

Ralph Nader's Hypocrisy

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Ralph Nader just published "[The Country You Destroyed: A Letter to George W. Bush](#)" on the Common Dreams website. Nader correctly blasts Bush for his invasion of Iraq and the ongoing tragedy of that war. Nader writes:

"When you were a candidate, I called you a corporation running for the Presidency masquerading as a human being. In time you turned a metaphor into a reality. As a corporation, you express no remorse, no shame, no compassion and a resistance to admit anything other than that you have done nothing wrong."

But Nader is being a hypocrite. He has never expressed any remorse or shame for the role that *he* played in making the war in Iraq possible. I am not saying that Bush and Nader are equally responsible for the war, but I do hold Nader responsible for helping elect Bush in 2000. Without Nader, there'd have been no President George W. Without George W., no war in Iraq.

I am still angry at Ralph Nader for all the damage that George W. Bush did to my country. This also makes me very sad, because for years I believed that Nader was an heroic and courageous progressive. In the late 1990s, in introducing Nader at a forum on my campus, 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. I include him in my book, *The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20th Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame* (Nation Books, 2012).

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 probably 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 observes 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 regularly appeared in Gallup's annual list of most-admired Americans. He was not only admired; he also was trusted for his courage and principles. 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.

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 Republican-dominated 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 it's also true, and more important, that Nader could have singlehandedly changed the outcome of the race, and of American 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 probably would have occasionally 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 the killing and chaos continues today. With Gore as president, we wouldn't have had the scandals and misdeeds that 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, voting rights, affirmative action, and workers rights. And, of course, we would have avoided the mortgage meltdown, the epidemic of foreclosures, and the resulting deep recession -- brought on by the failure to regulate the banking industry -- that continues to plague the country.

We are all entitled to make mistakes. But when we do -- especially when our mistakes have enormous consequences that impact many other people -- we should acknowledge them so that we (and others) can learn from them.

I don't know whether Nader (who turns 80 next month) feels any regret for his serious error in judgment in 2000. If so, he has never said so publicly.

Surely he must, on occasion, worry that when he dies, the opening paragraph of his obituary will more likely 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 percent of the popular vote nationwide. Four years later, he received 463,653 votes -- only 0.38 percent 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 Americans in recent history, I reserve most of my outrage for political bullies like Bush, Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Phil Gramm, Newt Gingrich, Eric Cantor, Mitch McConnell, the Koch brothers, and the corporate titans from Wall Street banks, 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 enduring economic and environmental hardship, and the deaths and injuries of Americans and Iraqis, caused by George W. Bush's presidency.

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