

THE MYTH OF THE 'GOOD' NADER

Make You Ralph

by Jonathan Chait

As Ralph Nader prepares for another spoiler run at the presidency, liberals are again wringing their hands at the damage he may do not only to Democrats' chances of retaking the White House but to his own reputation as well. "The most regrettable thing about Mr. Nader's new candidacy is not how it is likely to affect the election, but how it will affect Mr. Nader's own legacy," editorialized *The New York Times* this week. "Ralph Nader has been one of the giants of the American reform movement. . . . [I]t would be a tragedy if Mr. Nader allowed [his anger] to give the story of his career a sad and bitter ending." The same theme was sounded in November of 2000. "Bernie Sanders is right. Ralph Nader is 'one of the heroes of contemporary American society,'" argued Eric Alterman in *The Nation*. "How sad, therefore, that he is helping to undo so much of his life's work in a misguided fit of political pique and ideological purity." As Robert Scheer lamented in the *Los Angeles Times*, "What Nader did was to impulsively betray a lifetime of painstaking, frustrating, but most often effective, efforts on his part to make a better world. He is a good man who went very wrong."

The good-man-who-went-wrong assessment of Nader is virtually unchallenged among liberals. But, if you think about it for a moment, it's awfully strange. Heroes of history do not normally reverse themselves out of the blue. George Washington did not end his days pining for a return of the British monarchy to U.S. shores. George Orwell did not suddenly warm to the virtues of totalitarianism. Nor, for that matter, did Ralph Nader go wrong after decades of doing good. The qualities that liberals have observed in him of late—the monomania, the vindictiveness, the rage against pragmatic liberalism—have been present all along. Indeed, an un-blinkered look at Nader's public life shows that his presidential campaigns represent not a betrayal of his earlier career but its apotheosis.

Nader made his name with the 1965 publication of *Unsafe at Any Speed*, an exposé of the Chevy Corvair. Today, people generally remember the ways in which Nader was right—the appalling lack of concern for safety in the automobile industry and the need for federal regulations. Few realize that Nader's campaign against the Corvair was only the most visible edge of an uncompromising, conspiratorial worldview. Nader believed not only that the Corvair was dangerous but that General Motors (GM) knew it was. Justin Martin, in his fair-minded 2002 biography, *Nader: Crusader, Spoiler, Icon*, shows how Nader hounded liberal Connecticut Senator Abraham Ribicoff into investigating whether GM had lied about what it knew in testimony before Congress. In a letter to Ribicoff, Nader wrote, "Now comes decisive evidence which reveals a labyrinthine and systematic intra-company collusion, involving high General Motors officials, to sequester and suppress company data and films." Nader insisted he had an array of inside sources and documents that would reveal this conspiracy. Ribicoff dutifully assigned a pair of staffers to the case, and they spent two years chasing down Nader's leads. None of them panned out. The investigators found no evidence that GM knew of the Corvair's safety flaws. The failure to confirm Nader's suspicions enraged him. "He could not let go of the Corvair issue," one of the staffers told Martin. "He was fixated. And, if you didn't accept or believe the same things he did, you were either stupid or venal."

During the late '60s and early '70s, Nader developed a reputation as a wonk's wonk, a data-driven do-gooder with a stack of papers perpetually tucked under his arm. In fact, even then his work was driven by ideologically motivated fanaticism. In 1971, Nader pressured one of his associates, Lowell Dodge, to sex up his study "Small on Safety: The

Designed-in Dangers of the Volkswagen.” In his self-proclaimed 1976 hatchet job, *Me & Ralph*, former *TNR* managing editor David Sanford describes how Nader insisted that Dodge rewrite the conclusion of the study so that it began, “The Volkswagen is the most hazardous car in use in significant numbers in the U.S. today.” Objecting that “the conclusion is not reflected in the data,” Dodge left the project, allowing others to take credit as principal authors. “I have always carried around considerable guilt about what I regard as the extreme intellectual dishonesty of that conclusion,” he told Sanford.

