

Ralph Nader - January 24, 2002

CRASHING THE PARTY

Ralph Nader

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I wonder why there aren't more Commonwealth Clubs in other cities to develop civic forums the way your club has done. I like the word "commonwealth" because it involves what we own in common in the United States. The greatest wealth of this country is held in common; however concentrated private wealth might be in a few hands, the greatest wealth is in the public lands, the public airwaves, the five trillion dollars of public pension funds, the public works of our country and all of the government-funded research and development that has led to the emergence of so many industries, from aerospace to biotechnology. I think that word is going to come back into vogue. In the 80 or 90 years since it was in vogue we tend to have individuated our society to an extreme degree, which is another way of saying the powers that be like to divide and rule by over-individuating societies rather than emphasize what we own together.

If we knew and grew up learning about what we own together, in terms of public resources and knowledge, we might want to control more of what we own and let less of it be controlled by private vested interest, like the broadcasting and natural resource industries and their increasing concentration in fewer hands.

The political economy in our country is lathered with self-censorship, evasive inattention and an extraordinary and studied ability to submerge the reality to myth, symbols, slogans and jingles which reflect too much of presidential politics. Why I ran for president seems to be the obsessive focus of some Democrats in the country. The most important reason I ran is that civil society is being shut out of Washington, D.C. by two parties that increasingly look alike and whose similarities tower over the dwindling real differences that they are willing to contend over. If we focus on one or two of the real differences as the be-all and end-all of our allegiance to one or the other party, we won't recognize the magnitude of the similarities.

When citizen groups who try to improve things by working federal policies can't work – they're excluded, shut out, can't get through the doors, can't get congressional hearings or get agencies to respond because there are dollar signs on all these doors – citizen groups have three options: one, indulge their illusion and work harder and harder for less and less; two, close down; or, three, close down and go to Monterey and watch the whales. Another option is to go into the political arena, stop thinking that politics is sleazy, dirty, ineffective and listen to what Thomas Jefferson told us a couple of centuries ago: When essentially vested interests take over our government, use it for their parochial services, and/or turn it against its own people, we have to go into the political arena for fresh, new political effort, orientation and movement.

I and many others who worked hard to help coal miners get occupational safety standards, advance the research in areas of disease and trauma prevention, open up freedom of information in government, and improve the safety of motor vehicles and food safety in the 1960s and 1970s find we cannot accomplish these things today. Most of what we accomplished in the 1960s and 1970s would not even be introduced as legislation today. It would not be the subject of a hearing. I could not have gotten through today the auto safety law, which has saved over a million lives (although it's irregularly enforced) since 1966. Reporters don't cover it as a regular beat. The media have changed in that respect. You don't have the stalwart people commanding the committees in Congress, you don't have any receptivity in the White House and you don't have the levels of outrage by people around the country who supported the psychological infrastructure for members of Congress to do the right thing.

The Democracy Gap

We live in a country that has far more solutions than it applies and far more problems than it deserves. That is represented by the democracy gap. Corporations produce a lot of wealth, and democracy distributes and produces a lot of justice. When the two are out of sync and the corporate government dominates the opportunity for popular sovereignty and a deliberative democracy, then we have more and more solutions piling up and more and more needs and injustices unaddressed. It's inconceivable that a society of our plentitude can be stuck in traffic the way it has been, especially over the last two decades. We have millions of people literally stuck in traffic every day going back and forth because we allow the highway lobby to devastate the prospects for modern mass transit. (Demographics assert that Americans are experiencing longer life expectancy. I think that's a questionable assertion, if you subtract the years we spend in traffic.)

We are increasingly being disenfranchised, though the symbols of democracy remain. What influence do the American people have over foreign and military policy, federal reserve policy? Corporations, ever fewer and ever larger, with no allegiance to countries or communities other than to control them, are strategically planning our future. They are planning our economic, political, and educational future, our military policy future, our foreign policy future, our genetically engineered future, our privacy future. The modern corporation is an artificial entity that was the subject of great skepticism in the early 19th century. It receives its existence from state and federal charters – without which corporations cannot exist, with all their privileges and immunities and abilities to transcend into unfair contests, interactions with ordinary human beings, who cannot accumulate power and wealth and presence in thousands of places at once the way corporations can. Corporations are getting away with things today that the corporations of 50 years ago would never even dream of at the heights of their avarice. And corporations of 50 years ago were getting away with things that corporations of 1850 would never have conceived of.

