

Nader gets his meeting with Kerry

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Ralph Nader's hour-long meeting with Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry on May 19 should go a long way in disabusing those who harbor illusions that the "independent" presidential candidate represents a serious or principled alternative to the American two-party system.

The closed-door meeting was held at Nader's request, at the headquarters of the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee in downtown Washington. Kerry himself would not comment on the subjects discussed, except in the most general terms. But Nader gave several press interviews afterwards and his description of the meeting was largely confirmed by Kerry's aides.

The most important issue in the 2004 election, the war in Iraq, went virtually without mention in the conversation between the two candidates. In an interview shortly after the meeting, with CNN's Judy Woodruff, Nader volunteered no reference to any discussion on the war. When Woodruff directly asked him if the subject had come up, Nader responded, "I said, you have no exit strategy. He said he had one."

Kerry adviser Steve Elmendorf, who attended the meeting, told the press that neither he nor campaign manager Mary Beth Cahill had any recollection of Iraq being discussed at all. Elmendorf was at pains to downplay the disparity, however, telling the *Los Angeles Times*, "Ralph Nader is a person of great integrity, and if he says he brought it up, he may have brought it up. But I didn't hear it when I was there."

The Kerry campaign has emphatically rejected the suggestion that Kerry has an "exit strategy" for Iraq. After adopting a vaguely antiwar posture during the Democratic primaries—in order to more effectively combat the candidacy of Howard Dean—Kerry has reverted in recent months to the position of criticizing the Bush administration's effectiveness in conducting the war, while supporting an indefinite continuation of the US occupation.

Nader claims that he raised the issue in passing, urging Kerry to differentiate himself from the policies of the Bush administration. In a telephone interview, he told the *Los Angeles Times*, "I told him you've got to look at it from the point of view of mainstream Iraqis and how they can be

persuaded to separate themselves from the insurgents." He said that setting a firm date for a "military and corporate withdrawal" from Iraq would help in this regard. "I said you need to give the public an exit strategy," Nader told the *Times*. "Bush doesn't have an exit strategy. He [Kerry] said, 'I have an exit strategy, and I'll be talking about it more.'"

The whole episode is revealing in the extreme. Under conditions of continuing upheaval in Iraq and the worldwide impact of the revelations of abuse of Iraqi prisoners by US soldiers at Abu Ghraib—including torture and murder—Nader barely mentioned the subject. And when it did come up, according to Nader himself, he expressed agreement with the fundamental strategic objective of the Bush administration and the Democrats: the necessity to isolate and defeat the insurgents.

His disagreement is purely over tactics. Nader advises the American occupiers that to maintain control in Iraq they have to relax their grip, relying more on the United Nations and the European powers.

Nader's talk of counterposing the "mainstream Iraqis" and the "insurgents" indicates that he accepts the official pretexts for the colonialist war—the claim that the US intervened for the purpose of "liberating" Iraq, and the no less cynical lie that the armed opposition enjoys little popular support and consists entirely of terrorists, criminals and remnants of the regime of Saddam Hussein.

Notwithstanding Nader's efforts to portray Kerry as a progressive alternative to Bush, the Democratic presidential aspirant is no less committed to American military "success" in Iraq than the incumbent, and a Kerry victory in November would not mean an end to the war or the withdrawal of American troops.

Kerry is assiduously offering himself to the American ruling elite as a more credible war leader than Bush. He pledges a more successful effort to round up international support—i.e., UN administrators, foreign troop contingents, financial aid and investment—to bolster the beleaguered US occupation. And he is positioning himself as a candidate who can more effectively mobilize the American population for the long-term sacrifices required to maintain a colonial-style regime in Iraq, both in terms of cuts in domestic social

spending and the demand for additional military manpower, which will inevitably require restoration of the draft.

Nader is well aware of Kerry's agreement with the imperialist war aims behind the US invasion of Iraq, and if he chooses not to dispute the issue, it is because he shares those goals. This standpoint is consistent with the gadfly role Nader has long played in relation to American capitalism. He criticizes—occasionally sharply—certain features of corporate America, but he does not challenge the profit system as a whole.

This attitude was displayed in the discussions that comprised the bulk of the Nader-Kerry meeting, on domestic issues and on corporate influence in the US political system. According to Nader, this discussion centered on his complaints that the Democratic Party has moved to the right on issues such as consumer protection, welfare spending and business regulation, caving in to corporate interests.

In response to this charge, according to a Kerry aide, Kerry replied, "Don't judge me by the people who preceded me. You may have had a disagreement with Bill Clinton, or Al Gore, or the Democratic leadership in Congress.... but that's not me. I have fought with you, I have been with you on a range of issues, and you should judge me by my record in the Senate."

Nader confirmed this exchange in subsequent press interviews, calling Kerry's response "a form of music" to his ears. He went on to praise their "common determination" to reduce "subsidies, handouts, giveaways" to corporate interests, strengthen unions and crack down on "corporate crime, fraud and abuse."

For all his rhetoric about opposing corporate control of the US political system, however, Nader made no mention in his subsequent comments about the huge flow of corporate money into the Democratic Party campaign—Kerry actually outraised Bush in the most recent reporting period. Nor did he raise with Kerry the flagrantly anti-democratic conduct of Democratic functionaries who are opposing efforts to place Nader's name on the ballot in various states, and threatening to challenge his ballot petitions after they are filed.

Instead, Nader offered effusive praise for Kerry, describing him as "very presidential," a good speaker and candidate, and recalling Kerry's role in the movement against the Vietnam War. "I've known him a long time," Nader told the *New York Times*. "It's hard not to like a 27-year-old guy who comes back from the war and helps lead the anti-war movement."

Nader repeated his contention that his campaign would not take votes from Kerry, but would, on the contrary, strengthen the effort to defeat Bush and put a Democrat in the White House in November. This argument, needless to say, makes a mockery of Nader's pretensions to genuine

independence from the two-party system.

Nader compared Kerry favorably to former vice president Gore, the Democratic candidate in 2000. The difference between Kerry and Gore "is the difference between a spruce tree and petrified wood," Nader told the *New York Times*. "Gore was petrified wood. He was stiff as a board, he didn't want to have these kinds of meetings. He didn't want to have meetings like this when he was vice president three years before the election. Kerry is much more open."

Even this seemingly banal and subjective commentary has political significance. After his defeat in 2000, Gore began to reposition himself to the left within the spectrum of American bourgeois politics, harshly criticizing the Bush administration for its attacks on democratic rights in the course of the "war on terror," and opposing the decision to go to war against Iraq. Gore ultimately endorsed Howard Dean for the Democratic presidential nomination.

Since the demise of Dean's bid for the Democratic nomination, Gore has shelved his antiwar rhetoric and rallied behind Kerry, tacitly embracing the latter's pro-war position. Nevertheless, the attempt to present Kerry as some kind of "left" or "progressive" improvement over Gore is as absurd as it is dishonest.

Nader is well aware that the majority of Americans oppose the war, and that antiwar sentiment is even more widespread among Democratic voters. A number of bourgeois commentators have noted that Kerry's greatest potential vulnerability is the broad and deep antiwar feeling that could be drawn behind an independent candidate who forcefully made opposition to the war and occupation of Iraq a centerpiece of his campaign.

But Nader has, to this point, chosen to downplay the war question, in order to facilitate his negotiations and maneuvers with the Democratic Party and its candidate. Nothing could more clearly demonstrate the unprincipled character of Nader's politics, and the fact that, in the end, he offers his political services to prop up and defend the very political system he purports to oppose.



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