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Unsafe on Any Ballot–Ralph Nader Runs Again

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Many Democrats are convinced that Nader threw the election to George W. Bush in 2000, and they fear a repeat of that same pattern in 2004. Nader received over 97,000 votes in Florida alone in 2000—a state Bush eventually won by only 537 votes. So far as the Democrats see it, this time it's personal. Mitch Caesar, the Democratic chairman of Broward County, Florida, recently told the press: "If I met with him, I might strangle him."

Liberal commentator Jonathan Chait calls Nader "a selfish, destructive maniac." Former President Jimmy Carter offered Nader a bit of colorful advice: "Go back to umpiring softball games or examining the rear end of automobiles and don't risk costing the Democrats the White House this year, as you did four years ago."

"Oh the whining!," Nader replies. "The endless whining! The liberals are always whining! You know, scapegoating me is a sign of a decadent party, a party that whines instead of going to work."

Nader is running this year as an independent, while in 2000 he ran at the top of the Green Party's ticket. He may face difficulties getting on the ballot in all 50 states, but he is running above 5% in many national polls, so the Democrat's concern might be well grounded. In a close election, Nader could once again make a difference.

So why would a liberal like Ralph Nader risk sinking the Democratic ticket while running in an election he knows he can't win? The answer to that goes back to Ralph Nader's history, personality, and sense of mission.

Ralph Nader was born to Lebanese immigrants in 1934. By all accounts, he experienced a very normal childhood in Winstead, Connecticut, and enjoyed life in the midst of a loving and supportive family. A precocious boy, Nader showed early signs of intellectual promise—and a sense of mission. After high school, Nader went to Princeton University, where he quickly emerged as an iconoclastic student with serious academic aspirations. Nader specialized in economics and Far Eastern studies at Princeton, but his real interest was law. While driving one day near the Princeton campus, Nader had to slam on the brakes of his car to avoid hitting Albert Einstein, who was absent-mindedly crossing the street. "Imagine if the brakes had failed," Nader was later to reflect. The issue of automobile safety would later become nearly synonymous with Nader's name.

At Harvard Law School, Nader adopted Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis as his model, and associated himself with Brandeis' concern for the rights of workers and the underclass. Nevertheless, when Nader graduated with his law degree, there was no clear sign that consumer rights would be his main concern.

After a period of world travel—in which he would meet figures including Fidel Castro and Salvador Allende—Nader took a job working on the staff of Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who was then serving as assistant labor secretary. Moynihan had previously worked for New York Governor Averill Harriman, and had written a noteworthy article entitled,

“Epidemic on the Highways.” Moynihan assigned Nader the task of writing a report on highway safety, a project he completed without public attention.

Justin Martin, author of *Nader: Crusader, Spoiler, Icon*, explains that Nader got his chance for stardom when publisher Richard Grossman was looking for an author to write a book on automobile safety. Grossman connected with Nader, and Nader eventually wrote the book that catapulted him to fame: *Unsafe at any Speed: The Designed-In Dangers of the American Automobile*. As Martin explains, the book became “a blueprint for Nader’s approach to virtually every issue he tackled in years to come. Foremost, the book is a criticism of how large, unaccountable forces—the auto industry in this case—make decisions that affect the lives of individual citizens.”

Nader’s most fundamental argument was that the automobile industry had traded safety for profits, and had institutionalized a culture that hid design defects and dangerous flaws from the consumer. When Nader’s book attracted attention, members of Congress decided to hold hearings intended to investigate the automobile industry. Those hearings launched Nader’s public career, and his focused testimony and apparent mastery of technical facts largely created what became known as the consumer movement in America. Nader’s fame would only be multiplied when General Motors hired private detectives to investigate Nader, and eventually had to apologize for harassing him. In one of history’s strange turns, General Motors effectively made Ralph Nader—the company’s sworn enemy—a celebrity.

From that point on, Nader saw himself as a crusader for the consumer. He established a number of organizations and law firms intended to bring about a revolution in the law on behalf of consumers. He attracted a young generation of attorneys who became known in the media as “Nader’s Raders.” At one point, Nader could claim almost 1,000 young attorneys in his movement. From the 1960s onward, Nader became one of the most famous personalities in the nation, and a name almost always connected to controversy. In launching the consumer movement, Nader was known for tactics that included intimidation and questionable science. Some of the “improvements” he demanded were of questionable safety value.

Nader played with running for president in 1992 and 1996, but he launched his 2000 campaign as a crusade, running as the candidate for the left-wing Green Party. The Greens, first associated with a radical environmentalist movement, had gained some political traction in Western Europe, but the party had a very small hold on the American electorate. Nader was far more famous than the party, and the candidate and the party seemed to be locked in a symbiotic relationship.

In the early period of his career, Nader had been associated with the politics of the Democratic Party. Nevertheless, his crusading spirit, or what others would call his megalomania, eventually led to a break with the Democrats. He had attempted to forge a political alliance with Jimmy Carter just after Carter’s election in 1976. But Nader became disillusioned with both Carter and the Democratic Party, and moved increasingly leftward in following years.

By the time Bill Clinton was elected President in 1992, Nader was an outsider in Washington, and was generally unwelcome in Democratic Party circles. During the eight years Clinton served in the White House, Nader was never even invited to visit. At one point, he implored Vice-President Al Gore for an appointment, but Gore’s office never responded. When Gore became the Democratic nominee in 2000, Nader saw him as a part of the problem, rather than the solution.

Third party politics offer an interesting descant to the American political theme. Third party candidates have changed political history, though none has been elected president. Theodore Roosevelt cost William H. Taft the presidency in 1912 when he ran as the candidate of the Progressive Party, known commonly as the “Bull Moose Party.” Other significant third party candidates include George Wallace in 1968, John Anderson in 1980, and Ross Perot in 1992. Third party candidates generally run in order to make a point, and Nader’s point is that both the Republican and Democratic parties are far too beholden to corporate interests.

Nader is a true liberal, who is associated with positions far to the left of the American electorate. He has largely abandoned his early concern for consumerism in order to embrace a project of social revolution. He is one of the most secular candidates ever to run for the presidency, and he has accused President George W. Bush of being a “messianic militarist” who threatens to undermine our constitutional form of government. Nader especially objects to the President’s references to God, and has argued that the United States should have “a secular president who is supposed to keep his religious motives out of deciding whether or not to go to war.” Nader has never been married, has no children, and is an avid supporter of homosexual marriage and abortion rights.

Early in his life, Nader met and took inspiration from Norman Thomas, who ran for president six times as the Socialist candidate. Thomas once told Nader that his greatest achievement was “Having the Democrats steal my agenda.” Whether or not the Democrats steal Nader’s agenda, he is willing to steal the election from his former allies. His candidacy is a reminder that third party candidates can often make a difference. At the same time, most Americans will be relieved to know that Ralph Nader is never likely to live in the White House.

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