

# RALPH'S WAY WILL HIS STRATEGY WORK? BY DAVID MOBERG MINNEAPOLIS

**K**atie Darkworth, a middle-aged, well-dressed Ohioan, dashes over to the easily recognizable, lanky figure walking through the airport in his rumpled blue suit. "Ralph Nader," she says enthusiastically, "I'm voting for you. I'm a registered Democrat, but I'm not voting for either Gore or Bush."

Nader thanks her and shakes her hand. That, in itself, is unusual. Although the renowned consumer advocate now running for president as a Green Party candidate has public recognition and respect that would make any politician envious, Nader tries to avoid being identified in places like airports. He is slow to shake hands with potential supporters and proudly declines to be photographed kissing babies. Clutching his file folders and newspapers, he's more at home with serious policy talk than idle chit-chat.

Though privately witty and amiable and publicly supremely self-confident, he can seem shy and certainly averse to dramatic self-promotion. "Turn down the klieg lights," he said disapprovingly at the start of a rally in Ann Arbor, Michigan, during a mid-September campaign swing through the upper Midwest. "This is not show business, after all."

Compared to George W. Bush—all smirk, no substance—or Al Gore, with his contrived bonhomie, Ralph Nader is the anti-politician. Yet many voters this year are drawn to his straight talk and principles. After nearly 40 years as a gadfly and consumer advocate who shunned electoral politics (until a symbolic presidential bid in 1996), Nader has now concluded that citizen groups have lost their ability to win without a drastic change in American politics.

By running for president, Nader hopes to build a new civic movement, a mobilization of a million citizen-activists who will not only make the Green Party an electoral force, but also revive the grassroots energy of past movements in America—from the anti-slavery abolitionists to the agrarian populists, the women's suffragists to the civil rights marchers. "This campaign is not about leaders producing followers," he told a crowd of 12,000 at the Target Center in Minneapolis on September 22. "This campaign is

about leaders producing more leaders. This campaign is about thinking, not slogans and photo opportunities. It is important to have beliefs, but it is important first to have some thoughts."

There is widespread popular support for much of Nader's core message—curbing corporate power, providing universal health insurance, taming globalization, public financing of campaigns, making public higher education free and strengthening environmental protection. Despite his limited funding and exclusion from the presidential debates, Nader was drawing high single digit support over the summer. After Gore's August transformation into a populist (thanks partly to Nader's threat), Nader's support dropped, though a September Harris poll gave him 6 percent of voters nationally. His relative success reflects his personal appeal, liberal discontent with Clinton and Gore, and the popularity of his program. But there are still serious doubts about his strategy even among those who admire him, agree with his policy goals and hope for a new anti-corporate movement.

**A**s Nader criss-crossed Wisconsin, Michigan and Minnesota on his "Non-Voter Tour," he packed auditoriums consistently with 1,000 to 2,000 people in Milwaukee, Madison, Ann Arbor, East Lansing and Flint—and he probably would have done so even without the help of celebrities like former talk show host, Phil Donahue, a longtime friend and admirer, or film and TV personality Michael Moore, who once worked for Nader. While students swelled the campus audiences, the crowds—especially in Minneapolis and Flint—also included unemployed workers and middle-aged investors, farmers and nurses, spiked-haired youth and balding lawyers. There were some alienated drop-outs as well as independents and even a few Republicans, but most were disenchanted progressive Democrats, supporters of figures like Jesse Jackson or Minnesota Sen. Paul Wellstone.

The typical Nader campaign speech is a rambling free association for an hour or more through a kaleidoscopic variety of issues, moving quickly from campaign finance reform to govern-

ment regulation, military contracts, corporate subsidies, income inequality, environmental degradation, civic education, corporate crime, workers rights and much more. But there is a consistent theme: "This election is all about power, the concentration of power in the hands of a few."

Corporate power has corrupted politics and culture, destroyed jobs, created inequality, and undermined the rights of citizens and workers around the world, Nader says. The two-party system in the United States is a "fraud," he insists. "They are not essentially different parties, but one corporate party with two heads and different makeup."

Nader inveighs against a host of corporate misdeeds, including "corporate managed dictatorial trade" (popularly known as "free trade"), "environmental violence" (as he says "pollution" should be seen), "corporate welfare as we know it" (like the public subsidies to the Texas Rangers' stadium that made Bush rich) and "brutalizing commercial culture" (that turns kids into a "generation of spectators"). He attacks "corporate crime" (that takes a far higher toll than street crime annually in death, injury and money lost from occupational disease, faulty products—like tires—and consumer rip-offs) and "corporate extremism" (in both political influence and business practices, such as redlining and usurious lending rackets). He denounces corporate agribusiness (destroying family farms and the environment), corporate control and abuse of public property (from the airwaves to the national forests), pharmaceutical companies (overcharging for drugs often developed at public expense) and military contractors (producing unneeded "gold-plated weapons systems"). The list goes on.

