

The US elections: What accounts for the anti-Nader hysteria of the New York Times?

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27 October 2000

Less than two weeks before the November 7 election, the *New York Times* has published yet another editorial attack on the campaign of Green Party presidential candidate Ralph Nader. Having denounced Nader's campaign in June and weighed in last August to urge his exclusion from the televised presidential debates, the *Times* printed an editorial on October 26 branding Nader's campaign an illegitimate intrusion into the contest between Democratic Vice President Al Gore and Republican Governor George W. Bush.

The title of the editorial, "Mr. Nader's Electoral Mischief," gives an indication of both the tone and substance of the piece. In language that bespeaks the editors' fright over the level of popular support for the Nader campaign, and their own contempt for democratic rights, the *Times* engages in an *ad hominem* attack on Nader that borders on character assassination. Nader's campaign, according to the newspaper, is a "self-indulgent" attempt to "gull" voters into thinking there are no major differences between Gore and Bush. The *Times* accuses Nader of "willful prankishness" and concludes that his "wrecking ball candidacy" is a case of "ego run amok."

It is hard to quantify the cynicism involved in casting Nader as a political charlatan while portraying Gore and Bush as honest politicians who "have waged a hard, substantive and clean campaign." Bush's mantle of "compassionate conservatism" is a ruse to conceal his role as front-man for the most privileged and politically reactionary social forces, while Gore's pretense of championing "the people, not the powerful" is a ploy to cover up the right-wing character of his own policies. Both are financed to the tune of hundreds of millions of dollars by corporate interests.

What has incensed the *Times* is not political dishonesty on Nader's part, but the considerable support his campaign has won in key states, where his vote could decisively affect the outcome of the presidential race. The editorial declares: "As the election nears, what once seemed a speculative threat has become a very real danger to the Gore campaign, with polls suggesting that Mr. Nader's meager share of the vote could nevertheless make the difference in eight states with 70 electoral votes."

The *Times* makes no attempt to square this political fact, which it finds so deplorable, with its contention that the contest between Gore and Bush offers so clear and fundamental a choice on the critical issues facing the electorate, that Nader's campaign can only be motivated by subjective and politically destructive impulses. How is it that millions of people around the country fail to appreciate the supposedly profound differences between the Democratic and Republican candidates, and agree with Nader that both official parties are beholden to a corporate and financial elite? This sentiment is reflected not only among Nader supporters, but also among the far

greater numbers of people—indeed, half or more of eligible voters—who are so estranged from the two parties they intend to sit out the election. The *Times* does not even broach this question, let alone answer it.

"The country deserves a clear up-or-down vote between Mr. Bush and Mr. Gore," the editorial declares. Why? What does such an injunction have to do with the democratic right of parties and candidates with differing views, including minority views, to compete in the electoral process, and the no less important right of the public to hear what they have to say? Why should only those parties and those candidates who are hand-picked and funded by the most wealthy and privileged social layers be allowed access to the media? Why should they be insulated from a public discussion with opponents of the two-party system?

As the *Times* well knows, in many parts of the world, including Europe and Israel, parties that win 5 percent of the vote are guaranteed representation in parliament. Not infrequently their representatives receive cabinet posts.

If anything, the 2000 campaign has underscored the deeply anti-democratic features of the American electoral process. All sorts of barriers, legal and extra-legal, are set up to block third-party candidates from gaining ballot status. The monopoly of the two official parties is reinforced by the "winner-takes-all" system for allocating political representation. The lack of proportional representation finds its most archaic expression in the persistence of the Electoral College.

The *Times* goes on to denounce Nader for seeking to effect "a leftward shift among Democrats away from the Clinton administration's centrist policies." Here, the newspaper is not attacking the Green Party from the left, i.e., criticizing it for fueling illusions in the Democrats, but rather from the right—for denouncing the rightward shift of the Democratic Party epitomized by the Clinton administration.

Speaking of the Democrats, the *Times* asserts, "Yet anyone who has followed the course of progressive politics over the last quarter-century knows that such a shift [i.e., to the left] is a formula for defeat..." The first reaction of any informed reader to this statement is bound to be: "What progressive politics?" The Democratic Party, which was never in a fundamental sense progressive, even in its most liberal days, has over the past 25 years shifted well to the right of the moderate wing of the Republican Party of the 1960s.

The *Times'* contention that the contest between Gore and Bush represents a stark contrast between a progressive and a reactionary candidate is belied by the very trajectory of the Democratic campaign. The same issue that carries the anti-Nader editorial features a column

by economic commentator Jeff Madrick, who describes the concerted effort of the Gore-Lieberman ticket in recent weeks to reassure the financial elite that, populist effusions notwithstanding, it can be trusted to continue the policies of fiscal discipline that have fueled the greatest boom in share values and corporate profits in US history.