Nader’s true fame came not from *Unsafe at Any Speed* but from the fact that its publication prompted GM to hire a private investigator to dig up damaging personal information that might discredit him. The irony is that Nader’s grandiose paranoia predated this episode. Before publishing *Unsafe at Any Speed*, Nader worked as an obscure functionary at the Labor Department under then-Assistant Secretary Pat Moynihan. “Ralph was a very suspicious man,” Moynihan told Charles McCarry in his 1972 biography *Citizen Nader*. “He used to warn me that the phones at the Labor Department might be tapped. I’d say, ‘Fine! They’ll learn that the unemployment rate for March is 5.3 percent, that’s what they’ll learn.’”

Nader’s friends recalled that often he would act furtively, speaking in code, always convinced he was being monitored or phone-tapped. When he insisted in 1966 that he was being followed, one of his friends replied, according to Martin, “Ralph, your paranoia has grown to new extremes.” Of course, it turned out that in that instance Nader *was* being followed. But this merely proved the old adage that sometimes even the paranoid have enemies plotting against them.

Nader sued GM and won \$425,000, which he used to found activist organizations that helped push through a staggering series of consumer and environmental reforms, most of them in the late ’60s and early ’70s. Nader rightly wins credit for spurring progress during the era. And yet, even during his heyday, Nader habitually denounced liberals and their work, sabotaging the very causes he claimed to believe in. Martin’s biography is filled with examples. In 1970, Nader championed a report by his staff savaging Ed Muskie, the liberal senator from Maine. Muskie, who helped engineer the Air Quality Act of 1967, had a reputation as an environmental ally, but Nader’s report called the act “disastrous,” adding, “That fact alone would warrant his being stripped of his title as ‘Mr. Pollution Control.’”

That same year, the Senate overwhelmingly passed a bill to create a Consumer Protection Agency (CPA), what Nader called his highest legislative goal. But, just days after praising the bill, Nader turned against it, saying that “intolerable erosions” had rendered the bill “unacceptable.” As Martin writes, “Without Nader’s backing, the bill lost momentum” and died in committee. The pattern repeated itself, as the CPA passed either the House or the Senate five more times over the next six years, but Nader rejected every bill as too compromised. “Ralph could have had a consumer agency bill in any of three Congresses,” liberal consumer activist and former Nader associate Mike Pertschuk told Martin. “But he held out for the perfect bill.”

The final defeat came in 1978. Again, Nader’s strategy was to impugn every Democrat who harbored any reservations at all about the bill. He maligned Washington Representative Tom Foley as “a broker for agribusiness”—despite the fact that Foley had bucked agribusiness to pass a bill regulating meatpackers. He attacked Colorado liberal Pat Schroeder, who had supported earlier versions of the CPA but had minor reservations this time, as a “mushy liberal” selling her vote to corporate contributors. He so alienated Democrats that, as the measure went down to defeat, one reportedly said as he voted no, “This one’s for you, Ralph.” House Speaker Tip O’Neill told *The Washington Post*, “I know of about eight guys who would have voted for us if it were not for Nader.”

For Nader, it was almost axiomatic that anybody who disagreed with him was a corporate lackey. “Nader sees critics as enemies,” wrote Sanford, a former ally. “Those who

do not serve him serve the evil elements of corporations.” This Manichaeian worldview came through in everything Nader did. In the 1970s, he worked to establish automatic funding for Public Interest Research Groups (PIRG) on campus—proto-Naderite outfits to train the next generation of like-minded activists. Nader’s preferred funding mechanism was for every student to automatically contribute \$1; those who objected could go to the college administration for a refund. But the administration at Penn State University in 1975 opted instead for a positive checkoff, whereby each student would check a box if he wanted to pitch in \$2 for the PIRG. Nader attacked Penn State as “a citadel of fascism” and threatened one Penn State board member: “I would advise Mister Baker to study very carefully the meaning of conflict of interest if he wants to understand the kind of disclosures that will be forthcoming in the coming year.”

