says, "I got the idea for EDS."

DOUBT—THE SORT OF DOUBT THAT PLAGUED HIM IN the weeks preceding his trip to the barber — was hardly part of his makeup. Not for long, anyway. When he began writing out the plans for EDS in 1962 (on a legal pad, at the kitchen table), he did it with rapid assurance. Drawing on the institutions that made him, Perot created not only a company, but a culture. His men would dress like IBMers, behave like the finest Midshipmen, treat one another like members of a big Texarkana family. "Simple and straight," he says. "We clearly codified what EDS is, what an EDSer is. Everything is just nailed down as succinctly as possible. I want people who are smart, tough, self-reliant, have a history of success since childhood, a history of being the best at what they've done, people who love to win."

Image was important because Perot was no longer selling the most famous equipment in the world. In fact, he was not selling equipment at all. Ross Perot was selling his people. Soon EDSers would be described as the blue-suited shock troops of the industry. Green Berets, Delta Force, computer commandos. The military analogy is appropriate. In the years to come, Perot hired dozens of veterans. As EDS grew, as its burgeoning staff took root in the computer rooms of more and more companies, its image became law. Strict rules of dress. No beards, no mustaches. Employees were given a "code of conduct." Follow it, or be gone. Perot's "clones" his people were called.

So encompassing was Perot's EDS that Esquire would later call it "the New Feudal Future." Osman Eralp, an analyst at the investment bank of Hambrecht & Quist, says, "If you play by Ross' rules you could be happy in EDS. Long hours, total commitment, making sure your professional life became part of



"I've always figured there must be some secretary there at the White House who stays from administration to administration, and when someone says, 'Where are we going to get money in the middle of the night?' she says, 'Call Perot.' I'm not sure, but I think it's Fawn Hall's mother."

you. In the early days, Perot worried that his people were not seeing their families enough; he gave each family stock now worth \$250,000. Unions never took root at EDS. "I'm all for unions, but we don't need 'em," says Perot. End of discussion. When a delegation of Japanese executives visited a number of American corporations, they told Perot that his was by far the most Japanese. Perot took it as high praise. "There's a sign over the gate of Toyota City and it says, 'Every worker is a brother,'" says Perot. "That's EDS."

Mort Meyerson, who is Perot's closest associate and now reportedly worth more than \$100 million, left his job as a computer programmer for Bell Helicopter in 1966 to come to EDS as a trainee. Soon he discovered what a strange place he had joined.

"I was practically living in the computer center working on some Medicare and Medicaid accounts," Meyerson says. "My wife and I had an infant boy and I happened to have off one Saturday. My wife was doing some work in the kitchen and, somehow, she managed to get a little bit of Drano in her eye. It was horrible. Her eye was actually foaming it was so bad. I put the baby under one arm and took my wife to the hospital. Ross was there in an instant. The next day he found out who the best ophthalmologist in the country was for that sort of injury, he rented a Lear jet and flew her to Johns Hopkins. It probably saved her eye. Remember, I wasn't an executive, just a beginner, and here he was, going to the limit for me and my wife. Imagine what I felt for that man. Imagine the loyalty. I would have walked through a wall for him."

your personal life and outlook—if you could accept that, you can be part of it. To a lot of people, EDS means uniformity, a stifling life. But to a lot of technical people, it's the cat's meow." Tom Peters, author of *In Search of Excellence*, a best-selling book on corporate cultures, once remarked of EDS: "You say the 'Pledge of Allegiance' every three minutes, then charge up the hill. They're like the Marine Corps. Heck, they are the Marine Corps."

Even while Perot dismisses the idea of a military, dictatorial shop—"You should see the fights we have!"—he has surely cultivated a homogeneous, Spartan environment. The EDS buildings are guarded by fences and barbed wire and sit in the middle of a nine-hole golf course. When you drive to the gates of EDS on Forest Lane in north Dallas, an armed guard wearing sunglasses, a white button-down shirt, rep tie, gray slacks and a pistol waves you over to the side of the road. In the lobby, a carved eagle holds dominion. There are eagles all over the place; it is the company bird.

