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**HUFF
POST** **POLITICS**

Ralph Nader's War

Earlier this month Ralph Nader spoke at a protest rally outside the White House demanding an end to US occupation of Iraq. I know that Nader was an early and vocal opponent of the war. But I wonder if he ever considers his own responsibility for this tragic war. Without Nader, there'd have been no President George W. Without George W., no war in Iraq.

Nader has been hinting that he's considering another presidential run in 2008, especially if Sen. Hillary Clinton wins the Democratic Party nomination. You'd think that by now Nader would feel some remorse for helping elected George Bush in 2000 and wouldn't want to make that mistake again. But Nader doesn't seem to have learned much from that experience.

I am still angry at Ralph Nader for all the damage that George Bush has done to my country. This also makes me very sad, because for years I believed that Nader was one of the greatest Americans of the 20th century. In fact, it wasn't that long ago, in introducing Nader at a forum on my campus, that I called him one of the 10 most important Americans of the past 100 years. I put Nader in the same league as Jane Addams, Walter Reuther, Martin Luther King, and Cesar Chavez.

Beginning in 1965 with the publication of his expose of the auto industry, *UNSAFE AT ANY SPEED*, and for more than 30 years after that, Nader inspired, educated and mobilized millions of Americans to fight for a better environment, safer consumer products, safer workplaces, and a more accountable government. Thanks to Nader, our cars are safer, our air and water is cleaner, and our food is healthier.

We have Nader to thank for seat belts and air bags. He was a key player in changing America's attitude toward nuclear power -- and why we stopped building nuclear power plants. Nader is more responsible than any other figure for some of the most important changes in recent American history. These include the Freedom of Information Act, the Clean Air Act, the Safe Water Act, and the Superfund law that requires the cleanup of toxic waste sites. Political observers credit Nader with getting Congress to create the Environmental Protection Act, the Consumer Product Safety Commission, and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

Nader built a network of organizations to research and lobby against corporate abuse. These include Public Citizen, Globe Trade Watch, Congress Watch, the Health Research Group, the Center for Auto Safety, and the Center for Responsive Law. He also started a network of campus-based organizations called "PIRGs" -- Public Interest Research Groups -- that over the years has trained thousands of college students in the skills of citizen activism. He has also written dozens of books -- all focusing on how citizens can make America a more democratic society.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Nader topped most public opinion polls as the nation's most trusted person. Had Nader retired in the early 1990s, his reputation and legacy as one of American history's most effective leaders would have been secure.

But then Nader got the political bug and decided to run for president. He did so in 1996 and 2000 on the Green Party ticket, and in 2004 as an independent. Because Nader sees both the Democratic and Republican parties as essentially the same -- as tools of corporate America -- he chose to run as a third party candidate. He claimed that his campaigns would help build a permanent progressive third party that could contest for power. But it never happened, mostly because America's winner-take-all rules make it virtually impossible for third parties to gain traction, but also because Nader never devoted himself to the hard work of party-building. (Remember that billionaire Ross Perot, running as a third party candidate in 1992, didn't win a single electoral vote). Instead, Nader simply marginalized himself as a figure in American politics.

Nader could have adapted another strategy that would have been more effective. Had he run in the Democratic Party primaries, he would have helped shape the debate and gotten considerable TV and radio air time on the debates. He wouldn't have won the nomination, but he could have helped strengthen the progressive wing within the party. This is the role Jesse Jackson played in 1988 and 1992 and that Dennis Kucinich, who has much less name recognition than either Jackson or Nader, is playing this year. This is also the approach that MoveOn has adopted with considerable success. We might call this a "party within a party" strategy, much like the corporate-backed Democratic Leadership Council used to move the party to the business-friendly center.

During his 2000 campaign, Nader argued that there was virtually no difference between Democratic candidate Al Gore and Republican candidate George W. Bush. After the scandalous miscounting of votes in Florida, Bush "officially" beat Gore by 537 votes (out of more than 5.8 million cast), making it the closest presidential election in the state's history. This gave Bush Florida's 25 electoral college votes and, with the help of the Supreme Court, the presidency.

Nader garnered 97,488 votes in Florida. Some of Nader's supporters would have stayed home if he wasn't in the race, but most of them would otherwise have voted for Gore. A week before election day in November, when polls showed that Gore and Bush were running neck-and-neck, Nader should have announced that he was encouraging his supporters to vote for Gore in order to avoid a Bush victory. Had he done that, Gore would have beaten Bush by a significant margin.

Yes, I know the well-worn don't-blame-Nader arguments: Had Gore run a better campaign in Florida, or even won his home state of Tennessee, he wouldn't have needed the Nader voters to win. The Florida Republicans -- led by Gov. Jeb Bush and Secretary of State Katherine Harris -- purged many eligible African Americans from the voting rolls, diminishing many likely Gore voters. All this may be true. But its also true, and more important, that Nader could have singlehandedly changed the outcome of the race, and of US history, by "releasing" his supporters to vote for Gore.

In fact, many big Republican donors also contributed to Nader's campaign in order to help Nader divert votes away from Gore and tip the election to Bush. Their strategy worked. And it dramatically changed the direction of American politics.

Had Gore won, progressives would no doubt have had reason to complain that he was compromising too much on a variety of economic, social, and environmental justice issues. We might even had to resort to protests outside the White House. But, with Gore as president, we would not have invaded Iraq, which has cost more than 3,795 American and over one million Iraqi lives, and undermined America's reputation around the world. In addition, the scandals and misdeeds that have surrounded the Bush White House -- the tax cuts for the rich, the rollback of environmental regulations, the attack on science on issues like stem cells and global warming, the overwhelming influence of the energy industrial complex, the evisceration of consumer and workplace safety laws, the failure to respond to the victims of Katrina, and the appointment of Supreme Court justices that created a majority that opposes reproductive choice, affirmative action, and workers rights -- would not have occurred.

I don't know whether Nader, now 73, feels any regret for this serious error in judgment in 2000. Surely he must, on occasion, worry that when he dies, the opening paragraph of his obituary will be more likely to mention his role in electing George Bush than his decades-long crusades for economic and environmental justice. Although Nader seems unwilling to acknowledge his error, voters learned the right lesson. In 2000, Nader received 2,883,105 votes -- 2.74% of the popular vote nationwide. Four years later, he received 463,653 votes -- only 0.38% of the popular vote.

I lament that Nader, once a hero to millions of Americans and a mentor to many activists, is now better-known for his political blunders. On my list of the worst contemporary Americans, I reserve most of my outrage for the political bullies like Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, James Baker, and Trent Lott, and the corporate titans from Enron, Halliburton, Wal-Mart, Eli Lilly, and their ilk who abuse workers, consumers, and the environment and wield their political influence to enhance their own power and greed. But I have some anger left over for Ralph Nader, whose lifetime of citizen activism is now overshadowed by the blood of Americans and Iraqis on his hands.

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