



## EDITOR'S NOTE

### THE COLOR OF THE INDEPENDENT MOVEMENT

The color of the independent movement has been controversial since the very start. Though the media rendered an image of the angry white male to define the independent voter, beginning in 1992 – when Ross Perot first ran for the presidency – those inside the movement know the true story to be otherwise. The “radical white middle” and the disaffected black and Latino Democrat is an electoral alliance with the potential to rock the political world. Indeed, some would argue that it already has.

Almost every significant American political upheaval that brought forth a new party or parties (however short or long lived) revolved around issues of race and racial equality. The most famous, of course, was the birth of the Republican Party in 1854. The Republicans, in contrast to the Whigs and the Democrats, opposed the extension of slavery to the new western territories. As Abraham Lincoln observed in his 1858 campaign for the U.S. Senate against Stephen Douglas, “The sentiment that contemplates the institution of slavery in this country as a wrong is the sentiment of the Republican Party.” Lincoln lost that contest, but two

years later was elected president of the United States as the Republicans supplanted the pro-slavery Whigs.

Socialists and other left parties opposed segregation and Jim Crow in the first half of the 20th century, but these movements did not yield a more representative electorate. When those efforts finally hit the mainstream, the results were shattering. In 1948 Hubert Humphrey, then the mayor of Minneapolis, introduced a civil rights plank into the Democratic Party platform. The southern Democrats (known fittingly enough as the Dixiecrats) bolted to back segregationist Strom Thurmond, who ran for the presidency as a States’ Rights Democrat, winning 39 electoral votes and nearly costing Harry Truman the White House. Twenty years later, Alabama segregationist and former Democratic governor George Wallace deserted his party as punishment for engineering the passage of the Civil and Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965. Wallace ran for president on the American Independent Party ticket, carrying five southern states; Humphrey, by then the vice president, lost the presidency to Richard Nixon. After 1964 black voters turned almost entirely

to the Democrats, abandoning the allegiance to the Republicans that they had maintained since the end of the Civil War. Yet almost at the moment that the Democrats became the party of black America, it went into a slow decline as the dominant partisan power in American politics.

Both the Republican and Democratic parties are tied deeply – in complicated, often conflicted ways – to race, racism and the political marginalization of black America. How could it be otherwise? The evolving (some would say devolving) relationship between America's political superstructure and black America is at the core of our nation's history. That relationship, though legally resolved by the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution, by the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision *Brown v. the Board of Education* in 1954 and by the passage of the Civil and Voting Rights Acts 40 years ago, is not politically resolved. And the independent movement – as it has emerged on the American scene – reflects that lack of resolution.

Most political insiders, including those in black circles, identify one figure as the key link between independent politics and black America. She is Dr. Lenora Fulani, a developmental psychologist originally from Chester, Pennsylvania, based for the last 30 years in New York City, who became the first African American and, not incidentally, the first woman to access the ballot in all 50 states in a presidential run. She ran twice as an independent, the first time in 1988, when she polled a quarter of a million votes, most of them coming from inner city communities and campuses.

The Reverend Al Sharpton, probably America's foremost contemporary civil rights activist, a Democratic presidential contender in 2004 who is contemplating another run in 2008, says of Fulani:

You know, I've known Dr. Fulani for a long time. And she and I have agreed to disagree on any number of issues. But you know, there is a growing sense of independent voters in this country, any poll shows that. And one of the things that I think that a lot of the media here misses, is Dr. Fulani rightfully is one of the pioneers of that, particularly in the African American community...Twenty years ago, when they started talking about independence, most people in African American political circles thought they were crazy. Now there is a growing trend. I think that we've got to give her credit for at least being persistent.

It was Fulani who first put the issue of including black voters in the independent movement on the table. In 1992, not long after her second presidential run was underway, Perot went on the *Larry King Show* and ignited the independent populist explosion that at its high point put Perot at 42% in the polls in a three-way race for the White House. Perot's advisors reached out to Fulani's campaign associates for advice on ballot access and Fulani spoke by telephone to Tom Luce, Perot's close friend, advisor and lawyer.

During the Democratic National Convention in New York that summer, Perot met privately with Jesse Jackson. On the last day of the convention, Perot called a hasty press conference to make a bombshell announcement: he was dropping out of the race because the Democratic Party had "revitalized" itself.

In shock, the legions of Perot activists convened an emergency conference in Dallas. Fulani's national field director, Cathy Stewart, attended the meeting, urging the participants to remain outside the two-party grid despite Perot's mysterious abdication, and to join with the Fulani campaign to pursue an independent Rainbow. Perot, however, got back into the race. He never hit 42% again, ultimately polling 19% of the vote. Exit polling showed him with 7% of the black vote.

Meanwhile, Fulani's connection to the Perot movement developed at the base. She was invited to speak at a meeting of Perot backers in ultra-conservative Orange County, California and received a standing ovation when she called for bridge-building between the overtaxed and the underserved in the interest of an independent political movement that included black America. (She did not, however, receive a "standing ovation" from the American Left. Far from it. Leftists cast the Perot movement as neo-fascist and Fulani as a collaborator for connecting herself to it. Their diatribes, however, were only a thinly veiled attack on the idea that black voters could form new alliances outside the Democratic Party.)