Behind all the trappings and symbolism, there is a definite substance to Perot's culture. If you work for it, it works for

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Perot made that sort of loyalty almost official, an intrinsic part of the culture. "Any time an EDSer or an EDS family member is in trouble, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, we're notified. If something happens, it's a five-alarm alert."

One employe, a product manager, was in a car crash and had to be put in a body cast. His medical bills far exceeded his insurance. EDS paid the difference. An employe named Steve Sharek was on vacation in the Mediterranean. He had an accident and is now a paraplegic. Perot got him to the best medical facility possible, and made sure his finances were taken care of. Recently, Sharek heard about Perot's battle with the corporate culture of General Motors. In a letter to Perot, he wrote, "I'd probably be lying on or six feet under that Cypriot beach if I'd been a GM employe."

In the meantime, the company's value skyrocketed. When the federal government passed medical insurance legislation in 1965, Perot won contracts with state Medicaid programs in 11 states to develop a computerized billing system. "That was the breakthrough," he says. Ramparts magazine called him "America's first welfare billionaire." Perot kept his own salary at \$68,000 but his holdings in EDS were obviously a fortune waiting to happen. As John Brooks wrote in *The Go-Go Years*, "Perot now had 23 contracts for computer systems, 325 full-time employes, about \$10 million in assets, annual net profits of over \$1.5 million, and a growth curve so fantastic as to make investment bankers' mouths water."

On September 12, 1968, EDS went public. Overnight, Ross Perot was worth \$350 million. And yet he makes sure it play it down: "It was like getting hit by a comet," his sister Bette says. "Ross sure didn't mind getting rich, but you know, after his wedding or the birth of his children, I think I know what was the single greatest day in Ross' life. Simple. The day he made Eagle Scout." Almost from the moment Perot became known as "the fastest richest Texan," myths grew up around his modesty. He bought his suits at K mart. He ate all his meals in barbecue joints. The family had no servants. His children would inherit only a pittance. To the contrary, his suits are of the finest cloth, he belongs to some of the toniest clubs in Dallas, the house in North Dallas is well-staffed and possessed of a tight security system and a full gymnasium, and no one should expect the Perot children to know anything other than wealth. Perot may not be a glutton, but he is no monk, either.

Indeed, his wealth kept growing. EDS stock had opened at \$16.50 a share. By 1970, it was selling for \$160. Perot was holding more than nine million shares, making him worth nearly \$1.5 billion. The numbers on the market were going crazy. "The price was way higher than it should have been," says Perot. "It was a fool's game." Suddenly the game ended. EDS stock plunged, and in seven hours, Ross Perot had lost \$450 million on paper, the largest single-day loss in the history of the New York Stock Exchange.

"People ask me what I felt," he says. "Money is strange. I felt sorry for the little investors who got taken to the cleaners. But what did I feel for myself? I felt nothing."

By 1971, Perot felt he could do almost anything. Motivated by both good will and the chance of big profits, Perot invested millions in an attempt to save DuPont Glove Forgan Inc., one of the biggest brokerage houses on Wall Street from bankruptcy. "A gigantic gamble," he says. He rolled the dice and ended up losing \$70 million, an awful failure. It was his biggest failure. "Perot moved in, saw the opportunity to make big things happen but it turned bad," says analyst Elial of Hambrecht & Quist. "But it was just too big and it bombed. He found his limit."

LIKE ANY ROCK 'N' ROLLER, PEROT TAKES THE SHOW ON THE road. And a marvelous show it is. In a speech to business people and politicians at North Carolina State University, he rips young

investment bankers as kids "who think they're God's chosen people." He describes the entrepreneurial life as a "mission, and the mission is to create jobs." Of the Japanese electronics revolution, he says, "It used to be that if your parents gave you an orange for Christmas, you knew they still loved you. But if they gave you a Japanese toy, you wondered. Now they make the best stuff in the world. Just take a look around your house." The crowd loves it.

