

# States of the Union

## DREAMS OF A THIRD PARTY

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WASHINGTON

SOME OF MY acquaintances are in political labor again, hoping to give birth at a national convention next spring to the Citizens Party. It would be the latest entry in America's dappled history of third-party pregnancies.

So far the Citizens Party is just a bright idea—a gleam in the eye of Barry Commoner and his sun-struck minions—but a sizable and talented organizing committee is already hard at work, some money from friends and well-wishers is trickling in and a national headquarters has been quietly opened in Washington across from the Mayflower hotel.

I confess to feeling a strong attraction to Leftish third-party experiments. Their ranks are filled with the beautiful and the damned, like all prophets, they would rather be right than powerful—an appealing stance in an era when the powerful have nearly always been wrong. Yet fate and instinct have thus far kept me thrashing in the mainstream. I was too young in 1948 to vote for Henry Wallace, and I was too old 20 years later to throw away my vote on Dick Gregory. Now here comes a group of reformers who seem just the right age—mine. Most are veterans of what we were once pleased to call the New Left, of old and honorable battles for civil rights and against poverty and the war in Vietnam. Today they represent the New Improved Left. A cadre of environmentalists and decentralists, with a political agenda for the Eighties that bears little resemblance to that of the Sixties.

A working paper drafted by the Citizens Committee tells the story. Among other things, it calls for

‘Public control of the energy industries

- “A swift halt to nuclear power
- “A strong push for conservation and solar energy

“An immediate, sharp reversal in the rate of military spending

“Stable prices for the basic necessities of life—food, fuel, housing, medical care.”

Underlying these points is the committee's perception of democracy as a victim of both big government and especially big business. “Elevating the national interest above vested private interests is the heart of what the Citizens Party is about,” says the working paper. “We believe in citizen control of major investment and resource decisions. We want to see that control as decentralized as possible. Experiments in worker and community ownership should be encouraged.”

Such populist notions, of course, are hardly new, but the tone of voice throughout this working paper is surprisingly measured and moderate. It reflects the new political group's leadership, which by and large consists of intellectual activists who have spent years pondering America's sundry dilemmas. The 25-person steering committee, for example, includes Richard Barnet, author of *Global Reach* and a founder of the Institute for Policy Studies, Robert Browne, president of the Black Economic Research Center, Robert Chlopak, director of the National Public Interest Research Group (a Nader spinoff), Robert Fahs, an officer in the United Auto Workers, Jeff Faux, an economist with the Exploratory Project on Economic Alternatives, Adam Hochschild, publisher of *Mother Jones* magazine, David Hunter, director of the Stern Fund, Maggie Kuhn, head of the Gray Panthers, Edward Sadlowski, of the United Steel Workers, and Studs Terkel, the writer.

The other day I visited the Citizens Party headquarters to see what else I could learn. The office, tucked away on the third floor of a building that also houses the opulent Chez Camille restaurant, is the very model of a minor party's new headquarters—small, crowded and lined with hopeful legends. A large bulletin board displays news clips from around the country, including a characteristically alliterative item from *Time* magazine that

calls the new venture "a Quixotic quest." A Los Angeles *Times* headline warns "Look Out Democrats! The Citizens Party Is on Its Way." The Chicago *Tribune* complains "A Third Party May Not Be a Joke."

Strictly speaking, as my friend Harriet Barlow patiently explained to me, the organizing committee does not consider itself a third party, there being these days only one other party to choose from, the one that some call Republican and others call Democratic. Because the two parties take nearly identical positions on most major issues, said Harriet, who is a co-chairperson of the Citizens Committee, millions of discouraged Americans have broken their voting habit. Only about one-third of all eligible voters, she reminded me, bothered to cast ballots in the last Presidential election.

So, like all newcomers on the American political stage, the Citizens Party claims to offer us a choice, not an echo. And nowadays, Harriet noted, the real choices are seldom mentioned. "Congress debates the oil question as if the only alternatives are between laissez faire and a windfall profits tax. Nobody brings up the possibility of divestiture, of workers owning the oil companies, of citizen control. The windfall tax is seen by the public as a far-Left position when it should be considered somewhere in the middle."

