

Ralph Nader: Conservatively Speaking

The long-time progressive makes a pitch for the disenfranchised Right.

Ralph Nader recently accepted Pat Buchanan's invitation to sit down with us and explain why his third-party presidential bid ought to appeal to conservatives disaffected with George W. Bush. We think readers will be interested in the reflections of a man who has been a major figure in American public life for 40 years—and who now finds himself that rarest of birds, a conviction politician.

PAT BUCHANAN: Let me start off with foreign policy—Iraq and the Middle East. You have seen the polls indicating widespread contempt for the United States abroad. Why do they hate us?

RALPH NADER: First of all, we have been supporting despots, dictators, and oligarchs in all those states for a variety of purposes. We supported Saddam Hussein. He was our anti-Communist dictator until 1990. It's also cultural; they see corporate culture as abandoning the restraints on personal behavior dictated by their religion and culture. Our corporate pornography and anything-goes values are profoundly offensive to them.

The other thing is that we are supporting the Israeli military regime with billions of dollars and ignoring both the Israeli peace movement, which is very substantial, and the Palestinian peace movement. They see a nuclear-armed Israel that could wipe out the Middle East in a weekend if it wanted to.

They think that we are on their backs, in their house, undermining their desire to overthrow their own tyrants.

PB: Then you would say it is not only

Bush who is at fault, but Clinton and Bush and Reagan, all the way back?

RN: The subservience of our congressional and White House puppets to Israeli military policy has been consistent. Until '91, any dictator who was anti-Communist was our ally.

PB: You used the term “congressional puppets.” Did John Kerry show himself to be a congressional puppet when he voted to give the president a blank check to go to war?

RN: They're almost all puppets. There are two sets: Congressional puppets and White House puppets. When the chief puppeteer comes to Washington, the puppets prance.

PB: Why do both sets of puppets, support the Sharon/Likud policies in the Middle East rather than the peace movement candidates and leaders in Israel?

RN: That is a good question because the peace movement is broad indeed. They just put 120,000 people in a square in Tel Aviv. They are composed of former government ministers, existing and former members of the Knesset, former generals, former combat veterans, former heads of internal security, people from all backgrounds. It is not any fringe movement.

The answer to your question is that instead of focusing on how to bring a peaceful settlement, both parties concede their independent judgment to the pro-Israeli lobbies in this country because they perceive them as determining the margin in some state elections and as sources of funding. They

don't appear to agree with Tom Friedman, who wrote that memorable phrase, “Ariel Sharon has Arafat under house arrest in Ramallah and Bush under house arrest in the Oval Office.”

Virtually no member of Congress can say that, and so we come to this paradoxical conclusion that there is far more freedom in Israel to discuss this than there is in the United States, which is providing billions of dollars in economic and military assistance.

PB: Let me move on to Iraq. You were opposed to the war, and it now appears that it has become sort of a bloody stalemate. You said you would bring troops out of Iraq within six months. What if the country collapses and becomes a haven for terrorists? Would you send American troops back in to clean it up?

RN: Under my proposal there would be an international peacekeeping force, and the withdrawal would be a smart withdrawal during which there are internationally supervised elections. We would have both military and corporate withdrawal because the Iraqi people see the corporations are beginning to take over their economy, including their oil resources. And we would continue humanitarian assistance until the Iraqi people get on their feet. We would bring to the forefront during the election autonomies for Kurds, Sunnis, and Shi'ites. So this would not be like a withdrawal in Vietnam where we just barely got out with the helicopters.

TAC: You often mention corporations. What is the theory behind this or what

are the alternatives to corporate economic power? I presume you are not talking about state ownership or socialism, or perhaps you are ...

RN: Well, that is what representative government is for, to counteract the excesses of the monied interests, as Thomas Jefferson said. Because big business realizes that the main countervailing force against their excesses and abuses is government, their goal has been to take over the government, and they do this with money and politics. They do it by putting their top officials at the Pentagon, Treasury, and Federal Reserve, and they do it by providing job opportunities to retiring members of Congress. They have law firms that draft legislation and think-tanks that provide ready-made speeches. They also do it by threatening to leave the country. The quickest way to bring a member of Congress to his or her knees is by shifting industries abroad.