The mass media expose corporate crime, defrauding of consumers on a systemic scale, poisoning of the environment, looting government resources, the conditions in our inner cities and nothing happens. Months later, there are still no investigations, no prosecutions and hearings. You know that the democracy is weakening seriously because these corporate abuses are impervious to exposé. That violates a very important principle: that the focus of sunlight is the greatest disinfectant, as Justice Louis Brandeis once said. In one decision in the 1930s, he also warned the states of allowing corporations to turn into Frankensteins in our midst. Remember Brandeis was a prominent corporate lawyer before he became a justice of the Supreme Court.

Lowered Expectations

Lots of good people who would ordinarily run for elections are not running because politics is so groveling and distasteful. Politics came out of Ancient Greece as an antidote to autocracy, as a purveyor of democracy. It's turned into a dirty word. Even politicians turn it into a dirty word when they dismiss an opponent's position by saying, "It's just politics."

People's expectation levels toward politics and government have reached perilously low levels. The difference between a cynic and a skeptic is that a cynic makes a diagnosis of society's abuses and withdraws, regaling in their intellectual sophistication. In withdrawing they create a vacuum and the vacuum is filled with rascals. A skeptic makes a similar diagnosis but roars back to change the conditions that fostered these abuses.

Examples of superior performance are not considered news. It is true Enron is very worthy of news. It is a supermarket of corporate crime, fraud and abuse. It is symptomatic of what

conservative George Will recently called a systemic problem in today's capitalism. In fact, if it is allowed to continue it will etch a chapter in American economic history that can be called "The Corporate Destruction of Capitalism," because capitalism is not supposed to be bailed out, it's not supposed to have a government guarantee. Capitalism is supposed to have competition. It's supposed to be challenged by new and established firms, and increasingly we have more monopolistic or oligopolistic control in one industry after another, and more merging of corporate interests with government services, such as corporate welfare in all of its manifestations.

The Least Worst

I announced my candidacy on February 21, 2000, in Washington. Every major television network was there. That evening there was no reporting of the announcement on any of the television networks except *CNN*. Although the subjects that we had dealt with for 35 years were subjects of considerable press attention and the subjects of our agenda, and although I campaigned before the largest audiences of any presidential candidate, and although I had very good contacts with members of the press, they refused to cover the campaign in a regular way. They covered it in feature way. The *Los Angeles Times* would say, "Gee, I wonder what the Nader campaign's doing? We haven't covered it for a couple of months. Let's send out a reporter." I met with editorial boards and they were very curious and very kind, and sometimes a reporter was actually there to write an article.

The other two major candidates were running in a two-party society where the assumption was that the country belongs to two parties and no other party, and if you wanted to challenge one or other of the two parties, you would have to learn how to climb a cliff with a slippery rope. There are so many obstacles beyond any obstacles that face small parties in other Western democracies. A political system that is not congenial to small parties is a political system that cannot regenerate itself any more than nature can regenerate itself if it doesn't allow seeds to sprout, or a business can regenerate itself if it doesn't allow innovators, entrepreneurs, and small business to sprout. Yet this kind of two-party, duopoly thinking has been ingrained in the minds of millions of Americans who are willing to be told, year after year, that you either stay home if you don't like the two parties or you trundle to the polls in a less than enthusiastic selection of the least worst. The least worst approach guarantees both parties get worse every four years.

The lesser of two evils – or the evil of two lessers – is not the direction that should guide American politics. I have criticized Democrats on Capitol Hill – which we now call "Withering Heights" – and the answer is almost always the same. When you criticize the Democrats on issue after issue, they lean forward and say, "Do you know how bad the Republicans are?" Here is a party that defines itself by the worst instead of defining itself by the best it can become. That's when you know that the corporate Democrats have taken over and marginalized the progressive Democrats, who represent a legacy that is the soul of the party.