"Similarly," Harriet continued, "the debate over Chrysler is limited to the question of subsidy vs. no subsidy. Our leaders don't see the opportunities that Chrysler's problems present us with—opportunities for new experiments in worker control and ownership." All of this, she concluded, comes under the heading of the public's "acquiescence to the corporate definition of its need," which in turn leads to "the fraudulence of the parameters of dialogue."

After Harriet left, I talked for awhile to the Citizens Committee executive secretary, Dan Leahy, an appealing gentleman from Wenatchee, Washington. He had brown, fuzzy hair, a bushy moustache, and was wearing bluejeans with a matching jacket and cap. The party's toughest task, he told

me, would be getting on the ballot in all 50 states. "Every state has different rules, and nearly all are rigged to favor the major parties. It's a nightmare."

I asked Leahy if he really expected the Citizens Party to elect a President in 1980. "We're in this for the long haul," he said. "We'll make gains in 1980, and maybe by 1984 we can win." Leahy showed me a statement by Barry Commoner that compared the Citizens Party of 1979 with the Republican Party of 1854. "We view this in many ways as parallel to the moment 125 years ago when a small group of people met in a Wisconsin town to form a new political party. They founded the Republican Party because neither of the country's major parties were confronting the great national issue of the day—slavery."

**I** DEPARTED marveling at the optimism that keeps this fragile movement going and growing. Analogies can be helpful, but it takes a considerable glossing of history to equate the Citizens Party's chances today with the Republican triumph 125 years ago. For one thing, the party the Republicans were hoping to replace—the Whigs—was already conveniently bankrupt, by 1854, when that historic meeting in Ripon, Wisconsin, took place, the Whigs' dissolution seemed assured, and even a conservative like Edward Bates was ready to bolt to a new party.

For another thing, the slavery issue back then was far more critical and divisive than are any current issues, including energy and inflation. Slavery had been debated and disputed for more than half a century, the Whigs had spent two decades staking their political reputations on their ability to settle the argument through negotiation and compromise. By 1854 it was clear to nearly everyone that they had failed, and that a fresh political alliance was required—not a small band of reformers, but a broad coalition of free-soilers and Northern industrialists, the latter being less interested in abolitionism than in protective tariffs and expansion of the railroads.

Then, too, there remains the question of whether *any* group today—even one more broad-based and more richly endowed than the Citizens Party—can succeed in ousting either of the major parties. Those Ripon Republicans, after all, were the last to turn the trick, though many since have made the attempt. Not even Teddy Roosevelt could do it.

It is true, I think, what the Citizens Party says of our two Establishment parties. That they are without great and guiding principles, that their positions on most major questions are essentially identical, that they offer few authentic choices to the thoughtful voter. But what else is new? "There are now two great and several minor parties in the United States," noted the Englishman James Bryce in *The American Commonwealth* (1907). "The great parties are the Republicans and the Democrats. What are their principles, their distinctive tenets, their tendencies?"

This is what a European is always asking of intelligent Republicans and intelligent Democrats. He is always asking because he never gets an answer. After some months the truth begins to dawn on him—neither party has any principles, any distinctive tenets.

The parties with principles, Bryce observed sadly and condescendingly, were invariably weak. The Socialists, the Populists, the Greenbackers, the Prohibitionists. But what Bryce failed to point out was that the programs of those splinter groups often found their way into the platforms of the two major parties. The Democrats in particular have been able over the years to borrow doctrines and ideas from the maverick Left and consequently to reinvent themselves from one generation to the next. In the 1930s, for example, the Democrats in effect created a new major party as an alternative to the third-party Socialists, who polled more than a million votes in 1932.

The test of Citizens Party success, therefore, will not be whether they win or lose but whether they can get big enough and noisy enough to scare the hell out of the Democrats. I wish them luck.