Concentrated corporate power violates many principles of capitalism. For example, under capitalism, owners control their property. Under multinational corporations, the shareholders don't control their corporation. Under capitalism, if you can't make the market respond, you sink. Under big business, you don't go bankrupt; you go to Washington for a bailout. Under capitalism, there is supposed to be freedom of contract. When was the last time you negotiated a contract with banks or auto dealers? They are all fine-print contracts. The law of contracts has been wiped out for 99 percent of contracts that ordinary consumers sign on to. Capitalism is supposed to be based on law and order. Corporations get away with corporate crime, fraud, and abuse. And finally, capitalism is premised on a level playing field; the most meritorious is supposed to win. Tell that to a small inventor or a small business up against McDonald's or a software programmer up against Microsoft.

Giant multinational corporations have no allegiance to any country or community other than to control them or abandon them. So what we have now is the merger of big business and big government to further subsidize costs or eliminate risks or guarantee profits by our government.

PB: Let's move to immigration. We stop 1.5 million illegal aliens on our borders each year. One million still get through. There are currently 8-14 million illegal aliens in the United States. The president is mandated under the Constitution to defend the States against foreign invasion, and this certainly seems to constitute that.

RN: As long as our foreign policy supports dictators and oligarchs, you are going to have desperate people moving north over the border.

Part of the problem involves NAFTA. The flood of cheap corn into Mexico has dispossessed over a million Mexican farmers, and, with their families, they either go to the slums or, in their desperation, head north.

In addition, I don't think the United States should be in the business of brain-draining skilled talent, especially in the Third World, because we are importing in the best engineers, scientists, software people, doctors, entrepreneurs who should be in their countries, building their own countries. We are driving the talent to these shores—

PB: How do we defend these shores?

RN: I don't believe in giving visas to software people from the Third World when we have got all kinds of unemployed software people here.

Let's get down to the manual labor. This is the reason the *Wall Street Journal* is for an open-borders policy: they want a cheap-wage policy. There are two ways to deal with that. One is to raise the minimum wage to the purchasing-power

level of 1968—\$8 an hour—and then, in another year, raise it to \$10 an hour because the economy since 1968 has doubled in production per capita.

PB: Say we went to \$10 an hour minimum wage. It is 50 cents an hour in Mexico. Why wouldn't that cause not 1.5 million, but 3 million to head straight north where they could be making 20 times what they can make minimum wage in Mexico?

RN: Because 14 million Americans are unemployed or part-time employed who want full employment or have given up looking for jobs. The more the minimum wage goes up, the more they will do so-called work that Americans won't do. They are not going to do it at \$5.15 an hour and have another used car, another insurance policy, another repair bill to get to work, but they are much more likely to do it at \$10 an hour.

The second is to enforce the law against employers. It is hard to blame desperately poor people who want to feed their families and are willing to work their heads off. You have to start with Washington and Wall Street.

PB: Should illegal aliens be entitled to social-welfare benefits, even though they are not citizens and broke into the country?

RN: I think they should be given all the fair-labor standards and all the rights and benefits of American workers, and if this country doesn't like that, maybe they will do something about the immigration laws.

PB: Should they be entitled to get driver's licenses?

RN: Yes, in order to reduce hazards on the highway. If you have people who are driving illegally, there are going to be more crashes, and more people are going to be killed.

PB: The Democrats have picked up on

Bush's amnesty idea and have proposed an amnesty for illegals who have been in the country for five years and who have shown that they have jobs and can support themselves. Would you support the Democratic proposal?