The answer, he insists, is developing "people power" to challenge corporate power, and the "key reform" is to adopt public financing of elections to minimize corporate financial influence on politics, "the boulder on the highway to justice."

While he dismisses Bush as "beyond the pale," Nader directs his most withering criticism at Clinton, Gore and Lieberman. Nader says Gore is a "political coward" suffering from "a serious character problem" who has shown an "extraordinary subservience to corporate power" and is "disgusting" in the way he panders to black church audiences while doing so little for their communities. In his eyes, Lieberman is an even more loathsome apologist for corporations.

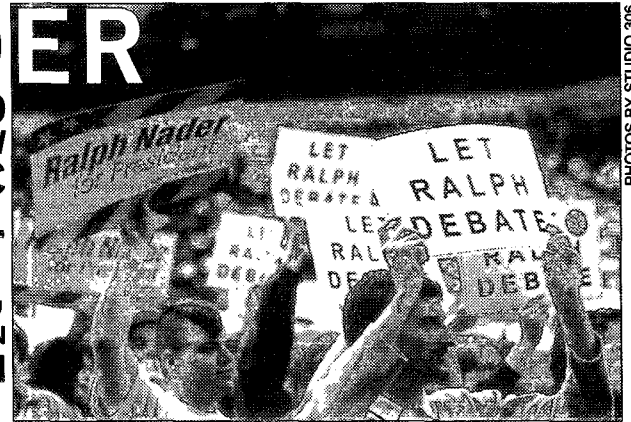
Brandishing a recent issue of *Business Week*, whose cover asked "Too Much Corporate Power?" ("yes," said three-fourths of those surveyed), he taunts the Democrats: "This magazine is to the left of the Democratic Party. Is the Democratic party making corporate power the cover story of the 2000 campaign?"

Oddly, apart from some of the denunciatory rhetoric, much of what Nader advocates was in the mainstream of the Democratic Party not so many years ago—and is standard practice in most of Western Europe. His answer to poverty is adoption of a "social wage," universal health insurance, higher minimum wages, and free public higher education. He also wants more public investment in transit, promotion of solar energy, reconstruction of the cities (including affordable housing and community policing) and a strengthening of trade unions. Like most European governments, Nader advocates treating drug abuse as a health problem, not a crime, and opposes the death penalty.

Nader's overriding attention to corporate power, class and broad social democratic solutions has provoked some criticism that he has ignored racism and issues of gays and feminists. On his Midwest tour, especially in a Milwaukee press conference with some local African-American and Latino leaders, Nader addressed some black community issues, like police misconduct, the war on drugs, capital punishment and environmental racism. But he also insists "it is a mistake to concentrate on race and not class, or class and not race. There's a mutually reinforcing vicious circle of race and class."

Typically, Nader adopts solidly progressive views on social policy but emphasizes issues of social class and power. When asked about gay rights, he says simply that he favors "full equal rights and responsibility across the board." He rarely mentions abortion rights, which he supports, "for the same reason that I don't talk about rights to public accommodation—it's a settled issue." He argues that Bush knows any attempt to overturn *Roe v. Wade* would doom the Republican Party because popular support for abortion rights is so strong.

## NADER HOPES TO BUILD A NEW CIVIC MOVEMENT, A MOBILIZATION OF CITIZEN ACTIVISTS.



PHOTOS BY STUDIO 306

Most criticism from liberals and progressives, however, is directed at Nader's strategy, including his argument that the Democrats and Republicans are virtually identical on most major issues (with the exception of abortion and gun control). Assuming that one of them will win, the argument goes, Gore is better than Bush. Nader (and his advocates) offers a variety of disparate rejoinders: Voters should vote their hopes, not their fears, and follow their conscience. Or the party differences are just rhetorical and not really significant. Or Gore will win anyway, so don't worry. Or Bush isn't Genghis Khan, but a Republican moderate. Or if Bush wins, Democrats will put up a more progressive fight than they will with a conservative Democratic president. These arguments, taken together, are not completely consistent, but there is arguable plausibility to most of them. They don't, however, constitute a strategy.

Nader's conviction that the Democrats are now no different from the Republicans grew out of his battles over the global economy. "I think the real turning point was NAFTA and GATT, when they put it to organized labor, which has been the cause of one Democratic election after another," he says. "And when they refused to exert any war-room mentality on behalf of public funding of public campaigns, I knew it was over."