The Jimmy Carter presidency only saw a heightening of Nader’s schismatic tendencies. “I want access. I want to be able to see [Carter] and talk to him. I expected to be consulted,” he told *The New York Times*. That Carter filled his administration with former Naderites didn’t help. Less than a year after Carter put former Nader deputy Joan Claybrook in charge of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Nader denounced her, demanding she resign for implementing an air-bag regulation with “an unheard of lead time provision.” In 1980, Nader told *Rolling Stone*, “In the last year we’ve seen the ‘corporatization’ of Jimmy Carter. Whereas he was impotent and kind of pathetic the first year and a half, he’s now surrendered. . . . The two-party system, by all criteria, is bankrupt—they have nothing of any significance to offer the voters, so a lot of voters say why should they go and vote for Tweedledum and Tweedledee.” (Liberals today who anguish over Nader’s insistence that no important differences exist between the two parties should note that this belief dates back more than two decades.) In the summer of 1980, Jonathan Alter (now a *Newsweek* columnist) worked on Nader’s voting guide for the presidential election. Alter came away amazed by Nader’s fury at Carter. “He didn’t seem overly distressed at the idea of Ronald Reagan becoming president,” Alter later told Martin. As Nader addressed a gathering of supporters in 1981, according to *The Washington Post*, “Reagan is going to breed the biggest resurgence in nonpartisan citizen activism in history.”

Of course, that did not happen. But twelve years of Republican rule failed to dim Nader’s conviction that little difference existed between the two parties. Even Nader’s critics seem to forget that he began running against Democrats in 1992, when he urged New Hampshire primary voters to write in “None of the above.” “None of the above” meant Nader himself, as he would tell audiences: “Hello, I’m ‘None of the above,’ and I’m not running for president.” Nader demanded that the major candidates address what he deemed the important issues of the day. In his 2002 memoir, *Crashing the Party*, Nader alleges that Bill Clinton leaked the Gennifer Flowers adultery revelations himself to avoid having to address Nader’s agenda. “I’m almost certain that [Clinton] and his supporters knew [the Flowers scandal] was coming,” he posits. “Clinton knew how to stay on message, and nothing was going to get him to take a stand on President Bush’s NAFTA proposal before Congress, or on nuclear power, or on the failing banks in New Hampshire.” This assertion neatly encapsulates Nader’s style of thinking—the fevered conspiracy-mongering, the moral righteousness, and the laughably outsized role he assigns himself in world events.

As Nader embarks upon his fourth protest run against the Democrats in as many elections, there is something slightly ridiculous about the shock of his liberal critics. They still don’t know who they’re dealing with. Nader is not a heroic figure tragically overcome by his own flaws; he is a selfish, destructive maniac who, for a brief historical period, happened upon a useful role.

In the waning days of the 2000 election, some of Nader's campaign advisers urged him to concentrate on uncontested states, like New York and California, where he could attract local media without competition from the major-party candidates and win liberal voters who needn't fear tipping the race to George W. Bush. Instead, he chose a whirlwind tour of battleground states, campaigning in Pennsylvania and Florida, where votes would be harder to come by but more consequential to the outcome of the race. Liberals assume Nader tried to maximize his vote total without regard to how it affected Bush and Gore. The truth is that he *actively sought* to help Bush, even at the expense of his own vote total.

It's therefore both comic and sad when liberals take Nader at his word that he does not believe he affected the outcome of the 2000 race. The website RalphDontRun.net patiently explains how, if Al Gore had netted even 1 percent of Nader's 97,000 Florida votes, he would have overcome Bush's 537-vote margin. Like other liberals, the people behind the website seem to think, if they could only persuade Nader that his candidacy might help reelect Bush, it would dissuade him from running. More likely, it would have the opposite effect. The real mystery is not why Nader would do something so destructive to liberalism. It's why anybody ever thought he wouldn't.