RN: This is very difficult because you are giving a green light to cross the border illegally. I don't like the idea of legalization because then the question is how do you prevent the next wave and the next? I like the idea of giving workers and children—they are working, they are having their taxes withheld, they are performing a valuable service, even though they are illegally here—of giving them the same benefits of any other workers. If that produces enough outrage to raise the immigration issue to a high level of visibility for public debate, that would be a good thing.

PB: The U.S. population now—primarily due to immigrants and their children coming in—is estimated to grow to over 400 million by mid-century. Would that have an adverse impact on the environment?

RN: We don't have the absorptive capacity for that many people. Over 32 million came in, in the '90s, which is the highest in American history.

PB: What would you do about it?

RN: We have to control our immigration. We have to limit the number of people who come into this country illegally.

PB: What level of legal immigration do you think we should have per year?

RN: First of all, we have to say what is the impact on African-Americans and Hispanic Americans in this country in terms of wages of our present stance on immigration? It is a wage-depressing policy, which is why the Chambers of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers, Tyson Foods, and the *Wall Street Journal* like it. The AFL-CIO

has no objection to it because they think they can organize the illegal workers—

PB: They switched.

RN: —because they have been so inept at organizing other workers. There is hardly a more complex issue, except on the outside of the issue, the foreign policy, the NAFTA—

PB: I was going to ask you about NAFTA and the WTO—

RN: Sovereignty shredding, you know. The decisions are now in Geneva, bypassing our courts, our regulatory agencies, our legislatures.

PB: I find it amazing that Congress sits there and they get an order from the WTO, and they capitulate. What happened to bristling conservative defiance, “don't tread on me” patriotism? I think the problem is that a lot of these guys in Congress—I think some of them are basically good guys. But I went up there and was asking about some issue, and they would say things like, “I don't even know what it is about. My boss tells me ...”

RN: Did you hear about my challenge to Senator Hank Brown?

We put a challenge out before WTO was voted in 1995 because we went all over Capitol Hill and had never found any Member of Congress or a staffer who had ever read the proposal. So I said, “I'll give \$10,000 to the favorite charity of any Member of Congress who will sign an affidavit that he or she has read the WTO agreement and will answer 10 questions in public.”

The deadline passed. Nobody. So I extended it a week. A quarter to 5:00 on Friday, the phone rings in our office. It is Hank Brown, and he said, “I don't want the \$10,000 to charity, but I will take you up on it. How much time do I have?” I said, “Take a month.” So he reserves the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for the interrogation.

It gets better. The press is all there, and in the witness chair is Hank Brown. We have 12 questions, and he answers every one. They weren't all simple either. It was really impressive. And I said, “Thank you very much. That was really commendable,” and we start to get up and he says, “Wait. I have something to say.” He says, “You know, I am a free trader, and I voted for NAFTA, but after reading the WTO agreement, I was so appalled by the anti-democratic provisions that I am going to vote against it and urge everyone else to.”

The next day, almost no press. It shows you the bias against anybody who challenges those multinational systems of autocratic governance that we call “trade agreements.” And he didn't convince one extra senator.

Once when I testified before the House Ways and Means Committee, I had to say some nice things at the beginning, “Mr. Chairman, distinguished Members of the House Ways and Means Committee, it is indeed a pleasure to testify before a committee of Congress that has read this proposed trade agreement,” and the chair looks up and says, “What makes you think we did?”

Let's put it this way: it is impossible to exaggerate the dereliction of diligence in the Congress.

PB: Can we move on to taxes? Reagan cut the top tax rate from 70 percent to 28 percent in terms of personal income taxes. Clinton raised it to 39.6. Bush has cut it back to 35 percent. What do you think is the maximum income-tax rate that should be imposed on wage earners?

RN: Zero under \$100,000. Now you got to ask me how I am going to make —

PB: What is the rate above \$100,000? What is the top rate?

RN: Then you have a graduated rate. Thirty-five percent, in that range, for the top rate. It comes down to the loopholes.

When it was 70 percent, did you ever meet anybody who paid 70 percent?