But the problem in each case was Clinton, not all of the Democrats. On NAFTA and other trade legislation, the majority of House Democrats have often opposed the president. Indeed, Nader at times praises Democrats like North Dakota's Byron Dorgan or Michigan's David Bonior and claims that House Minority Leader



Richard Gephardt acknowledges that Nader's campaigning might help the Democrats gain control of the House. It often seems that Nader's real fight is with the conservative Democratic Leadership Council, but he sees no hope for winning that fight without the credible threat of liberals going somewhere else, just as conservative Democrats can threaten to go to the Republicans.

At an editorial meeting of the *Capital Times* in Madison, Nader talks about his encounter as a Princeton undergraduate with longtime Socialist presidential candidate Norman Thomas. Hinting at his own possible strategy, Nader recounts asking Thomas his greatest accomplishment, to which Thomas replied, "having my agenda stolen by the Democratic Party." Yet Nader, who argues the Democratic party is irremediably corrupt, also talks about leading the Greens into a "death struggle" with the Democratic party to determine which will be the majority party.

**W**hile riding between campaign stops in Michigan, Nader talks at length about how he saw the campaign fitting into his long-term vision for American politics. Although he argues that Democrats who share his views should think strategically and vote for him in states where either Bush or Gore is far ahead (say Texas or New York, respectively), Nader rejects the corollary that people should vote for Gore in states where the race was close. "If you ask me," he says, "I wouldn't vote for Gore under any circumstances."

He acknowledges that if he were voting in the district of a progressive Democrat congressman, like Rep. Henry Waxman of California, he would support Waxman. Then again, if there was a Green candidate, even a weak one, he said he would vote against his longtime ally. "There's an overriding goal here, and that's to build a majority party," he says. "If you're going to build a new party, you go all the way."

"I hate to use military analogies," he continues, "but this is war on the two parties. After November we're going to go after the Congress in a very detailed way, district by district. We're going to beat them in every possible way. If [Democrats are] winning 51 to 49 percent, we're going to go in and beat them with Green votes. They've got to lose people, whether they're good or bad. They've got to lose people to be put under the intense choice of changing the party or watching it dwindle."

Is his goal to reform the party? "That's their option," he says. "They can dwindle us by really taking our issues and implementing them. That's the kind of competition I want. If they want to have a massive drive on corporate crime and take that issue away from us, fine."

Nader is willing to sacrifice progressives like Russ Feingold in Wisconsin or Wellstone, though he also believes that the Green threat will give them bargaining power within the Democratic Party. "That's the burden they're going to have to bear for letting

their party go astray," he says. "It's too bad. It isn't that we haven't given them decades, and they got worse and worse. It isn't like we have a choice. Every four years they get worse."

But can the Green Party really become more than just an irritant to the Democrats? Currently the party consists of an association of state parties, some independent state parties, and a small Greens/Green Party USA that are trying to settle their ideological differences—plus the Nader campaign apparatus. Nader, however, is not a member of any Green Party and doesn't intend to join (a stance shared by Michael Moore). "I don't want to get involved in intraparty disputes," Nader says, claiming he can build the party better by attacking corporations and opponents and trying to recruit good people. "I can't stand the loss of time that's involved there. If I was a Green Party member, I'd have to take sides internally. I want to focus it externally on the adversaries."

In Nader's vision, the Green Party can succeed by recruiting a million people who each contribute \$100 a year and 100 hours of their time to build a "civic action" party that fights on issues in between elections, allying with labor and community groups and building storefront offices to help consumers. It sounds appealing, but there are probably fewer than a million highly active members in all existing progressive organizations. They're all flawed, Nader responds. Community groups have been "self-limiting" because they shun electoral politics, he

argues, and electoral efforts like the New Party rely too much on building up from the local level without a national presence. In any case, he says, "if the level of discontent that I see around the country doesn't amount to a million people willing to make a modest commitment, then we don't have what it takes in this country. I want to put it to that test."

"The only way you can fight corporate power is on all fronts," Nader says. "It's no more possible to fight just as an environmental or consumer group. You've got to grab away the media from them with a media strategy. You've got to fight them electorally. You've got to fight them with international mobilizations. You've got to fight them the way we beat the MAI [Multilateral Agreement on Investment] on the Internet. You've got to fight them with shareholder actions ... [and] with repealing Taft-Hartley. Every conceivable way, that's the only way it can be done."