I decided that I wasn't going to spend too much time bemoaning the lack of regular coverage. But in early summer of 2000, the headline in the "A" section of *The Washington Post* was, "Gore, family relax in North Carolina." I decided I better head to Vermont and flamboyantly relax and then maybe I'd get an article. The Nader/LaDuke candidacy received less than one percent of the money, less than one percent of media coverage and about three percent of the vote. We tried to campaign in a model way, called for by many editorials of many newspapers, who over the years have criticized the Republicans and Democrats for not campaigning forthrightly, honestly or interactively with the citizenry. We refused to take PAC money, soft money, business money. We mostly raised money by small contributions and some \$2,000 maximum contributions. We raised money by filling the largest arenas of the country with \$10, \$15, \$20 contributions, and we achieved some matching funds under federal law. We campaigned with the people instead of parading in front of them. We didn't go into the inner city for a photo opportunity. (As a matter of fact, we even forgot to ask the photographers to come.) We want to become even more creatively

indignant about the miserable lives people find themselves living with their children in the land of the free and the home of the brave, the most powerful and richest economy in the history of the world.

From the Inner City to the Everglades

In inner-city Hartford, up to 40 percent of children suffer from asthma. There are incinerators not far away. In South Central Los Angeles is a public housing project built on former oil refinery land, soaked with carcinogens. In the middle of this square, the children, mostly Hispanic, were running around and breathing the flares that came from a pile of dirt that was an unfinished remediation project from the city's attempt to do something about the contaminated soil. So many people died from cancer that they had a little memorial where they would lay some roses as every cancer death was carted away to the cemetery.

We campaigned with people trying to save the Everglades, trying to stop the coal barons from blowing off the tops of mountains, rumbling the rocks and debris and blocking the streams and scaring the dickens out of the villages in the hollows of Appalachia. We stood by the neighborhood groups in Boston, next to Fenway Park, who were protesting a proposed \$400 million tax subsidy for a new ballpark. The neighborhood had other ideas where that kind of money could be used, for the benefit of people other than sports megamillionaires. We marched with workers striving for a livable wage in Madison, Wisconsin, who are working for subcontractors at the university for six or seven dollars an hour before deductions in the cost of getting to work.

We campaigned in front of the New York Stock Exchange, denouncing city and state politicians who surrendered to the New York Stock Exchange demand that it receive over a billion dollars to buy land and build a new stock exchange about a block away. Here is this bastion of global capitalism demanding corporate welfare. They told New York City that they would not go across the river with the stock exchange and establish the Hoboken stock exchange if they received a billion dollars in taxpayer money.

There were virtually no commendations in the media. After a while we got the message: that we should not run any presidential campaign, we should leave it up to the two parties, we should just shut up. We cannot go to the polls in America and vote no. There is no binding "none of the above." If there was, I think sometimes it would win and it would cancel the candidates on that party line and order new candidates and new elections in 30 days. We only have the option to vote yes. We cannot vote in a proportional representation system so that more votes can count. We do not have the kind of mechanisms where new parties can have a chance to reach critical mass and become players on the political scene. If the German Greens can get more than five percent of the votes, they get five percent or more of the parliament.

Growing Up Civic

The democracy is weakening. The standard of living for most people is declining, according to the Department of Labor, after ten years of boom. In our country the majority of workers are making less in inflation adjusted wages than they made in 1973 or 1968. We have six million families without affordable housing. We have expanding homelessness, especially with more and more layoffs and the recession. We still have widespread hunger and malnutrition in our country. We have devastated our environment. We have exported a lot of jobs through 27 years of growing trade deficits. We have \$7.5 trillion of consumer debt, indicating that people certainly can't live on what they're making, and they're going deeper and deeper into debt. Yet these are not the

indicators that we hear from Alan Greenspan, George W. Bush or others who use corporate indicators, not people indicators, to measure economic progress or regress.