By 1993, the Perot-backed United We Stand, America (UWSA) was organizing independents into a non-party lobby. But some Perot leaders wanted to move beyond lobbying to the creation of a new political party. Propelled by key Perotistas – Nicholas Sabatine, Jr. of Pennsylvania and Ralph Copeland of Virginia – a Federation of Independent Parties (FIP) began to take shape under the stewardship of Dr. Gordon Black, a political scientist and pollster for Perot who was based in western New York. Black and Fulani had several

meetings. He appeared to be intrigued by Fulani's vision of an independent movement that would be inclusive of African Americans; in his published writings Black had argued that America needed a "centrist" third party, which would draw liberals from the GOP and moderates from the Democrats, leaving black voters to capitalize on the potentially greater influence they could exercise in a down-sized Democratic Party. However, under pressure from liberal academics and Democrats, Black denied Fulani an invitation to the FIP founding conference in Kansas City.

Her exclusion would have guaranteed that the Perot legacy would be a "whites-only" one but for the fact that Nick Sabatine had been chosen by the FIP to lead its process through to the founding of a new independent party. A small-town lawyer with a passion for balanced budgets, an immutable sense of fairness, and a belief that history was being made by the Perot voter, Sabatine formed a friendship with Fulani, her political guiding light, Fred Newman, and this writer in the months following the Kansas City launch. The FIP rules conferred recognition on delegations to the founding convention based on demonstrable on-the-ground support. Fulani's following among black activists – like her connection to networks of gay and progressive activists – was both broad and deep. Consequently in 1994, when the founding convention of what came to be named the Patriot Party was held in Crystal City, Virginia, black (along with gay and progressive) representation was visible and substantial. Whereas the "top-down" machinations surrounding the new independent movement pushed in the direction of racial exclusion, up-from-the-bottom organizing provided a course correction.

Sabatine was elected chairman of the Patriot Party. (Gordon Black and four other delegates from New York walked out after the convention voted overwhelmingly to remove the word "centrist" from the party's description because of its implied exclusiveness.) The newly elected national executive committee had three persons of color among its six members.

For the next year, the Patriot Party acted on its mandate of lobbying within the broader Perot/UWSA movement to convince Perot to run again and to use this second candidacy to form a broad-based national independent party. Sabatine and Fulani traveled to Dallas in the summer of 1995 to attend a UWSA convention, and organized a huge rally of third partyists. Three months later, Perot announced plans to create a new national party, said he might run as its candidate,

and kicked off a statewide party registration drive in California with Fulani ally Jim Mangia doing some of the heavy lifting.

Perot's main political advisor by that point was Russ Verney, formerly the executive director of the New Hampshire Democratic Party. Verney's tasks included the wooing and management of the organized forces participating in the Reform Party effort, among them the Patriot Party. Verney attended a meeting of Patriot Party leaders in Virginia to offer guarantees of a fair and democratic process inside the fledgling party. He also met privately with Fulani, Newman and me, offering assurances that Perot was committed to opening the party to the black community.

Perot went on to become the 1996 nominee. (He bested former Colorado Governor Dick Lamm in an open national primary by two to one.) That summer, the Patriot Party dissolved itself into Reform and Perot went on to poll 8% of the vote. The party was formally constituted in 1997 in Kansas City, where a highlight of the convention was a reception hosted by the Black Reformers Network, a caucus-style association created by Fulani to elevate the African American presence inside Reform. More than 300 Reformers attended the gathering, many of them white; they came partly in solidarity and partly out of curiosity.

For Fulani, the issues of racial diversity and up-from-the-bottom democracy went hand in glove. As one of the party's best known champions of empowering and rewarding party activists who were actually building Reform's base (as opposed to cutting deals in Perot's name), she became notably popular with the party's most active and independent-minded state leaders. At Reform's national convention in Dearborn in 1999, she polled 45% of the vote in a head to head match-up for vice chair against Perot's handpicked candidate.

Soon, however, the party was riven by factionalism. Verney (on Perot's behalf) and later Pat Buchanan (on his own behalf) sought to muffle dissent and democracy inside Reform; together they managed to drag it, kicking and screaming, first to the right, and eventually into oblivion.

The Reform Party, which under the influence of Fulani and others made itself hospitable to African Americans, never actually achieved any depth at the base among black voters. But the Independence Party of New York, which became a ballot status party in

PHOTO: GERRY EVERETT



*Lenora Fulani (r) and Independence Party members*

1994 in the early high tide of the Perot movement, did sink deep roots in the black community. Those roots proved to be so significant that the Independence Party's black leadership catalyzed an historic shift by African American and Caribbean American voters in the 2005 New York City mayoral election (See *The Black and Independent Alliance*, p. 11).

The story of black voters' rise to prominence in the Independence Party is narrated in detail in the complaint to the U.S. Justice Department reprinted on p. 19, so it need not be retold here.

Suffice it to say, however, that since the one-term election of Jesse Ventura as governor of Minnesota in

1998, the most significant event in the history of the national independent movement so far is the black electoral revolution of 2005 in New York City. That revolution has, however, provoked a backlash of considerable proportions, involving major Democrats and Republicans together with Independence Party state chairman Frank MacKay and other turncoats within the independent movement who have attempted to dismantle the New York City Independence Party – home base of the party's membership of color – and to dismiss its black leadership. These “whites only” independents have undertaken to satisfy the major parties' strategic perspective: that black people are better off when they “stay in their place.”

There is little question but that the Democrats and Republicans will be better off under those circumstances. There is no question, though, that black and other minority voters exert much more power if they are independent, rather than the political property of a single party.

If the aim of the independent political movement – whether it takes the form of a party or a federation, a coalition or a voter association – is to reverse the deterioration of American democracy and to repel the tyranny of partisanship, it must include and empower all who would join in that cause. The color of the independent movement has to do with race and racial parity. And it also has to do with the red, white and blue that signify American ideals of radical democracy and resistance to unchecked authority. To lead that kind of movement, the independents must *be* that kind of movement. We must stand for liberty and justice for *all*.

Jacqueline Salit, Executive Editor  
editor@neoindependent.com