

Ralph Nader's political olive branch to Bush

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Earlier this month former Green Party presidential candidate Ralph Nader co-authored a column that appeared on the op-ed pages of the *Wall Street Journal*. Entitled “Ending Corporate Welfare as We Know It,” the article by Nader and Robert Weissman (editor of the Nader-backed *Multinational Monitor* magazine) presented a generally positive picture of the newly installed administration of Republican President George W. Bush.

Nader and Weissman sought to couch their enthusiasm for aspects of the Bush administration—above all its extreme nationalist and unilateralist predilections—in measured terms. The article, published March 7, began:

“If it took Richard Nixon to go to China, could George W. Bush be the president who ends corporate welfare as we know it?”

“That doesn't appear likely. But in a budget outline that offers little reason to smile to those concerned about the concentration of corporate power, the Bush administration has offered a glimmer of hope on the corporate-welfare front.”

Nader and Weissman went on to praise Bush's budget outline, published the preceding week, for proposing a reduction in funding for three federal programs that provide government subsidies to corporations: the Overseas Private Investment Corporation, the Export-Import Bank and the Advanced Technology Program.

“These are positive steps,” wrote Nader. He then proceeded to applaud Bush's Treasury Secretary, Paul O'Neill, who “has voiced skepticism about the Wall Street bailouts regularly engineered by the International Monetary Fund in coordination with his Department.”

The thrust of the article was that the proposed scale-back in the above named programs and O'Neill's public criticisms of IMF bailouts were promising moves, but only partial steps. “But while all these initial moves are in the right direction, there is much, much more to do to rein in corporate welfare,” wrote Nader.

In conclusion, the authors of the article respectfully reminded Bush of his “commitment” to (quoting Bush) “reduce subsidies that primarily benefit corporations rather than individuals” and wondered whether the new president would show “the political courage to offend the very corporate fat cats who funded his campaign.”

In assessing this altogether remarkable article, one is obliged to assume that Nader's professed hope in Bush's ability to oppose the influence of “corporate fat cats” is merely a journalistic device aimed at currying favor with the new administration. That would be consistent with the generally groveling tone of his commentary. The alternative, that Nader really believes the new president to be something other than a tool of corporate interests, would brand the former Green candidate and long-time lobbyist a political idiot.

Nader's conceptions may not be terribly profound, but he is not as credulous as he makes out. He is not unaware, for example, of the significance of the timing of his article, and, even more to the point, where it appeared. That Nader rushed into print in the first weeks of

the new administration, indeed, within days of Bush's nationally televised budget address, and published his flattering missive on the op-ed pages of the *Wall Street Journal*, was itself a political statement.

The *Journal* was no doubt delighted to feature a laudatory piece from the supposedly “left” Nader. Its op-ed pages are notorious as the repository for the most unabashed attacks on democratic rights and the most brazen defenses of wealth and privilege. The *Journal* serves as the semi-official house organ of the Republican right and spearheaded two political coups in recent years: the ultimately unsuccessful attempt to topple the Clinton administration in the sex-scandal-driven impeachment campaign, and the successful effort to install Bush through the suppression of votes in Florida.

To anyone who has seriously followed Nader's political trajectory, the *Wall Street Journal* olive branch to the Bush administration could not have come as a complete surprise. While Nader was anxious to make a public statement greeting the new president, he was remarkably taciturn during the Republican impeachment campaign—subsequently, during his presidential campaign, he said he would have voted to convict Clinton in the Senate and remove him from office—and he maintained a studied silence throughout the five-week electoral crisis in Florida that followed the disputed presidential election last November.

In his *Journal* piece, Nader maintained his public record of indifference toward the assault on democratic rights led by the Republican right. He made no mention of the fact that the administration he was praising had come to power on the basis of a direct attack on the right to vote, summed up in the Supreme Court ruling that scuttled a court-ordered recount of votes in Florida and attacked the constitutional principle of popular sovereignty.

Nor had Bush, from his inaugural to the date of Nader's column, provided the slightest reason for anyone to doubt his intention of implementing the right-wing social agenda advocated by the most ruthless sections of the capitalist elite. He had appointed a cabinet dominated by multimillionaire corporate executives and extreme-right ideologues. His first official act, carried out two days after his inauguration, was an executive order banning US aid to international family planning organizations that provide abortion counseling.

