



The First Stone *By Joel Bleifuss*



DARREN MCCOLLESTER/NEWSMAKERS

Is He Totally Crazy?

WHEN RALPH NADER announced on "Meet the Press" that he would run as an independent for president, Tim Russert noted that there had been an orchestrated campaign to persuade him not to run. He pointed to the Web site www.ralphdonotrun.net that features a video clip that says in part: "The simple fact is if Nader had not run, Gore would be president, not Bush." The video concludes, "Visit Ralph Nader's Exploratory Committee Web site and send the message: Ralph, please don't run."

To which Nader responded, "That is a contemptuous statement against democracy, against freedom, against more voices and choices for the American people."

On the day Nader declared his candidacy, my son Adrián was in New York attending "Life After Bush: Youth

Activism and the Fight for our Future," a conference sponsored by the Democratic Socialists of America. He called me and asked, "Is he totally crazy?"

I paused. No, Nader is not totally crazy. Few people are, but ... dare I write more?

In 2000, *In These Times* opposed Nader's third-party strategy as wrong-headed. I wrote in a September 5, 2000, editorial:

While the Democrats are far from perfect, there is a difference between them and the Republicans. That difference makes a difference, maybe not to the well-being of middle-class Nader supporters, but certainly to those people whose quality of life depends on federal programs.

As a result of that and other coverage, a number of readers canceled their subscriptions and some donors closed their check books. On no subject has *In These*

Times received such a barrage of letters.

Four years later, and here we go again. Make no mistake about it, Nader can be rhetorically eloquent.

Explaining to Russert why Bush should be impeached, Nader asked is there "any better definition of high crimes and misdemeanors in our Constitution than misleading or fabricating the basis for going to war, as the press has documented ad infinitum?"

His denunciation of the corporate control of Washington was refreshing, particularly given the venue of a network news show. "There's just too much power and wealth in too few hands, increasingly giant corporation hands that have no allegiance to our country or our communities other than to control them or to abandon them. They have taken over Washington. Washington is now a corporate-occupied territory."

So what is he up to? A key can be found in deconstructing the language of his interview with Russert.

First, let it be clear that the disagreement between Nader and thinking progressives is solely over political strategy. "The liberal intelligentsia ... agrees with almost all our positions," said Nader. He could have said, "I agree with almost all the liberal intelligentsia's positions." Yet that change in subject and object would have required that he drop the royal first person plural and subordinate his ideas to the realm of progressive common sense, both of which would make him and his positions sound a little less special.

Nader deftly turns criticism of his strategy into an attack on his noble ideals—a tactic that works well if you don't think too closely about what he is saying. For example, when Russert asked Nader to respond to the charge that "he's going to be a spoiler because of his ego," Nader replied, "A spoiler is a contemptuous term, as if anybody who dares to challenge the two-party system and corrupt politics and broken politics and corporate power is a spoiler."

Come again? "Spoiler" is a term used when speaking about elections. Such as, "Remember that weird Texan with the big ears who spoiled the election for George Bush senior in 1992?" Or, "Remember that self-righteous Washingtonian who spoiled the 2000 election for Al Gore, who at this point in a presidency could have named 211 judges to lifetime appointments on the federal bench?"

And what about that war in Iraq? Russert asked Nader, "Do you believe that Al Gore would have invaded Iraq?" Nader responded, "He would have. I think he was a hawk." Well, whatever helps you sleep at night.

When it comes to how to forge political change Nader's thinking gets downright muddled. Speaking of those who contemptuously call him a spoiler, Nader told Russert:

These people are well-meaning people who agree with us on many of the issues, but they're hostages to an antiquated Electoral College winner-take-all system that blocks all the way to excluding candidates from the debates, blocks any kind of voices, any kind of competition, and we've got to fight that. ... You've got to fight it

from the inside ... and that's what I'm trying to do.

Huh? Where exactly on the inside is Nader? The Beltway?

He seems to have wandered too long in the wilderness of Washington-based public-interest groups. He understands that terrain. He discovers a threat to public well being, be it a dangerous Corvair or the emergence of a corporate oligopoly. He exposes the danger. And then, invoking all that is decent and human, demands that the wrong be righted.