Now, where would I make it up? This is where the creativity comes in. I would move the incidence of taxation, first, from work to wealth. So I would keep the estate tax, number one.

PB: You restore the estate tax to 55 percent?

RN: That is a little extreme.

PB: That is where Bush has it, 55, and he is cutting it down gradually to zero. What do you think it should be?

RN: Again, 35 percent.

PB: Would this be on all estates?

RN: No. Estates above \$10 million.

PB: Ralph, you are not going to raise much money with this tax.

RN: There will still be a tax on smaller estates. I think all estates over, say, \$500,000 should pay some tax. The estate tax as a whole raises about \$32 billion a year, but the thing is the loopholes. Buffett, as an example, won't pay because all of it is going to his foundation.

I think we should have a very modest wealth tax. I agree with the founder of the Price Club, who thinks it should be 1 percent.

PB: One percent of your wealth each year would be turned over to the federal government?

RN: Right. Then the third shift is why don't we tax things we like the least? We should tax polluters. We should tax gambling. We should tax the addictive industries that are costing us so much and luring the young into alcoholism and tobacco and drugs. And we should tax, above all, stock and currency speculation.

PB: A short-term capital gains tax?

RN: Like a sales tax. If you go to a store and buy furniture, you pay 6, 7, or

whatever percent. You buy 1,000 shares of General Motors, you don't pay anything. So what we are doing is taxing food and clothing but not the purchase of stocks, bonds, derivatives, and currency speculation. A quarter-of-a-cent tax will produce hundreds of billions of dollars a year because of the volatility. You remember the days when 3 million shares on the New York Stock Exchange was a big day? Now it is 1.5 billion shares.

The point is this: work should be taxed the least. Then you move to wealth, and then you move to things we do not like. And you will have more than

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enough to replace the taxes of under \$100,000 income and to provide for universal health insurance and decent public transit and to repair the public-works infrastructure.

PB: So you have got a \$500 billion deficit now, and the early baby-boomer retirements start in 2008, and by 2012, the whole Clinton-and-Bush generation gets Medicare and Medicaid. These are the biggest payers into these so-called trust funds. They are also going to be the biggest drawers out, and 77 million of them retire in 2030. So how do you balance that budget?

RN: You repeal Bush's two tax cuts in 2001 and 2003. Then you get out of Iraq, and you cut the waste and the shenanigans out of the military contracting. That would more than take care of the deficit.

PB: You bring the troops home from Europe and Korea and the Balkans?

RN: We are presently defending prosperous nations like Japan, Germany, and

England, who are perfectly capable of defending themselves against nonexistent enemies.

PB: Let me move to the social issues. Would you have voted against or in favor of the ban on partial-birth abortion?

RN: I believe in choice. I don't think government should tell women to have children or not to have children. I am also against feticide. If doctors think it is a fetus, that should be banned. It is a medical decision.

PB: Between the woman and her doctor—

RN: And whoever else, family, clergy.

PB: Should homosexuals have the same right in law to form marriages and receive marriage licenses from the state as men and women?

RN: Yes, and if you had that, you wouldn't have to use the word "marriage." The reason "gay marriage" is used is because state laws connect certain benefits with that word. As a lesbian leader was quoted saying in the *New York Times* a few weeks ago, the issue is not the word "marriage." The word is "equality."

PB: Let's go to politics. If you had not been in the race in 2000, who would have won?

RN: That requires me to be a retrospective clairvoyant. If I wasn't in a race, would the Democrats have gone all-out to get out the vote in certain states because they were worried about the percentages I was drawing? And if I was not in the race, would Gore have made populist statements day after day—"I am for the people, not the powerful"—

which polls showed brought him more votes than if he went to Lieberman's semantic route?

Having said that, exit polls showed 25 percent of my votes would have gone to Bush, 38 percent would have gone to Gore, and the rest would have stayed home and not voted. A month and a half ago, a poll came from New Hampshire that showed that 8 percent were for me: 9 percent Republicans, 11 percent independents, 4 percent Democrats.

