

Ralph Nader to run as independent in US presidential race

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23 February 2004

Consumer advocate Ralph Nader, who ran for president in 2000 as the candidate of the Green Party, declared Sunday that he would join the 2004 presidential campaign as an independent candidate. He made the announcement in an interview on the NBC News program "Meet the Press," following several weeks of public discussion of a possible candidacy on his own web site and in the media.

Nader's decision to run has been denounced by a wide array of his former supporters in the liberal and middle-class "left" milieu. Most prominently, the *Nation* magazine published an editorial appeal last month urging him not to run, on the grounds that this would take away votes from the prospective Democratic nominee and help reelect President Bush. A group of Greens, liberal Democrats and former Nader 2000 campaign activists established a web site devoted to opposing the launching of a Nader 2004 campaign.

In response to a question from "Meet the Press" interviewer Tim Russert, Nader rejected the label of "spoiler," the preferred term of abuse of his Democratic Party critics. "A spoiler is a contemptuous term," he said, "as if anybody who dares to challenge the two-party system and corrupt politics and broken politics and corporate power is a spoiler." He went on to denounce the "antiquated Electoral College winner-take-all system" that "excludes candidates from the debates" and "blocks any kind of competition."

Attacks on Nader for deciding to enter the presidential race are intrinsically anti-democratic. They take as their starting point the preservation of the existing two-party system, which is itself a mechanism for curtailing democratic rights. As Nader pointed out Sunday, without any response from Russert, "You'd never find that type of thing in Canada or Western democracies in Europe. It is an offense to deny millions of people who might want to vote for our candidacy an opportunity to vote for our candidacy. Instead, they want to say, 'No, we're not going to let you have an opportunity to vote,' for our candidacy."

Towards the end of his television appearance, Nader made reference to the anti-democratic restrictions on third-party and independent candidates under US election laws. "There's a tremendous bias in state laws," he said, "against third parties and independent candidates bred by the two major parties, who

passed these laws. They don't like competition. So it's like climbing a cliff with a slippery rope. And anybody who doubts it can look at a list of all these signature barriers and all the obstacles a number of states ... put before third-party candidates."

As Russert pointed out, these restrictions will likely prevent Nader from getting on the ballot in many states, despite his celebrity status from a long public career and his well-publicized 2000 presidential campaign. Such laws present an even greater obstacle to socialist opponents of American capitalism, like the Socialist Equality Party presidential and vice-presidential candidates Bill Van Auken and Jim Lawrence.

Nader's comments on "Meet the Press" were considerably more radical-sounding than his 2000 campaign or his conciliatory attitude to the Bush White House in the aftermath of the election. [See "Ralph Nader's political olive branch to Bush"] This is an indication that he is sensitive to the swing to the left in public opinion, with growing opposition to the Iraq war and anger over the stagnant job market and the administration's right-wing domestic policy.

In his Sunday interview, Nader denounced the war in Iraq, characterized Washington DC as "corporate-occupied territory" and described the US political system as "two parties ... ferociously competing to see who's going to go to the White House and take orders from their corporate pay masters."

One of the most revealing exchanges in the "Meet the Press" interview came when Russert asked Nader point-blank whether Al Gore would have gone to war in Iraq if he, rather than Bush, had been declared the victor in Florida in the 2000 presidential campaign.

Nader replied: "He would have. I think he was a hawk. He may have done it in a different way. He and Clinton got through Congress a regime-change resolution as a pillar of our foreign policy."

Nader went on to deal with the charges, echoed by Russert, that his candidacy was responsible for Gore's loss of Florida's key electoral votes in 2000. Nader said: "But let me answer the points you made. They're quite provocative. Any number of third-party candidates in Florida could have affected the equation the way you just described. Libertarians got thousands of votes, Buchanan got thousands of votes, Socialist Workers

Party got votes. The Florida campaign was won by Gore. It was stolen by Katherine Harris and Jeb Bush and their cohorts from Tallahassee to the Supreme Court.”

