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No Place for Perot In the Debates

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The Commission on Presidential Debates is to decide soon whether Reform Party nominee Ross Perot and running mate Pat Choate will be included in the presidential and vice-presidential debates that are scheduled to begin next week. Commission members say their top criterion for inclusion is whether a ticket has a "realistic" chance of winning. By that standard as by others, there ought to be no debate: Neither Ross Perot nor Pat Choate is a realistic -- or even plausible -- president of the United States.

Recent national opinion surveys show the Perot-Choate ticket drawing only 5 percent support -- a far cry from the 19 percent that Perot ended up with after his on-and-off campaign in 1992. What's more, monthly polls in crucial states where Perot and Choate's Buchanan-like message of economic protectionism ought to be popular show that Perot's support has been dropping like a stone. In Michigan, Perot's 19 percent backing in July fell to 10 percent in August and to just 4 percent in early September. Indeed, it's hard to envision any state where Perot-Choate could challenge Dole-Kemp or Clinton-Gore even for second place, and there may be some, like Alaska and California, where either Libertarian nominee Harry Browne or Green Party candidate Ralph Nader could outdo Perot for third place.

Perot's only hope for a chance at increased voter support is the commission. Just as with Nader and Browne, inclusion of any of the lesser candidates as equal contenders on the same stage with Bill Clinton and Bob Dole would represent such a gift of stature that any beneficiary would attract more supporters. Without such commission munificence, however, neither Perot nor Nader nor Browne could draw even high single-digit national support.

Numbers aside, though, there's also the question of just what sort of "party" Perot's personally owned "Reform" effort has shown itself to be. Look back a month at the unfair and undemocratic tactics with which Perot and his salaried henchmen treated the unwelcome challenge from former Colorado governor Richard Lamm. Perot had claimed that he and his party were looking for a new candidate, a "George Washington the second." But when Lamm stepped forward to seek the Reform nomination, it quickly became clear that Perot and his aides had no intention of allowing anyone but Perot to win the nod. Perot's staff refused Lamm access to party membership and mailing lists, and the party's failure to distribute ballots in a timely enough fashion so that Lamm supporters could vote for him over Perot left the entire "Reform" effort as little more than a blatant charade.

Perot may profess a commitment to democratic values, but the Lamm episode ought to raise the most serious questions about his political character. One recent national poll reported that 74

percent of respondents believe Perot does not possess the personality or temperament to serve as president.

Post reporter Donald Baker has highlighted how Perot refrains from any face-to-face campaigning among the general public, opting instead only for forums where Perot and his operatives can exercise maximum control. Indeed, there's been a remarkable absence of vociferous press complaint about the almost equally startling fact that Perot hasn't held even one single news conference in the past three years.

Perot's greatest embarrassment to date is his selection of Washington author Pat Choate as his vice-presidential running mate.

The notion -- and Perot's audacious assertion -- that Choate is even minimally qualified to serve as vice president or president of the United States is so sadly laughable that it ought to be treated with far more explicit outrage and derision than has yet been the case.

Ross Perot should not be considered a plausible contender for the presidency -- either by journalists or by the commission on presidential debates. For Perot as for Choate, there ought to be no debate.

The writer is author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning book "Bearing the Cross."