Bush's budget address, which Nader found so “hopeful,” was a thoroughly dishonest defense of his proposal for a tax cut overwhelmingly benefiting the rich—a measure aimed at effecting the most sweeping redistribution of wealth from the working population to the economic elite in US history.

On the very day that Nader's column appeared, Congress passed a bill, backed by big business and the Bush White House, overturning new workplace safety regulations designed to prevent repetitive strain injuries, an affliction that affects more than one million workers every year. Two days later Bush intervened to outlaw a strike by Northwest Airlines mechanics and announced he would block any strike action

by workers locked in contract negotiations with the major airlines.

Even if Nader were able to overlook such anti-democratic and anti-working-class measures, one might think his enthusiasm for the new administration would be dulled by its pro-business offensive against the environment. Nader was, after all, the presidential candidate of the Green Party.

Since assuming office Bush has made abundantly clear his intention to roll back environmental restrictions on industry. Besides opening up the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil and gas exploration, the Bush administration is considering the following measures, according to a recent article in the *New York Times*: easing clean-air rules for coal-fired power plants, loosening federal standards on river flows to protect fish, giving refiners relief from diverse anti-pollution standards in various states, and allowing states to control drilling rights on some federal lands.

He has already reversed a campaign pledge to require power plants to control emissions of carbon dioxide, reversed a Clinton administration executive order that tightened arsenic standards for drinking water, and rescinded another Clinton administration proposal to increase public access to information about the potential consequences of chemical plant accidents. This week Bush officially proclaimed US opposition to the Kyoto protocol on global warming and declared the international treaty to be “dead.”

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Bush has, in addition, nominated as his administration’s “regulations czar” Harvard Professor John D. Graham, the founder and director of a Harvard center that receives most of its money from corporations and regularly issues reports arguing for the abolition of environmental and other industry regulations.

How is Nader’s willful blindness to the Bush administration’s pervasive “corporate welfare” to be explained? To begin with, his political adaptation to right-wing forces in American politics is not a new development. In his acceptance speech at the Green Party nominating convention last June, Nader counseled Green members to curry favor with conservative voters by saying his campaign championed “traditional, not extreme values.” He made a calculated decision to appeal to supporters of Senator John McCain and backers of even more right-wing political figures.

Nader made common cause with Reform Party presidential candidate Patrick Buchanan, joining the ultra-right demagogue in protectionist campaigns against trade agreements with Mexico and China and agitation against such bodies as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), which he attacked for “subverting American sovereignty.”

American nationalism and defense of the nation state constitute the political and ideological lynch pin of Nader’s perspective. His opposition to globalization, however radical or “left” it might appear at any given moment, is rooted in this profoundly reactionary standpoint. Far from expressing the social interests of the working class—which, in any event, Nader dismisses as an independent, let alone revolutionary, force—his criticism of capitalist organizations such as the WTO and the IMF reflects the opposition of certain layers of the middle class and sections of capital least able to compete on the world market. It has nothing in common with a socialist and internationalist opposition to global capitalism.

Of particular significance in Nader’s *Wall Street Journal* article is his praise for Treasury Secretary O’Neill. Nader lauds the former Alcoa CEO’s critical remarks in regard to IMF bailouts. There is,

however, nothing progressive in O’Neill’s perspective. He speaks for sections of American capital that are, if anything, more nationalistic in their orientation than the spokesmen for finance capital represented by his Democratic predecessor Robert Rubin.

O’Neill’s statements articulate the tendency strongly expressed within the Bush administration toward a more unilateralist US foreign policy, in economic, diplomatic and military affairs. No section of working people, either in the US or around the world, will benefit from the implementation of such an aggressively nationalistic orientation. On the contrary, it portends an even more explosive and belligerent use of US economic and military power.

Nader, however, is attracted to O’Neill’s politics precisely because of his “no nonsense” assertion of “American sovereignty.” Here one sees the reactionary logic of all forms of protest based on American nationalism. Nader’s evolution to the right, his capitulation to the extreme right-wing forces that dominate the Republican Party, is ultimately a function of his political program and the social forces represented by that program.

Nader and the Greens do not base themselves on the working class. On the contrary, they deny that the fundamental division within society is that between the main social classes, the working class and the bourgeoisie. They attempt to cobble together a perspective for social reform and the defense of the environment without challenging the capitalist system itself. As a result they have no real independence from the ruling class, and must adapt themselves to one or another of its factions. As Nader’s evolution so clearly demonstrates, on such a basis neither social reform, nor the defense of the environment, nor the defense of democratic rights is possible.

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