After the applause dies, he walks down a concrete tunnel to a press conference. In a brief session, he compares the "cowboy operations" of the National Security Council to the behavior "of a banana republic." Outside the door, the autograph seekers wait for him. Three women wearing identical blue business suits, white blouses and flouncy red ribbons press their copies of *On Wings of Eagles* into Perot's hands.

"You gals want 'em inscribed?" he says.

"Sher dooooo!"

Perot signs his name (with no "H.") in broad, bulgy strokes.

Before he can get to the door, a horsy-looking man presses his card into Perot's hand and asks a favor so obscure and so rushed that no one can possibly understand it. Perot shrugs: "I don't know what it is, but people have this compulsion to talk to me. What is it? You got any ideas?"

He knows. Perot knows it's his role as rescuer—Perot as Liberator.

He first earned the reputation in 1969 when Henry Kissinger called him to the White House and, according to Perot, said, "Ross, our intelligence reports say that half our POWs in Vietnam will die of brutality or neglect before the war is over. We



Perot tried to embarrass the North Vietnamese with his Christmas mission for the POWs.

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have to do something about it, but we can't do it ourselves. Can you help us?" Perot said he would. His contact at the White House for the project was Alexander Haig. "We knew he was passionate about what was happening to the boys," says Haig. "We knew he had something to offer more than just money."

The specific plan was left to Perot. "I spent a lot of time with an EDS trainee named Tom Neurer reading stacks of Communist literature," he says. "Communists write a lot of literature, you know." Perot's guleless sense of symbol and myth and emotion served him well. This time Christmas was his tool, his wedge. For \$1.5 million, Perot rented two Braniff 707s and crammed them with letters from home, medicine and 1,400 canned yule dinners. Although the North Vietnamese would never accept such a shipment, Perot managed a remarkable public relations victory, arranging public confrontations and press conferences all over Southeast Asia. In Laos, Perot stood outside the North Vietnamese embassy shouting into a bullhorn: "Let us have our men!" He was either a surprisingly effective Quixote or a masterful self-promoter, depending on your point of view. "He was amazing," says Haig.

The prisoners never had their Christmas dinner, of course, but after the war many POWs reported that in the camps they had heard about Perot's mission. Eventually, the North Vietnamese allowed more mail, and some POWs reported that their overall treatment had improved. They finally felt they had not been forgotten, at least not by a Dallas billionaire. "When one POW got back, I heard from him right away," says Perot. "He said, 'They told me I've got two phone calls. I used one to call

my wife and the second to call you.' " Perot's critics said that the mission had done at least as much for him as for the POWs.

The following year, Perot read about the exploits of Army Col. Arthur (Bull) Simons. Simons and a team of commandos had raided the Son Tay prison camp outside Hanoi hoping to rescue POWs. Although the mission failed—the camp had been abandoned—Perot went to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, to congratulate Simons anyway.

When the POWs returned home from Vietnam, Perot financed a ticker tape parade for the Son Tay raiders in San Francisco. Nixon's chief of staff, H.R. Haldeman, wanted the parade to wait until after a White House reception. "That guy was your classic instance of someone who got to where he was because he was good at blowing up balloons in the campaign," Perot says. "I told him, 'Look, the guys want this. I'm just paying for it.' He said if we went through with it there could be no military bands. Imagine! I told him, 'Fine, we'll get every high school band we can find. But when the subject of why we didn't have military bands comes up, I'll let them know about our little conversation.' Guess what? We got the military bands."

Simons could not have been more impressed with this little computer jock from Dallas. In 1973, Perot says, he sent Simons back to Laos to look for POWs. "Simons said they were there," Perot says, "but there wasn't much he could do about it."