Here Nader spoke directly and truthfully. However, his own role in the theft of the 2000 election was by no means blameless. Nader remained silent during the post-election crisis of November-December 2000. He had just received three million votes nationwide as the Green Party presidential candidate, and nearly 100,000 votes in Florida, where Bush’s official margin of victory was only 537. A statement by Nader then, condemning the Republican tactics and the Supreme Court intervention as election theft, would have had considerable political impact. But he said nothing.

Four months later, in April 2001, at a press conference in Detroit, Nader was asked about the significance of the Florida conflict. He reiterated his position that the election dispute was nothing more than a partisan squabble, which had no intrinsic significance for the democratic rights of the American people. “Both parties steal elections,” he said. “Who stole the election from Nixon in 1960? The Democrats do it when they can get away with it and the Republicans do the same. I say pox on both their houses.”

Nader’s vocal condemnation of the war in Iraq and the continued US occupation also marks a political shift. While he was critical of the Bush administration’s decision to go to war, Nader played no prominent role in the antiwar movement and did not speak at the major protest rallies in February and March 2003.

Asked by Russert if he advocated the immediate withdrawal of US troops from Iraq, Nader hedged, saying, “We owe a responsibility to the people of Iraq.” This type of “yes, but” remark is characteristic of the remaining candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination, who criticize Bush for sending troops to Iraq, but either insist that the US troops remain, or, in the case of Dennis Kucinich, propose that the US occupying force be replaced by a UN military force. The latter was the line Nader adopted in his reply to Russert’s question.

Russert subsequently asked Nader about remarks last year in which he suggested that Bush was not only “beatable, but impeachable” because of his lies on the war in Iraq. Nader replied: “If there’s any better definition of high crimes and misdemeanors in our Constitution than misleading or fabricating the basis for going to war, as the press has documented ad infinitum, I don’t know any cause of impeachment that’s worse... Our Founding Fathers gave the Congress the right to fire the president. It shouldn’t be a big deal. For far more trivial reasons, you know, Clinton was impeached.”

This is another flip-flop, since Nader supported the impeachment of Clinton and said he would have voted for Clinton’s removal from office for an offense that he now concedes was “trivial.”

These reversals of position have an inner social and political

logic. Nader has long rejected the perspective of socialism and the central role of the working class in the struggle to transform society, espousing instead a politics of protest based on sections of the middle class. He offers himself as an individual, not the representative of a party. (Even in 2000, he accepted the Green Party nomination, but never actually joined the Green Party). Such a political outlook is inevitably subject to shifts in the wind, especially in the moods of the radicalized petty bourgeoisie.

Nader’s political outlook is by its very nature inconsistent and self-contradictory. He combines attacks on the corporate domination of American politics with support for the profit system as a whole. This amounts to supporting the domination of economic and social life by these same corporations, which is ultimately the basis of their control of the political system.

The Socialist Equality Party opposes the Democrats and Republicans, not because we deny the obvious differences and conflicts between these two bourgeois parties, but because our program is based on fundamental issues of political principle and articulates the interests of working people. The needs of the working class are irreconcilably in conflict with the existing capitalist order, which both big business parties defend. Working people can defend their interests only through the establishment of their own independent political party. No short-term considerations can override the necessity of the struggle for the political independence of the working class.

Nader, on the contrary, lacks any solid basis for opposing the politics of “lesser evilism” and, in his “Meet the Press” interview, he left the door open for eventual support for the Democrats. He suggested that a political collapse of the Bush reelection campaign was possible, which would make a Democratic victory inevitable, regardless of how many votes he received. But when Russert asked directly if Nader might withdraw his candidacy if it appeared that his votes could make the difference between a Democratic victory or Bush’s reelection, Nader refused to give a straight reply, saying, “When and if that eventuality occurs, in the rare event that it occurs, you can invite me back on the program, and I’ll give you my answer.”



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