Citing Gore's speech at the Democratic convention last August, in which the vice president postured as the champion of "working families," Madrick writes: "Mr. Gore bolted out of the Democratic convention with a ratings lead." He continues: "Since then, however, the vice president has made a rhetorical course correction. He started emphasizing the fiscal discipline of his agenda and referred less to what he would do for working families..."

"But once Mr. Bush started accusing Mr. Gore of being a big spender and stressing a few social programs of his own, the tone of the campaign changed. One of the first hints was that the Gore campaign started using the term 'middle-class families' instead of 'working families.'"

In conclusion, Madrick writes: "If Mr. Gore loses the election, it will be wrong to say he over-emphasized social spending. To the contrary, he doggedly tried to prove he was a fiscal conservative—and confused his message in the process."

In the aftermath of the presidential debates Gore has labored even more desperately to prove his credentials as a disciple of the Reagan school of "limited government." Speaking October 25 in Little Rock, Arkansas, Gore declared, "In this tale of two candidates, I'm the one who believes in limited government and I have believed in it long before it was fashionable to do so in the Democratic Party. I don't believe there's a government solution to every problem. I don't believe any government program can replace the responsibility of parents, the hard work of families or the innovation of industry."

At the same time both he and his running mate, Senator Joseph Lieberman, have gone out of their way to echo the Republican right on certain social issues. Thus Gore, appearing October 26 on the Good Morning America television program, said he supported a recent Supreme Court decision upholding the right of the Boy Scouts to exclude gays.

Lieberman, in a well-publicized October 24 speech at Notre Dame University in Indiana, repeated his earlier attack on the constitutional separation of church and state, restating the claim—both legally spurious and politically reactionary—that "the Constitution promises freedom of religion, not freedom from religion."

This attack on a core constitutional principle, laid down in the very first sentence of the Bill of Rights, in and of itself exposes the reactionary essence of the Democratic campaign and demolishes the notion that a victory for the Democrats on November 7 will in some way safeguard the democratic rights of the American people.

The *Times'* diatribe against the Nader campaign, revealing as it does the newspaper's contempt for democratic principles, reflects the outlook of a highly privileged social elite that has grown increasingly distant and hostile to the broad mass of working people, the more it has enriched itself in the course of two decades of political reaction and unbridled corporate profiteering. Its economic, intellectual and moral corruption finds expression in its indifference to democratic rights.

The *Times* reacts with such frenzy to the Nader campaign because it sees in the support for the Green Party candidate, particularly among young people, the danger of a political break with the political institutions of the financial and corporate oligarchy that controls the United States. To the extent that Nader's campaign reflects, even in a

limited way, the possibility that the social anger percolating just below the surface of American political life will erupt in unpredictable, even revolutionary forms, the *Times* reacts hysterically with a torrent of abuse.

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party have fundamental, principled political differences with the candidacy of Nader. As we have explained in previous articles, we do not believe that he represents a working class alternative to the Democrats and Republicans. The record of the Green parties in Europe has already shown that the Greens are incapable of defending the interests of the broad masses of people. In every country of Europe they have adapted themselves to the needs of the ruling elite and lined up behind its policies, both domestic and foreign.

Nader's program, an amalgam of vaguely progressive policies and conceptions of an outright reactionary character, speaks for reform-minded sections of the middle class, not the working class. In no way does it challenge the economic foundations of capitalist rule. Consequently we do not advocate a vote for Nader.

Nevertheless, the *WSWS* and the *SEP* unconditionally defend Nader's right to participate fully in the elections. He has every right to run for the presidency and he should reject with contempt the efforts of Democratic Party operatives, AFL-CIO union bureaucrats and the *New York Times* to politically bludgeon him into withdrawing his candidacy.

Those who support Nader should similarly reject the argument that a vote for the Green candidate is either "wasted" or tantamount to a vote for Bush. All such arguments are based on the intellectually and politically bankrupt politics of "lesser evilism." This outlook, always fundamentally reactionary, was used for decades to maintain the political monopoly of two parties dominated by American big business. In an earlier period, when the Democrats espoused a limited policy of social reforms, it appeared to have some measure of validity. In fact, as increasing numbers are coming to see, it has led the masses of working people into a political blind alley, in which they are effectively disenfranchised.

Today, when the Democrats have abandoned any policy of social reform and adopted the laissez-faire program of the Republicans, the pretense that they represent a "lesser evil" can be maintained only on the basis of the sheerest demagoguery and lying. The Gore campaign, which has from the first sought to accommodate itself to the anti-democratic forces that mounted the impeachment conspiracy of 1998-99 and spearheaded the social assault on the working class of the past two decades, is the concrete manifestation of the moribund state of the Democratic Party. Far from a vote for Gore contributing to a struggle against reaction, it actually, whether wittingly or not, helps perpetuate it.

The most effective preparation for the consequences of the next administration, whether headed by Gore or Bush, is the development of an independent mass political movement of the working class based on a democratic and socialist program.



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