Perot and Simons would next work together in 1979. Two EDS executives working in Tehran, Paul Chiapparone and Bill Gaylord, were arrested by Iranian police and thrown in jail—making them the revolution's first hostages. There were never



Last year in Dallas, Prince Charles awarded Perot the Churchill medal.

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any charges. Perot called his old contacts Kissinger and Haig; he called on the State Department; he called on every agency he could think of. He got promises, advice, but precious little help.

Once more, Perot came up with his own plan: Simons would assemble a voluntary, private commando team for a rescue. Jay Coburn was one EDS executive who could hardly refuse the mission. Years before, when his infant son was dying, Perot made sure the child was transferred to a better hospital. The boy lived, and, for years after, Coburn said he would be there any time Perot needed him. He joined the team. Known as "The Sunshine Boys," they trained for their adventure in Tehran at Perot's weekend house on the shores of Lake Grapevine in Dallas.

Later Perot would be criticized for taking national security matters into his own hands. "The privatization of foreign policy is a dangerous matter, and I think Perot comes pretty close to the line," says former secretary of state Cyrus Vance. "I was troubled by that mission, quite frankly."

"But what else were we left with?" Perot insists. "We tried the government. No luck. We tried to work through the Iranian legal system. Hah! We even tried to pay bail, which was nothing more than a ransom. It was \$12 million and they finally refused it. Everything failed. I was either going to lose the guys or try something. Now they say you should obey the law. Whose laws? The law of Iran in a revolution? Where were the laws? There were none. Everybody sits over here and says why don't we go by the Marquess of Queensberry rules, but it didn't play over there . . . We took the risk because we felt it was wrong to leave two innocent men behind. It was that simple. It was the principle."

Chiapparone and Gaylord were locked up in a forbidding maximum-security prison, a fortress with steel doors and towers. Their cell was near a mental ward, and they heard the screams of the mad in the middle of the night. From the streets they heard sounds of gunfire and revolution.

Once in Tehran, Perot managed to get permission to see Gaylord and Chiapparone. "The key thing then was to tell them to hang tight and that we'd get them out," says Perot. Chiapparone, who is still with EDS, remembers the day that Iranian officials let Perot visit him and Gaylord in jail. "I was absolutely shocked that Ross would travel halfway around the world just to tell two employees that he cared. What's more, his mother had cancer at the time and he came to Tehran knowing that he might never see her again." After seeing Chiapparone and Gaylord, Perot flew back to Dallas, leaving Simons to improvise.

"To get us out, Simons needed a trick," says Chiapparone. "That was the only way."

Simons had read how the French opened the gates of the Bastille during the Revolution. "We figured on it," says Perot now. "In a revolution, someone always opens the jails. Simons and an Iranian employe of ours named Rashid spent time with the mobs outside the jail. They discovered that the mobs had leaders, and so Rashid formed a mob of his own and became a leader. When the right moment came, he paid off the local police to open up the magazine. Rashid threw weapons to everyone and yelled, 'It's up to us revolutionaries to free the political prisoners.' Rashid got the key and everyone started streaming out. The guards refused to shoot at their own people."

In the chaos, Gaylord and Chiapparone jumped the wall and ran out onto the streets of Tehran. They hitched a ride to the Hyatt hotel where Perot had said Simons would be waiting for them.

Once everyone was safely back in Dallas, the news coverage was tremendous. The story got even more attention when 52 Americans were imprisoned in the U.S. Embassy in Tehran on



Perot may be the world's first populist billionaire. People meet him in the street, straighten up and say, "Keep it up!" Or "Give 'em hell, Ross!"

by two senior guys in the administration that he was in no shape to talk to me. I wanted to tell him that this thing wasn't being planned with the right intensity."

After Carter's rescue attempt failed dismally in the desert, the public could not help comparing images: Perot's triumphant "Sunshine Boys" and Carter's twisted helicopters. But Zbigniew Brzezinski, who was assistant to the president for national security affairs during the Carter administration, finds the comparisons specious. "I don't remember him sending intelligence people to Iran, but I know we spoke to him, and it was clear to everyone that the two situations were completely different."

