

Why the New York Times wants Green Party candidate Ralph Nader out of the presidential campaign

Patrick Martin
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An editorial published in the June 30 issue of the *New York Times* is a crude expression of contempt for democracy on the part of this supposed guardian of liberalism and political freedom. The commentary, entitled “Mr. Nader's Misguided Crusade,” denounces the presidential candidacy of Ralph Nader, who received the Green Party nomination last week, calling it “a self-indulgent exercise that will distract voters from the clear-cut choice represented by the major party candidates, Vice President Al Gore and Gov. George W. Bush.”

The editorial continues: “We are equally reluctant to see the main election choices clouded by the spoiler candidacy of Patrick Buchanan on the Reform Party ticket...” There follows a pro forma qualification: “Of course, both Mr. Buchanan and Mr. Nader have the right to run” (the “of course” only underscoring the newspaper's hypocrisy). Having made this nod to democracy, the *Times* returns to the business at hand: “But given the major differences between the prospective Democratic and Republican nominees, there is no driving logic for a third-party candidacy this year, and the public deserves to see the major party candidates compete on an uncluttered playing field.”

The editorial is at once ludicrous and sinister. To speak of “major differences” between Gore and Bush is a travesty. It is notable that the *Times* makes no attempt to say what these differences are. In reality, less separates these two candidates than any pair of Democratic and Republican presidential nominees in the twentieth century. For the past 20 years the Democratic Party has raced to match the rightward lurch of the Republicans, abandoning its previous liberal reform policies. The Clinton years have marked the extinguishing of any significant differences on social policy between the two parties.

As for the candidates, both are political scions of the ruling elite—Gore the son of a senator, Bush the son of a president. They personify the domination of American society by an aristocracy of wealth and privilege that is separated from the masses of working people by an unbridgeable social gulf.

Even more fundamental than the *Times*' fantastical characterization of the Bush-Gore race is its attack on the very existence of the Nader candidacy—no sooner was he nominated by the Green Party than the *Times* condemned his campaign. This is an expression of hostility to the most fundamental requirement of democracy: free and open discussion. The editors reject any notion that the purpose of an election campaign is to have the broadest possible discussion of political issues, in which the clash of opposing points of view can educate public opinion.

It apparently does not occur to the *Times*' editors that political organizations outside the two traditional parties of American capitalism should, as a matter of democratic principle, have the fullest opportunity to present their views to the public, or that the people should have the right to hear them. As it is, US election laws make it all but impossible for parties promoting minority views—and especially left-wing and socialist parties—from gaining ballot access, and the media conglomerates make no bones about blacking out coverage of their programs, candidates and activities.

Of particular note, as an expression of the *Times*' contempt for democratic rights, is its preference for “an uncluttered playing field.” What, one wonders, does the *Times* make of the electoral systems in much of Europe, where parties are guaranteed representation in parliament once they win 5 percent of the vote, and their leading representatives in some cases are given cabinet positions?

Although the editorial does not state this explicitly, the

Times clearly opposes including either Nader or Buchanan in this fall's nationally televised election debates. As far as the *Times* is concerned, democracy consists entirely in the competition of the two "major"—i.e., big business-supported—candidates against one another, but no competition should be allowed which is directed against the two-party system as a whole, or which raises political issues which those parties exclude from American public life. Nader arouses the wrath of the *Times* because his campaign raises, in however limited a way, criticism of corporate America.

The *Times* hails the value of an "uncluttered playing field" at a time when public disaffection with the two big business parties is growing, and there are portents of an impending breakup of the traditional political setup in the US. As the *Times* is well aware, only eight years ago the Texas multimillionaire H. Ross Perot won some 20 percent of the vote in the presidential election, the highest "third party" vote since Theodore Roosevelt's Bull Moose candidacy in 1912.

The *Times* editorial is motivated in large measure by the newspaper's concern over the weakening of the two-party system, as millions of working people conclude that neither of the two big business parties represent their interests. From this standpoint, it is ironic that immediately underneath the editorial denouncing Nader and defending the two-party monopoly in the United States, the *Times* publishes an editorial wagging a finger at Mexico and warning the Mexican government against seeking to maintain the one-party monopoly of the ruling PRI.

The *Times* notes: "The policy differences separating the two leading contenders are relatively minor, particularly on issues concerning the United States. Both Mr. Labastida and Mr. Fox are broadly pro-trade and pro-business and would work comfortably with Washington on border and drug issues." This is true, but if the differences between the two Mexican frontrunners are "relatively minor," the differences between Bush and Gore are infinitesimal.

The Bush-Gore contest has not and cannot raise any serious social issue. Every speech is poll-tested and packaged by advertising consultants, who "position" the candidates based not on principled concerns, but on immediate electoral advantage. This in turn derives, not from the opinions of ordinary voters, but from decisions made by multimillionaire campaign contributors and the opinion makers in the corporate-controlled mass media. The result is an electoral process in which more and more

resources are expended—the 2000 campaign will cost over \$3 billion—to influence fewer and fewer actual voters.

This is not the first time in recent years that the *Times* has voiced anti-democratic sentiments. Throughout the Monica Lewinsky affair, the newspaper provided a crucial liberal cover for the attempt by extreme-right elements, working with Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr, to unseat an elected president through a trumped-up sex scandal. The *Times* gave editorial support, not only to the legitimacy of the charges against Clinton, but to grossly anti-democratic methods employed by Starr, including browbeating witnesses and illegally leaking stories to the media.

Such views are not the mere whim of the newspaper's editors, or its multimillionaire owners in the Sulzberger-Ochs family. They are the product of definite social and political shifts in the privileged elite atop New York society, whose fortunes have ballooned over the past decade of virtually nonstop stock market boom. The bonanza on Wall Street has, of course, not trickled down to the masses of New York workers, many of them minority and immigrant. It has, however, enriched a sizable upper-middle-class layer which once espoused a liberal standpoint on social and political issues, but has moved sharply to the right and become largely indifferent to the defense of democratic rights.

Given the ham-fisted character of the *Times* editorial, it could only have been written, not simply by people who have grown more conservative, but by those so besotted with wealth and privilege that they are unaware of how outrageous their views are to the vast majority of ordinary people.

Readers of the *World Socialist Web Site* will know that we do not endorse the politics of Nader or the Green Party, let alone the extreme-right-wing chauvinism of Buchanan. But the support which both of these third party candidates have received is at least in part a reflection of rising popular hostility to the political monopoly of the two big business parties. These candidates, and all others who have obtained ballot status to compete in the elections, should have equal access to the media, to the televised debates and to all other political forums during the election campaign.



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