PB: If you hurt Bush more than Gore, why are the Democrats trying to keep you off the ballot?

RN: Because they will forever think that my progressive policies will take more Democrat votes and independent votes than they will take from the other side.

PB: If you got 15 percent of the vote this time, who do you think would be the next president of the United States?

RN: I don't know how it would break.

PB: Let me ask you about your ballot position because it was around this time that we were wrapping up getting on the ballot in all 50 states. How many ballots are you on right now?

RN: None yet, but we'll be on more than 43 states, which is the number we had last time. We want to get on them all. The problem is, we haven't concentrated on the easy states.

TAC: Is there any circumstance in which you can come to an arrangement with Kerry campaign not to run?

RN: The time to drop out is before you drop in. You cannot build a national campaign and get tens of thousands of volunteers working their hearts out and then in October feed the cynicism of American politics by cutting some sort of deal. The answer is no.

PB: What are the reasons a conservative should vote for Ralph Nader?

RN: Well, largely—

PB: Rather than Kerry.

[Laughter.]

RN: I'm not expecting conservatives to change their minds on certain issues that we disagree on, but if we look at the issues where we have common positions, they reach a level of gravity that would lead conservatives to stop being taken for granted by the corporate Republicans and send them a message by voting for my independent candidacy.

Here are the issues. One, conservatives are furious with the Bush regime because of the fantastic deficits as far as the eye can see. That was a betrayal of Bush's positions, and it was a reversal of what Bush found when he came to Washington.

Conservatives are very upset about their tax dollars going to corporate welfare kings because that undermines market competition and is a wasted use of their taxes.

Conservatives are upset about the sovereignty-shredding WTO and NAFTA. I wish they had helped us more when we tried to stop them in Congress because, with a modest conservative push, we would have defeated NAFTA because it was narrowly passed. If there was no NAFTA, there wouldn't have been a WTO.

Conservatives are also very upset with a self-styled conservative president who is encouraging the shipment of whole industries and jobs to a despotic Communist regime in China. That is what I mean by the distinction between corporate Republicans and conservative Republicans.

Next, conservatives, contrary to popular belief, believe in law and order against corporate crime, fraud, and abuse, and they are not satisfied that the Bush administration has done enough.

Conservatives are also upset about

the Patriot Act, which they view as big government, privacy-invading, snooping, and excessive surveillance. They are not inaccurate in that respect.

And finally, two other things. They don't like "Leave No Child Behind" because it is a stupidly conceived federal regulation of local school systems through misguided and very fraudulent multiple-choice testing impositions.

And conservatives are aghast that a born-again Christian president has done nothing about rampant corporate pornography and violence directed to children and separating children from their parents and undermining parental authority.

If you add all of those up, you should have a conservative rebellion against the giant corporation in the White House masquerading as a human being named George W. Bush. Just as progressives have been abandoned by the corporate Democrats and told, "You got nowhere to go other than to stay home or vote for the Democrats," this is the fate of the authentic conservatives in the Republican Party.

I noticed this a long time ago, Pat. I once said to Bill Bennett, "Would you agree that corporatism is on a collision course with conservative values?" and he said yes.

The impact of giant corporations, commercialism, direct marketing to kids, sidestepping parents, selling them junk food, selling them violence, selling them sex and addictions, selling them the suspension of their socialization process—years ago conservatives spoke out on that, but it was never transformed into a political position. It was always an ethical, religious value position. It is time to take it into the political arena.

PB: Well, it's a pleasure. Thank you very much for coming over, Ralph.

RN: Thank you very much. ■

Iran Builds a Bomb

Will joint U.S.-Israeli attacks be Bush's October Surprise?

By Eric S. Margolis

THE AVALANCHE OF BAD NEWS from Iraq has largely obscured another dangerous crisis boiling in the Mideast: the intensifying strategic confrontation between nuclear aspirant, Iran, and nuclear superpower, Israel.