So Nader now has a hankering to fix the systemic flaws in our electoral process. Yet as far as electoral politics go, he hasn't got a clue. The near-total lack of support his candidacy has received from people who have run for and then actually been elected to office would humble lesser mortals.

Those who question the wisdom of his strategy he slams as "liberal intelligentsia," accusing them—or should I say us?—of wanting "to block the American people from having more choices and voices, especially young people who are looking for idealism, who are looking for a clean campaign, who are looking for the real issues in this country."

In other words, he's doing it for the children. And what will those "young people" find in Nader's campaign? Idealism? Or a thoroughly disillusioning lesson on how the electoral system is stacked against third-party efforts? After all, they don't call it a two-party system for nothing.

Since its founding by James Weinstein in 1976, a cornerstone of *In These Times*' editorial policy has been the understanding that, historically and systemically, third parties—however desirable—are not a viable political option in the United States.

Yet time and again, progressives in America engage in the quadrennial exercise of hitching their wagon to the latest progressive star. Recall 1980, when Barry Commoner made an independent run for president under the Citizen's Party banner.

At the time, Weinstein editorialized:

Both in theory and as a practical matter, the primary emphasis on presidential politics is a dead end. ... As a matter of practical politics, the only hope the left has of electing progressives to office is on the scale of a legislative election, ei-

ther to state legislatures, city councils or Congress. ... The road to power—and in the short run, to popular agitation around progressive principles—lies first through the legislature.

Ralph Nader might heed Weinstein's words and devote his considerable charisma, eloquence and financial resources to helping build electoral coalitions at the congressional level to elect 10 Representatives who would then join the Congressional Progressive Caucus.

This issue of *In These Times* features a new column, "House Call," which we are establishing at the instigation of Rep. Bernie Sanders, Vermont's at-large member of Congress. "House Call" will present periodic reports from members of the Congressional Progressive Caucus. Sanders, through grassroots organizing and coalition building, repeatedly has been reelected as the only independent in the House. He told me he was concerned that people, particularly young people, have become disillusioned by electoral politics because they don't realize that good progressives can be elected to Congress. And he said they lack such role models because members of the Congressional Progressive Caucus are not given a voice in the mainstream press. They will have one in *In These Times*. ■

The Unscripted President



"Agent Orange? One of our finest intelligence operatives in Vietnam. I met him in Alabama..."

KITCHENTABLE CARTOONS



Who Owns the Sky?

Reviving the Commons

BY DAVID BOLLIER

FORMER INTERIOR SECRETARY WALTER HICKEL ONCE EXPLAINED: “If you steal \$10 from a man’s wallet, you’re likely to get into a fight. But if you steal billions from the commons, co-owned by him and his descendants, he may not even notice.”

Not since the Gilded Age of the 1890s has so much public wealth been shoveled into private hands with such brazen efficiency. Timber companies, corporate ranchers and foreign mining companies with cheap access to public lands are plundering our national patrimony. Congress obligingly turns a blind eye to the accompanying pollution, soil depletion and habitat destruction. Companies are rushing to patent our genes, privatize agricultural seeds and stake private claims on plots of the ocean. Broadcasters—who for decades enjoyed free use of the public’s airwaves, a subsidy worth hundreds of billions of dollars—are attempting to exploit an equivalent amount of electromagnetic spectrum for digital TV. We the taxpayers pay billions of dollars to sponsor risky path-breaking federal drug research, research that too often is given away to pharmaceutical

companies for a song. Then we pay a second time—as consumers, at exorbitant prices—for the same drugs.

And so on.

The privatization of public resources is not a new story, to be sure, but the current rapacity is truly stunning. Much of the immediate blame must go to the Bush administration, which has rewarded corporate contributors with one of the most sweeping waves of privatization and deregulation in our history. But while Republicans are the most aggressive cheerleaders for privatization, many Democrats equally enthuse about the “free market” as an engine of progress and deride strong government stewardship of resources.

This bipartisan support is why fighting privatization is so difficult. American political culture has a strong faith in the efficacy of markets and skepticism in the competence of government. Critics bravely cite individual episodes of privatization gone bad, but there is