At EDS, employees understood the rescue mission as an extension of the culture, almost a given. "After everything you've heard about Ross and EDS and the loyalty there, well, hell, I could have told you he would have gone to Iran," says Mort Meyerson. Over the next two years, the public relations department at EDS got many proposals from authors wanting to write about the rescue mission. Perot arranged to meet the best-selling spy novelist Ken Follett.

At first Follett found it "a bit difficult to get over Perot's personal magnetism." And, after he began researching the book, he soon discovered what it was to doubt his subject. "If Ross is telling a funny story, he'll cheerfully alter the facts to make it funnier," says Follett from his estate in Surrey. "I made it clear that I wanted the plain facts. I was checking a story on the phone with someone and I said, 'Well, you know how Ross exaggerates . . .' A passing remark, but it got back to him, and he said, 'I don't want you going around this town telling people I exaggerate. I have a relationship with the people of Dallas and this country and it means more than this book.' Well. It was rather like a blast of icy wind that blows into the room when someone opens the door. We are very good friends but I did see a glimpse of that tough side of him."

Not everyone adored *On Wings of Eagles*. "From what I know of it, it's a bit of an exaggeration," says Cyrus Vance. "The Sunshine Boys" say it was fact. One way or another, *On Wings of Eagles* made millions for Follett. It codified the legend of H. Ross Perot.

THE FIRST TIME HE EVER HEARD THE NAME OLIVER NORTH, Perot says, he was eating dinner at the Old Warsaw restaurant in Dallas. It was December 1981. North called him there and asked if Perot would be willing to help the government in a

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H. ROSS PEROT

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matter of grave importance. For the time being, he kept the matter vague. "Ollie just called me up out of the blue," says Perot. "I've always figured there must be some secretary there at the White House who stays from administration to administration, and when someone says, 'Where are we going to get money in the middle of the night?' she says, 'Call Perot.' I'm not sure, but I think it's Fawn Hall's mother. She's been there since the days of Kissinger."

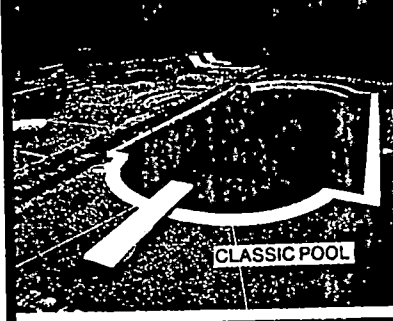
Days later, Perot got a call at three in the morning from one of the Joint Chiefs wanting to know if he could deliver \$500,000 in an hour to Italy as ransom for Brig. Gen. James L. Dozier, who had been kidnapped by the Red Brigade terrorist group. Perot agreed, and kept in close contact with Defense and State Department officials. During one phone call from a high-ranking government official, he remembers thinking, "I don't even know who he is." It could have been anyone on the phone saying he was an assistant secretary. I often think of that. I say, "These guys ought to have some kind of ID or something."

"Anyway, the guy said, 'Look, nothing's working. Could you put together a team to break him out?' I said, 'I'll think about it. I'm flying to Dallas, and I'll call you when I get there.' For three hours, I sat on the plane and thought, 'How am I going to tell him what a terrible idea it was?' When he landed in Dallas, Perot turned on his car radio and heard the news: Italian police had freed Dozier. He was relieved, but remembers thinking how "squirrely things get sometimes."

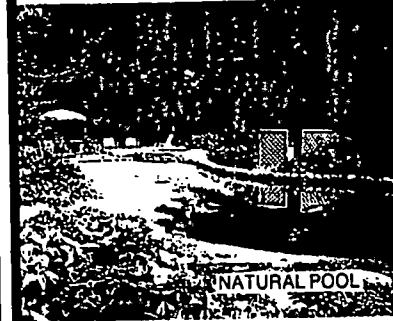
"I was just getting ready to call the guy in Washington and say it doesn't make any sense for a bunch of computer guys to get involved. You say to yourself, 'Why aren't we better than this?'"