America is sliding backward, even compared with Western European countries, in motor vehicle fuel efficiency, in our public works, repair and modification. We're sliding backward in our greater energy dependence and greater energy scarring of the environment, in spending more and more money on health care without spending it on disease and trauma prevention. It's hard to face up to these things, to the 20 percent child poverty rate in the U.S. compared to the three percent in the Netherlands, where they think there's too much and they're trying to do something about it. There's a two percent rate in Scandinavia. Why is it that 40 years ago, after the rubble of World War II, these countries were able to give their people by law universal health care, full paid maternity leave and family sick leave, four weeks of paid vacation, 41 percent higher real wages for the lower one third of the workers compared to the U.S., decent public transit, adequate benefits, and rather nice facilities like libraries that don't close because of municipal budget restrictions while stadiums are built in spite of municipal budget restrictions? Why did they achieve these things many years ago, and yet we can't? Maybe we're not organized enough. Maybe we're too stratified. Maybe the people in this country who get their calls returned are too comfortable, and the people who aren't comfortable don't get their calls returned – and they're the majority. Maybe we've lost a sense of realizable futures. Maybe we're buying a lot of propaganda that is peddled through the mass media in all kinds of ways.

Whatever it is, we can forget about it if we resolve to engage in a new political direction, new civic institutions and do what we can do if we simply spend more time doing it. The amount of time people spend watching the Super Bowl amounts to 500 million citizen hours. That amount of time in 1993 would have given us universal health care. It's much more efficient, humane, inclusive, and universal health care does not cost more money. We are already spending \$4,200 per capita on health care, almost double what some European countries are spending – and much more than what Canada is spending, where it covers everybody from cradle through nursing home. It's a matter of taking that \$4,200 and developing a system that is not so administratively expensive and cumbersome and does not relegate so much of its assets to bureaucratic HMOs who really don't deliver medical care as much as they deliver customers.

Five hundred years before the birth of Christ, the Greek philosopher Heraclitus said that "character is destiny." One might add that "personality is decisive" for the capability of people building civic cultures. It is character and personality that spell the steady sense of commitment, that give recognition to others in similar endeavors, that enable growth and development of civic skills, perspectives, and frames of reference, that provide the necessary pauses for reevaluation, for improved strategies and modes of self-renewal, for keeping alert and alive the public's imagination of life's possibilities for human beings everywhere.

It is indeed the young who take the risks, who break new ground, who locate or create solutions to widespread needs, who think the unthinkable, who show how prevailing ideologies regularly lie to themselves through phony symbols and images. However, it is also the young who can be most dissuaded by a sensual, tempting corporate culture, who can be seduced into trivializing their lives and postponing their potential. As I have said to many college undergraduates, you have about fifteen thousand days or a little over two thousand weeks before you turn sixty-five. Whether you wish to relax and smell the roses after that age or continue making this a better world, there is little time to lose. Put your knowledge and your vision to work. Keep thinking of the valiant efforts from the past and the children of the future. Put your beneficent mark on your world. Become good ancestors. Let it never be said by future generations that, during your days in the sun, your generation declined to give up so little in order to achieve so much.

Key to public imagination is the conscious refusal to grow up corporate and the conscious need to grow up civic. When did we grow up corporate? We might be surprised at how thoroughly it has permeated our vision and our horizons. Have you ever seen a new car ad on television showing

congested traffic? Have you ever seen a new mass transit ad on television with people relaxing, reading the newspaper, chatting with one another on their way to work, parallel to a highway clogged bumper-to-bumper with trucks, vans and cars? After 40 years of this disparity, we can understand why modern public mass transit is not seen as a glamorous way to get around on the ground. It's true in our growing up not knowing what we own together as a commonwealth so that we can understand how we can better use it for the commonweal. Growing up civic is the liberation of the human mind and the facilitation of the greatest instrument ever devised to solve human problems, prevent injustices, foresee and forestall future perils and accentuate future benefits: a deliberative, working, daily democracy.

Answers to Written Questions from the Floor:

Q: Talk a bit about Enron and its relationship with the current administration.

A: Enron's board of directors failed, outside corporate law firms and accounting firms failed, and state and federal regulators failed. Half of the House of Representatives received contributions from Enron and 75 percent of the Senate did. The Bush administration is proud that, although last fall administration officials, such as the secretary of the treasury, got calls from Enron executives and their creditors, such as Citigroup, they did not try to bail out Enron. That was a wise political move rather than a demonstration of courage. But they didn't sound the alert. When the economic advisor and the special assistant to Bush and the secretary of treasury got these SOS calls, they should have said, "We had better get over to the Securities and Exchange Commission and the Justice Department and look into this." They did not, and for that they are culpable.

