

Dr. Lenora Fulani and the Independence Party Welcome Ralph Nader to Harlem



**Emmanuel AME Church
October 23, 2004**

Dr. Lenora Fulani's Welcoming Address

At the beginning of this week, The Los Angeles Times reported on John Kerry's outreach to Black voters. The Times said, "many African Americans remain ambivalent about the Democratic candidate, despite their antipathy [that's a fancy word for being pissed off]...despite their antipathy towards George Bush." And a poll just taken by the Washington Post and ABC News showed that while nearly 80% of Black voters said they planned to vote for John Kerry, less than half of them were enthusiastic about his candidacy.

Sisters and brothers, this is an old story. Having compromised on fundamental issues of health care, of poverty, of the war in Iraq, of social justice and democracy itself, having compromised the things that Black America needs most desperately – the Democratic Party comes to us with the message that we must vote for them because we have no other choice.

This is the trap, this is the box that Black people are locked in. This is the box from which we must escape, if we are to have political power.

I founded the Independence Party in 1994 to spring us from that trap. It is my belief that all Americans, and particularly Black Americans, must have independent political connections and new ways of voting. We must reposition ourselves politically as a community. We must have new and diverse coalition partners. We must have the freedom to be independent.

I first ran for the presidency as an independent in 1988. At that time the corruption and decadence of the Democratic and Republican parties was just beginning to yield an independent movement. In my campaign, I brought forth two main messages. One was that America needed to open up its political process, that we had to break down the structural barriers that keep the American people locked into narrow ways of voting and narrow ways of thinking. The other message was that Black people – that you and I and millions of African Americans – young and old, poor and well to do – had to join the march to independence. We had to be a major voice, a leadership force – in the independent movement.

I have worked diligently, as have many others – some of them are in this room – to make that real. And we have. The Independence Party has tens of thousands of members and voters in the African American community. Dr. Jessie Fields, Barbara Pashay and I sit on the Party's State Executive Committee. In 2001, we polled 30% of the Black vote for Mayor Michael Bloomberg in a deliberate repudiation of the racialistic tactics of the Democratic Party.

My message to the Black community is a simple one. We've got to become political players. We've got to be positioned so that the political and economic and cultural power brokers deal with us – on our terms, on terms that help poor people and disenfranchised people. Every time you read something nasty about me or the Independence Party in the newspapers, take it as a sign that we've forced some players to the table. That's why the political establishment and its media mouthpieces can be so vicious. They don't like it when ordinary people, most especially ordinary Black people, exercise power on their own behalf.

The Democratic Party gets a lot of Black votes, but the Democratic Party doesn't represent Black people or poor people in the political game. The Democratic Party represents only itself. That's why we can't depend on it. That's why we must have the freedom to be independent.

In my two presidential campaigns, I spent a lot of time in Harlem. I remember one day vividly – in 1992 – over at Harlem Hospital, about 15 blocks away from here. I confronted presidential hopeful Bill Clinton about his refusal to stand up for the inclusion of insurgent candidates in the presidential debates. Mr. Clinton had come to Harlem looking for a photo op with Black folks. And he got one – though not the one he was looking for. The next day a photo of our exchange – with me standing on a chair – made the front page of many major papers across the country.

After I stopped running for president myself, it got harder to get independent presidential candidates to come to Harlem. In 1996, I tried to persuade Ross Perot to come and walk across 125th Street with me. I couldn't even get him to come to the phone. Still, I campaigned for him because I believed that as Black voters, we had to start showing our independence, whether the candidate came or not. In 2000, when I backed Pat Buchanan's bid for the Reform Party nomination, he pledged on national TV that he'd come to Harlem with me. You might have noticed he never made it – one of the many reasons I withdrew my support. Later that year, the Independence Party's presidential candidate John Hagelin did come, but the Hagelin campaign was a small campaign that did not attract much attention.

Actually it was in Harlem, in 2000, just a few days before the election that I first met Ralph Nader. I had asked Al Sharpton to host events for all the independent presidential candidates and he did – one for Mr. Hagelin and one for Mr. Nader. This was in the days when Reverend Sharpton was still keeping a toe in the independent waters, before he became a full-fledged, no holds barred John Kerry Democrat.

I didn't see Ralph Nader again until a little over three years later, when he spoke at a national conference that I helped to organize in New Hampshire – under the auspices of Choosing an Independent President 2004. By that time, Ralph had decided that if he ran again, he wouldn't run as the candidate of a single party. He'd run as an independent to bring together a new coalition of diverse voters and distinct elements of the independent movement.

I was very glad when Nader announced that he would run. I had watched the Democratic Party destroy the progressive anti-war candidate – Howard Dean – a process that unfortunately Reverend Sharpton played an active role in. But, Ralph Nader – a radical reformer with a long and distinguished record of fighting the big corporations on behalf of ordinary Americans – was running as an independent and that meant that poor people, that disenfranchised people, people of color, people against the outrageous war in Iraq, had

another choice. So I said to myself – Lenora, fasten your seatbelt! (And don't forget, Ralph made that possible!) I thought, it's going to be a wild ride. I endorsed him and worked hard to get the Independence Party line for his candidacy.

As soon as his campaign got underway, the Democrats became enraged. They were determined to drive Ralph out of the race, to throw him off the ballot, to bury not only him, but the entire independent movement. And who was on the front line of that anti-democratic effort? The Congressional Black Caucus – the CBC.

Ralph Nader met with the CBC in June. The plan for the meeting was to discuss issues of “mutual concern.” But rather than have that dialogue, rather than show respect for a man who has brought about more health, safety and environmental reform than any other individual in America, they screamed and yelled and even cursed at him. “We demand you drop out” some of them said, showing disrespect not only to Ralph but to us, to Black Americans. In my book, democracy means Ralph Nader runs and Black people get to decide for ourselves who to vote for. Isn't that what the civil rights and voting rights movements were about? Did Dr. King die so that we would have the right to vote...only for Democrats?

When I heard about the incident with the CBC, I was outraged. I wrote a strongly worded letter, a portion of which was quoted by Richard Carter in last week's Amsterdam News. My letter concluded with this – “If you” – I wrote to the CBC, “If you have difficulty hearing the message that the Democratic Party has abandoned and betrayed black people from a white man, so be it. You can hear it from me instead.”

Several months ago I had the opportunity to meet with Ralph. Harry Kresky and I sat and talked with him about where we've taken the Independence Party, about his fight – our joint fight – with the “liberal intelligentsia.” In that meeting, I told him about all of you. I told him that I wanted him to stand alongside me in the heart of Black America and say “I am your candidate.” I wanted him to see your faces and understand that we – like so many Americans – want the freedom to be independent. And so I asked him to come to Harlem. And he said yes.

Sisters and brothers, friends, independents and independent-minded citizens of all parties, we have a tremendous opportunity this year to take a giant step out of the slavery of the corporate duopoly and towards the freedom and power of political independence. We can use our votes to build, to grow our movement and to tell the world that Harlem – and Harlems all across America – are getting smarter, tougher and more demanding. That we're becoming political players. That we're getting more independent.

Please welcome the man who spends every day fighting for ordinary people and has been doing it for forty years.

Please welcome the Independence Party's candidate for President of the United States – Ralph Nader.