Bobby Ray Inman, former deputy director of the CIA, says it does make sense: "There's a tendency for presidents, when they get frustrated, to call on private people, and Perot has demonstrated a willingness to respond and act."

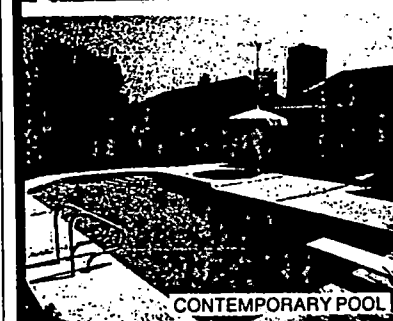
Perot had established himself as a kind of conservative Jesse Jackson. They both had agendas and they both acted on them. Just as Jackson came to various crises with the power of his constituency and his ego, Perot came to them with his reputation, his ego and his wallet. The more often the government called him, the more he felt sure that in some cases a businessman could act more quickly and effectively than a government.



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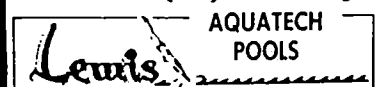


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Admiral Poindexter and Colonel North were bit players, and the major characters were people who were in the weapons business for years, some of whom had CIA connections.

"Those characters are all patriots in their own minds. The True Path is in their heads. Their purpose in life is to save the country from the rest of us. Now, once a guy gets that in his head, get out of the way. If you went into covert activity and went into the field for years, well, you have no family life, no friends, the only people you had contact with were on the other side. You're an old man as a young man in that business. Talk about a recipe for instability. There it is. What do you do with these guys once you get them wound up and programmed? How do you shut them up in a free society? I guess in a totalitarian society you'd just put them away."

Perot resigned from the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board last year, sources say, out of sheer frustration and boredom, and he has been deeply critical of the Reagan administration's handling of the Iran-contra scandal, but he can hardly avoid politics and the issues that engage him most. One afternoon during our interviews, Perot flew north in his Learjet to Washington. A limousine dropped him off at the northwest gate of the White House. "Got to see some peo-

H. ROSS PEROT

ple," he said. Inside, he met with Don Regan on the POW-MIA issue. The issue has been Perot's obsession since 1969. With full security clearance, he has spent days with Pentagon and CIA files. Perot is convinced there are still American prisoners in Vietnam. He doesn't know how many, and, in a sense, doesn't care. Once more, Ross Perot is on a rescue mission. Once more he is the Liberator. "I don't care if it's one guy. One guy. You don't sell your people out. You save them."

JEFF, A HOTEL CLERK, SITS ON THE hors d'oeuvres table handcuffed to a jail door. He's shucked his Dallas Hyatt hotel uniform for prisoner's fatigues and jungle paint to be a centerpiece, a military variation on the chopped-liver Bible or the carved-ice swan. "It's a job," Jeff says, eyeing the distant celery stalks. "I do what they tell me to do." He hardly moves, the better not to slip a jackboot into the radish bowl. Only a few of the hundreds of guests who approach the table to dunk their carrots in the dip stop to ask Jeff just what he is doing in such a pose. "I'm here honoring H. Ross Perot," he says. "If I were real, he'd set me free, I guess. That's what they tell me."

Sponsored by the Dallas Press Club, the affair is huge. Nearly 1,000 guests take their seats at tables with odd decorations. The centerpieces are small brown boxes stamped "SECRET." On one side of the box, a toy soldier shoots his submachine gun; on the other, an American flag flutters in the air-conditioned wind. The house lights dim. Perot walks down the center aisle flanked by two uniformed combat soldiers. The guests stand, cheer and rattle their bangles. With the spotlight shining in his face, Perot waves to the crowd like MacArthur come ashore at Inchon. In homage to Perot's controversial \$700 million split with GM, the band plays a furious version of "Take This Job and Shove It."