The Enron situation could be a great engine for accounting firm reform, pension plan reform, investor protections and more prosecutorial and law enforcement budgets. Twelve congressional committees are investigating. That doesn't mean that after they finish their high dudgeon histrionics that they will actually pass legislation. Both parties have their hands sticky; it's very easy for them to wrap it up without sending legislation to George W. Bush. It's up to us to contact our senators and representatives and let them know that we're watching this investigation and what kind of reforms will come out to protect future workers, pension holders and investors. If we just take ten minutes out and do that, we will register something that's being watched very closely on Capitol Hill, in every senate and representative office, which is, "Are we hearing from the folks back home? Do they care about this? Are they upset? Do they want us to do something?" If they don't hear it, this scandal is just going to be an episode in corporate history and a diversion of government attention.

Q: Will you run for governor here against Gray Davis?

A: In the interest of brevity, no. No governor in American history has raised more money for his political reelection than Gray Davis – \$36 million. That's about a million dollars a month. What is the effect of begging all kinds of vested interests for that money? I want to try to build the Green Party, get more candidates in, get more civic groups under way and find more leaders for the future – although it would be tempting to do successfully what Upton Sinclair narrowly missed doing in the 1930s. That was a great race. That could have changed the face of American politics. He was defeated by one of the dirtiest modern public relations campaigns in American history.

Q: Are there changes the Democratic Party can make that would persuade you not to run for president in 2004?

A: I wish I could say, If they adopted the Green Party agenda, which is very broad and deep. But you can't trust them to do that. A prominent person I've known for years said, "Would you drop out if the Democrats would hold a hearing on corporate power?" Talk about expectation levels.

Can they regenerate themselves? Yes. It will take a revolution of higher expectations that I don't think they're capable of. They need a civic jolt. They're going to be getting one increasingly. The Green Party did a great favor for the Democrats last year. Maria Cantwell was elected by the Green spillover vote. She won by 2,300 votes in the state of Washington, and the Green Party got 103,000 votes. There was no Green Party Senate candidate challenging her and Gorton, and there was a huge spillover. She recognizes that, as does the Senate leadership. That brought the Senate to 50-50, which set the stage for Republican Jeffords from Vermont to drop his Republican designation, go to an Independent designation and turn the control of the entire U.S. Senate in all the chairs, judiciary and otherwise, to the Democratic Party.

Q: If you had been elected president, how would your reaction to September 11 have been different?

A: In all due modesty, it would not have happened. For 30 years our aviation safety group has been pressing the airlines to adopt security standards, including toughened cockpit doors and latches, as some foreign airlines have done for years, and the airlines resisted and the FAA did not require it. That is the consequence of non-regulation and deregulation.

I would not have restricted civil liberties to the extent of the so-called U.S. Patriots Act. I would not have allowed corporations to blame everything on September 11 to get subsidies, bailouts and giveaways. I would have told the commercial militarists to back off and not press for hundreds of billions of dollars for weapons systems which are no longer required, even in the view of many retired admirals and generals who work for the Center for Defense Information. I would not have engaged in burning down a haystack in order to find needles which have not been found. I would have gone forward – this is a massacre and an international crime – in invoking the international doctrine of hot pursuit and, with a multilateral force, brought the backers of the attackers to justice in a court of law – as we did with mass murderers in Nuremberg after Nazi Germany was defeated – to expand the international rule of law and the use of law for deterrence as well as justice.

Q: The title for your next book should be *I Told You So*.

A: I have for years been remarking about developments that should be addressed. They weren't addressed and then they erupt and become big news, and we don't get invited to the hearing. There are members of Congress who have said, "You had better stay away from Capitol Hill." That was wise advice in light of the anthrax letters.

We have to recognize that people who do anticipate situations that happen should be given a little more credibility than people who are always falsely predicting, like Alan Greenspan in the last year, who gave a whole set of wrong predictions. We almost have a cultural freakishness operating where if you predict incorrectly or if you engage in wrongdoing you become a celebrity and are asked for more advice. The most sobering thing about *The Wall Street Journal* is that every few weeks, in a wonderful feature they ask investment analysts for predictions as to which stocks will perform better in succeeding months, and then they throw darts at the New York Stock Exchange companies in the newspaper. The darts win at least as often as the experts. These experts keep getting retained, and the darts don't even get put in the Smithsonian.