

Why are the Democrats so incensed at Ralph Nader?

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There are two types of criticisms of consumer advocate and independent presidential candidate Ralph Nader—those from the right and those from the left. Democratic politicians, newspapers such as the *New York Times* and assorted liberal commentators attack Nader from the right. They denounce his candidacy as an unwarranted disruption of the normal election process and a diversion that will take votes from the Democratic candidate, thereby facilitating the reelection of Bush.

These attacks assume that the only legitimate opposition to Bush and the Republicans must come from within the Democratic Party. Those who voice them seek, whatever criticisms they may make of the Democrats and Republicans, to defend the two-party system.

The opposition to Nader from the left, while unconditionally defending his right to run, criticizes the limitations and inadequacies of his program. It explains the contradiction between his claims to oppose “corporate power” and the substance of his policies, and his continuing orientation, notwithstanding his denunciations of the “two-party duopoly,” to the Democratic Party.

The latter is the standpoint of the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party. In subsequent articles, we will explain in detail the principled basis of our political differences with Nader. For the present, we will focus on the question: what accounts for the hysterical reaction of the Democrats and many liberals to the Nader candidacy?

Nader, for his part, has gone out of his way to reassure his liberal critics that his decision to run as an independent candidate is aimed at reviving the Democratic Party, rather than weakening it. Speaking before the National Press Club in Washington DC on Monday, one day after he announced his presidential run on NBC News’ “Meet the Press” program, Nader advised Democratic leaders and party loyalists to “relax and rejoice” over his campaign. Replying to the charge that his intervention would help President Bush by taking votes away from the Democratic candidate, Nader declared several times that his campaign would be directed against Bush and that he expected to receive only a small number of votes from those who would otherwise cast their ballot for the Democratic contender.

“I will focus on getting Bush out,” he said, adding, “I will not get many Democratic votes.” To underscore the point, he acknowledged telling Democratic National Committee Chairman Terrence McAuliffe that he would “help deserving congressional candidates in key swing districts because I want the Democrats to

recapture the House and the Senate.” He endorsed the practice of vote-swapping, a process whereby Nader supporters, via the Internet, match up with Democratic voters, agreeing to vote for the Democratic presidential candidate in close races if their Democratic counterparts agree to vote for Nader in states where the outcome will not be affected.

He spoke of “fulfilling the aspirations of the Democratic Party,” took Democratic liberals to task for “ten years of losses by the Democrats at the national, state and local level” to the Republican right, and called his campaign “a liberation movement for the Democratic Party.” “We hope they [the Democrats] are rising again,” he said.

Nader’s basic perspective is to push the Democrats to the left and make them more responsive to the social concerns of ordinary people. In his National Press Club address, for example, he spoke of his campaign as an instrument to “turn the rudder” of the Democratic Party.

None of this has assuaged the Democratic establishment or its prominent liberal and “left” supporters. Among those who savagely denounced Nader for running are New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson, who was energy secretary under Bill Clinton and is considered a prospective vice-presidential candidate in 2004, and Al Sharpton, the left-talking charlatan who is still officially in the running for the Democratic nomination.

Richardson ascribed Nader’s decision to enter the race as “an act of total vanity and ego satisfaction” and Sharpton declared, “The only reason he’s running is either he’s an egomaniac or as a Bush contract.” (Sharpton’s attack is particularly scurrilous, since it is well documented that one of his key financial and political backers is Roger Stone, the long-time Republican dirty tricks operative who led the mob that shut down the Miami-Dade County vote recount in the fall of 2000, helping Bush steal Florida’s electoral votes and hijack the election).

Mainstream “liberal” newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Detroit Free Press* have weighed in against Nader, as have left-liberal publications such as the *Nation* and a host of liberal columnists. Robert Scheer, in the February 24 *Los Angeles Times*, vented his fury by writing: “In an act of pure egotism, Ralph Nader—who has been largely silent on the main issues of the day, nursing his wounds since the last time he messed up an election—insists on another chance to play at electoral politics on the national stage. Does he have no sense of accountability or shame?”