The soldiers escort him to a makeshift throne on the stage. The theme is simple: Perot as Liberator. The set decorations are a dark dungeon cell and an angry-looking banner behind him written in Arabic. The applause gets louder and louder. In Perot the audience sees not merely money beyond reckoning, but also independence, patriotism, a Will Rogers sort of wisdom. At one table a woman can no longer contain herself. "Run, Ross! Run for president!" she shouts.

And at that moment the band invites a local singer to lead the crowd in a chorus of the crowd's favorite Carter-era anthem:

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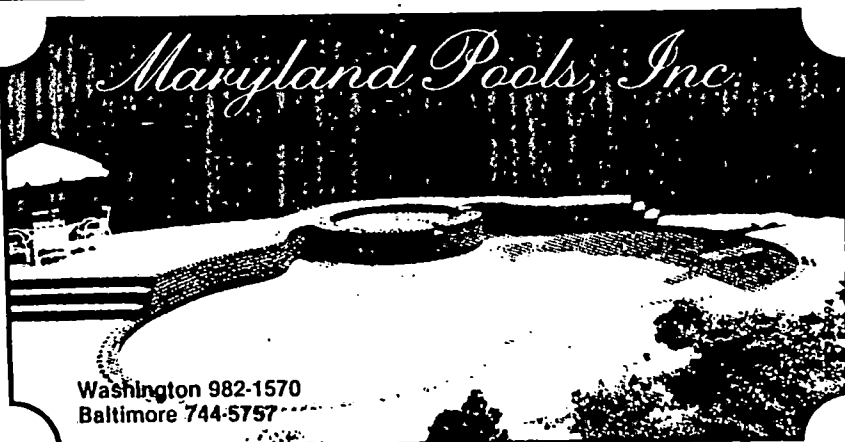
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H. ROSS PEROT

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Where are you now when we need you, Ross Perot?

Speaker after speaker takes gentle jabs at Perot, at his ears (large), at his ego (somewhat larger), at his fortune (almost the largest). The jokes are roses disguised as raspberries. He'll never run for president, they say—he's already king. They note that *W* magazine put him on this year's "in" list, along with Boris Becker, Barcelona and spinach. They say Ross just had an accident—a speedboat hit him while he was walking on the water. Too bad the job Perot really wants—the speaker rolls his eyes heavenward—is already filled. Perot laughs and laughs and the crowd laughs, too.

There are dinners in Perot's honor all the time. Last year, Prince Charles and Nancy Reagan awarded him the Churchill medal in Dallas. Last month in New York he was given a medal named for Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who saved thousands of Jews during World War II. Wallenberg's sister said her brother would "recognize a kindred spirit" in Perot. The dinner at the Hyatt was advertised as a roast; really, it's a love-in, but a chaste one. Unlike the roasts for entertainers at the Friars Club, there are no obscenities spoken here, hardly an off-color thought mentioned. When one unfortunate "local television personality" makes a joke about condom ads, the audience titters nervously. There are a few hisses. Perot's smile is so tight it squeaks.

Finally it is time for the legend his own self. The band pumps out "Hail to the Chief," a gigantic American flag unfurls above the stage and Perot rises from his throne. Presently, last year's Miss USA, Christie Fichtner, races to the stage and hugs him tight.

"Oh, Mr. Perot," she sighs. "You're such a hunk of man."

Perot surveys his admirer, an endlessly tall blond who seems bred on tablespoons of saccharine, Oil of Olay and apple pie. She is preternaturally beautiful. "I don't think we have to worry about the Japanese producing one of these," says Ross Perot.

The crowd, as they say, goes wild. ■

Next week: a clash of cultures as Ross Perot takes his ways and will into Roger Smith's boardroom at General Motors.