Israel and Iran have been trading nuclear threats for almost a decade. In 1995, a senior Israeli military official called for pre-emptive strikes against Iran's nuclear reactor complex at Bushehr in a replay of the destruction in 1981 of Iraq's Osirak reactor by Israeli F-16s.

Three years later, Israel's then prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, warned that his nation "will not sit back in the face of the very serious strategic threat that Iranian missiles pose to us." Chief of Staff Shaul Mofaz amplified these threats, saying strikes against Iran "might be necessary to prevent Iran from deploying nuclear weapons and delivery systems." Iran's defense minister, Rear Adm. Ali Shamkhani, retorted that any Israeli attack would bring retaliation, "in a way Israel cannot imagine."

Pouring fuel on the fire, senior Iranian cleric Ali Rafsanjani called on Muslim nations to use nuclear weapons against Israel. Sounding much like Chairman Mao, Rafsanjani opined that the Muslim world could survive a nuclear exchange while Israel could not.

Since then, numerous senior Israeli military officials and their neoconservative Washington allies have been openly speaking of attacking Iran's expanding nuclear infrastructure. Lt. Gen. Mofaz repeated his threats to attack Iran in late 2003. Ominously, Israel's Mossad

reportedly stated that if Iran's nuclear weapons program was not forcibly halted by mid-2004, it could not be stopped.

Israel's prime minister, Ariel Sharon, who is said to have proposed to India in 1983 a joint attack on Pakistan's reactors, repeatedly warned of the dangers to Israel from Iran and called on the U.S. to "march on Tehran the day after it took Baghdad."

Israel is taking Iran's challenge very seriously: it is now deploying the U.S.-financed, \$5 billion Arrow-II anti-missile system designed to counter attacks by medium-ranged missiles from Iran (and, previously, Iraq) and, as well, the latest U.S. Patriot PAC-3 anti-missile version. Israel is developing, with Northrop-Grumman, a low-level laser system against artillery rockets and Scud missiles. Interestingly, Congress has been far more eager to fund anti-missile systems for Israel than for the United States.

The recent release of Israel's Man in the Iron Mask, Mordechai Vanunu, focused attention on a most unwelcome, highly taboo subject that the Bush administration seeks to avoid: Israel's large and growing nuclear arsenal.

For decades, Washington has either turned a blind eye to Israel's nuclear-weapons programs or covertly aided them. In an absurdity worthy of Samuel Beckett, the Bush White House long pretended that Iraq possessed nuclear weapons, which it clearly did not, while simultaneously pretending that ally Israel did not possess them, which it certainly did. The White House also denied

that North Korea had nuclear weapons, though the CIA affirmed that it did.

Vanunu, a technician at Israel's top-secret Dimona nuclear complex, fled to Britain in 1985 and revealed the existence of Israel's nuclear arsenal that he claimed numbered 200 nuclear warheads. Vanunu was lured to Italy by a female Mossad agent (or CIA agent, as he now claims), kidnapped by Israeli agents, tried, and condemned to 18 years in prison, 12 of them in solitary.

Israel's long-held policy of coy ambiguity over its nuclear arsenal suited both Jerusalem and Washington. Connoisseurs of intrigue believe Vanunu was buried alive in prison to prevent him from revealing the full extent of U.S.-Israeli nuclear co-operation at a time when Washington was preaching non-proliferation and Congress was threatening to cut off all U.S. aid to any nation developing nuclear weapons. Few members of Congress cared to commit political *hara kiri* by cutting aid to Israel.

During the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, Israel blackmailed the Nixon administration into delivering huge quantities of arms by threatening to use its nuclear weapons against Syrian and Egyptian forces. Moscow's warnings to Damascus that Israel was moving nuclear missiles and bombs out of storage caves was the reason victorious Syrian armored forces mysteriously halted their advance on the Golan Heights, which allowed broken Israeli forces to regroup and counter-attack.

Since then, little has been heard about Israel's nuclear arsenal. A barely-noted