Democratic officials plan to do more than simply denounce Nader. Whatever their pro-forma statements acknowledging Nader's democratic right to run, they intend, according to the *New York Times* (February 23), to mount "a bucket of court challenges" to keep him off state ballots.

Why are these forces so incensed?

In the eyes of the US ruling elite, Nader's intervention threatens to raise disturbing questions that it had hoped to suppress with the quashing of Howard Dean's bid for the Democratic nomination—first and foremost, the war in Iraq. Nader is calling for the rapid withdrawal of US troops and their replacement by UN forces, and has accused Bush of impeachable offenses in connection with his lies about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and Iraq-Al Qaeda connections.

With the Democratic race narrowed down to two candidates, John Kerry and John Edwards, both of whom voted to give Bush authorization to invade Iraq, the political and corporate establishment, Democratic as well as Republican, are looking to engineer an election in which the massive popular opposition to the war will be all but ignored, and potentially explosive issues such as corporate corruption and the widening gap between the financial elite and the working masses will be pushed to the side. Thus the *Wall Street Journal*, in an editorial gloating over the Democrats' dismay at Nader's intervention, declared: "We agree with the Democrats on at least one point"—namely, that Nader should be excluded from the presidential debates.

For the Democratic Party establishment, the prospect of a Nader campaign, even if limited in terms of ballot status, cuts across a campaign strategy aimed at preempting any serious mobilization of popular outrage against Bush's foreign and domestic policies. The party leadership wants, once the nomination has been locked up, to shift the campaign further to the right. It would like to gain the presidency by winning the imprimatur of the ruling elite, and avoid needlessly raising expectations as to what a Democratic administration would do once in power.

Notwithstanding the limitations of Nader's critique of the political system, his attacks on corporate power and the prostration of the Democratic Party before the Republican right will make it more difficult for the Democratic candidate to "moderate" populist appeals on issues such as jobs, health care and education, and soften his attacks on Bush's record on democratic rights and militarism.

More fundamentally, Nader's intervention and the extreme reaction it has provoked from within the political establishment reflect the fragile and crisis-ridden state of the American two-party system. The political monopoly of two parties beholden to the propertied elite has served to defend the basic interests of the American ruling class for more than a century. But this system has grown so sclerotic, insulated and alienated from the population at large that it can no longer tolerate the raising of any serious social or democratic issues or any criticisms that go beyond the most banal and superficial.

In a country as huge and complex as the United States, so riven by social, demographic and geographical contradictions, existing within and subordinate to an increasingly global economy, the domination of political life by two parties controlled by a narrow

financial elite has become utterly irrational and untenable. The churning conflicts that dominate American society—above all, the conflict between the working class and the modern-day robber barons—can no longer be contained within such an archaic and dysfunctional political framework.

Both of the parties have shifted so far to the right that they are unable to credibly pose as representatives of the people. The Republicans speak for the most ruthless and rapacious sections of the corporate elite, while the Democrats trail behind, seeking with less and less credibility to conceal their adaptation to the Republican right behind a hollow pretense of some sort of "progressive" alternative. Both parties have largely lost the broader social bases in the middle class and working class they once enjoyed. In practice, they both devote themselves to the further enrichment of an oligarchy at the expense of the people.

Nader's candidacy, whatever his personal motives, is not accidental, nor is it purely an expression of his own ambitions. He represents and responds to the moods within a certain constituency. The self-designated "consumer advocate"—a classless term that embraces the most heterogeneous social layers—articulates, above all, the anger of sections of the middle class, small businessmen, small farmers, pensioners, etc., that feel abandoned and betrayed by both parties, and set upon by what Nader calls, borrowing a phrase from Theodore Roosevelt, "malefactors of great wealth."

The Nader movement cannot provide the basis for a genuine and viable alternative to the two-party system. That requires not a consumer movement, but rather an independent class movement of working people, based on a socialist and internationalist program.

However, the frenzied response of the Democratic and liberal establishment to Nader's candidacy can only mean that the grip of the two-party monopoly is weakening, and the conditions are emerging for a social and political movement of working people that will open the way for a revolutionary transformation on truly democratic and egalitarian foundations.



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