While Nader doubts the Democrats can be reformed, he also argues that the Greens will indirectly help progressive Democrats. "If this party is capable of internal reform," he says, "then everything we're doing is helping the dissidents and the rebels, because they'll say in year 2002 that Gephardt may lose the House because of Green Party candidates. Think of the different kind of struggle where the progressive forces in the Democratic Party going up on Capitol Hill can tell the corporate Democrats that they're going to lose voters because they have a place to go."

Nader hopes that in districts where one party now rules with little contest, the Greens can enter and become the major opposition

## "THE ONLY WAY YOU CAN FIGHT CORPORATE POWER IS ON ALL FRONTS."



# Ralph Nader: We Can Do Better

By David Brower

I voted for Ralph Nader for president in 1996. By my own reckoning, the first term of Bill Clinton and Al Gore had already done more environmental harm than the 12 previous years of Reagan and Bush. We knew that Ralph Nader's campaign would be token, but we wanted to establish the idea of voting for what we want, not what we least don't want.

Since then progressive trade unionists, environmentalists and human rights activists have demonstrated the capability to create a new political movement in this



country and across the globe. My own participation in this movement began in early 1999, when I helped the United Steelworkers found the Alliance for Sustainable Jobs and the Environment (ASJE). This alliance is best summarized by the Steelworkers' David Foster: "If you will promise to make sustainable jobs a product of environmental protection, we will promise to make environmental protection our most important job."

ASJE marched in Seattle along with tens of thousands of union members, environmentalists, and human and animal rights activists. Shutting down the World Trade Organization meeting was just the beginning. This much publicized but too little understood public uprising last November marked a turning point for progressive activism in America, yet it remains a political orphan in this election year. Subsequent rallies in Washington, Philadelphia and Los Angeles have only strengthened our movement in spite of the increasingly unconstitutional crackdown on nonviolent organizers. Are the people who marched (or know they should have) and withstood police brutality to stand up for their convictions willing to swallow all that pride and vote for Al Gore, a pro-death penalty, pro-globalization candidate swimming in corporate cash? I wouldn't bet on it.

It's not enough to protest in the streets, we also need champions in the halls of power. We need to have a

way to express, through the ballot box, both our dissatisfaction with our current political choices and our firm optimism that we can do better, that we must do better.

In this election, Ralph Nader and Winona LaDuke provide a unique and wonderful opportunity to register that electoral expression. Are there risks in this strategy? Of course.

But what about the risk of continuing to hold our collective nose and vote Democratic? *Global Environmental Outlook 2000*, a three-year study by the U.N. Environment Program, recently warned of mounting evidence that human beings are seriously destabilizing the nitrogen balance, a problem that could make fresh water supplies unfit for human consumption. The document states that 80 percent of the world's forests have been destroyed or degraded, 25 percent of all mammals are at risk of extinction, and greenhouse gases have quadrupled in just four decades. Do you think these trends reversed or even slowed during the blind growth of the Clinton-Gore years? Think again.

Rather than attempting to meet these undeniable challenges, both parties ignore them and remain unwilling to stand up to the oil, timber and mining barons causing so much of the damage. Our friends in the Democratic administration passed logging without laws, weakened marine mammal protection, extended the use of ozone-destroying methyl bromide and reversed the ban on PCBs. And this is the lesser of two evils!

Perhaps worst of all, this administration passed GATT and NAFTA, trade agreements that hand our environmental laws over to non-elected tribunals that meet in secret. Al Gore says he is for strong environmental laws (including many written by Nader), yet he champions a trade body with the power and propensity to remove these same protections.

Gore's trump card in this election is the strong economy. But what he calls a great economic boom is in truth a global liquidation sale. Gore and his even less-worthy opponent both demonstrate a failure to grasp the essential fact that the earth's natural capital (the life-supporting ecosystems) is being sold off for cash.

Ralph Nader understands this. He also understands that you don't shrink from challenge and let great opportunities pass you by. *In These Times* editor Joel Bleifuss recently urged progressives to vote for Gore, then start building "an independent political force" (see "Let's Win This One First," September 18). This is nonsense. The time to build a new political force is *during* an election campaign, when people are paying attention, when we have an American hero like Ralph Nader as our candidate. Once Gore is in office, our ability to pressure him will be greatly enhanced if we win a sizable vote in the election. If we capitulate again just to "win this one," we will be (and deserve to be) laughed off by the Democratic Leadership Council-dominated corporate pawn that is the Democratic Party today.

Don't sell your soul to fear in this election. Choose hope and vote for a future that is unpredictable, rather than the downward spiral we can see plainly in front of us. After all, risk is the spice of life, variety is just the meat and potatoes. Vote Nader, and begin to create a future you can really believe in. □

David Brower is past president of the Sierra Club and the founder of Friends of the Earth and the Earth Island Institute.