

REFLECTIONS ON CAMPAIGN 2000

By Michael Ventura

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Campaign 2000 has left America weaker, with less to trust in its leaders and less to trust in itself, because each candidate avoided dealing with the fundamental moral choices his candidacy represented. I write one week before the election, and this piece will appear two days after it, but damage has been done no matter who wins.

The Nader Campaign

When a man (Ralph Nader) and a party (The Greens) campaign while admitting no hope of election, then they are using our presidential selection process -- the most consistent example of the peaceful transference of power in history -- for other goals. Nader was upfront about this: His purpose was to set up an effective mechanism for a truly alternative voice in American politics. But that's as far as his honesty went. Sadly, it took this presidential bid to finally corrupt Ralph Nader. In the last weeks of the campaign it was clear that Nader's candidacy threatened Al Gore sufficiently in many swing states to throw the election to George W. Bush. What did Nader and his supporters do about this? They lied. They insisted they weren't hurting Gore; and that, even if they were, Gore and Bush were the same -- an especially conscious and pernicious lie. It is true that Bush and Gore were virtually identical in their stance toward the world economy; but it is also true that their domestic and environmental programs (and records!) were drastically different. An overwhelmingly affluent movement, the Greens refused to take responsibility for the suffering of millions of poor and disenfranchised Americans -- a suffering that Nader knew would deepen considerably under a Bush-Cheney administration. In their avoidance of this fact, the Greens were as morally bankrupt as any other political party.

Nader's half-truth was potent: It is essential to build an alternative political voice, outside the Democratic and Republican parties -- a voice not beholden to corporations and that cannot be ignored; and it is incontestable that, in the long run, such a voice could benefit not only America's poor but the world's. But the other half of that truth is also incontestable: Building this movement is going to cost something. In this election it could cost a woman's right to choose, a balanced Supreme Court, campaign-finance reform, medical care for the poor, and countless environmental decisions. When faced with these questions, the sound bites of Nader and the Greens were as glib and misleading as everyone else's -- they were, in fact, little better than wisecracks. The reason for their evasions was obvious: Their campaign was fueled by a sense of righteousness, and honesty about the price of that righteousness would make it, well, less righteous -- and would undercut their support. Thus Nader and the Greens indulged in and perpetuated America's favorite and most destructive political deception: You can have what you want without consequence.

But politics is the arena of consequences, of terrible prices. If America is to stay rich, much of the world will have to stay poor. (Bush and Gore know this but can never say it.) If the environment is to be saved, convenience as well as a chunk of our standard

of living will have to be sacrificed. (Nader and the Greens wouldn't admit this in their campaign because their college-kid base wants high-flying lives and high-paying jobs.) If our standard of living is not sacrificed to some extent, the environment will go on collapsing and the future will be severely threatened. (Gore said this forcefully in his book but soft-peddled it in his campaign.) Nobody would say these things because not one of these politicians trusted their constituencies to face the moral implications of their desires.

The consequences for Nader and the Greens are enormous. Having lied and evaded to give their party a national voice, they must continue to lie and evade to keep their constituency. And so the Greens have in effect cut themselves off from America's poor, by making the choice in this campaign to sacrifice the poor to their goals. This doesn't bode well for a revolutionary party.

The Gore Campaign

Al Gore revealed the weakness and insecurity of the American public more than any politician in my memory. The majority agreed with him on the issues but were frank in admitting that his intelligence, his grasp of detail, his very earnestness, intimidated them. They resented, rather than welcomed, his abilities -- something that was not true of the citizens who voted for Franklin Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower, or even John Kennedy. The problem was never that Gore was "not himself," as he was often accused of being; the problem was that he could never help but be himself: a well-schooled, well-versed political technician, deeply experienced in the ways of Washington, uncomfortable pretending to be anything else. The public demanded that Gore be a "regular guy," and whenever he tried to fulfill that demand they called him a phony -- and rightly, because he's not a regular guy. He tripped over his own feet whenever he attempted to feign a closeness to some hypothetical "average American." His moral failure was precisely his attempt to be liked on any terms not his own. Instead of hammering the issues, he kept trying to make himself presentable. Doing so, he was fighting not only Bush but himself. He didn't trust Americans enough to challenge them; instead, he tried to convince them. Which is to say: He didn't believe in the America he spoke of -- not enough to stake his election on it. Trying to appease the public's insecurity, he made himself weak and the polity weaker.

I am far to the left of Gore (far to the left of Nader, for that matter), but it would be more than cynicism, it would be willful blindness, to doubt his sincerity and his commitment to making government the mediator between the powerful and the powerless -- which is, after all, government's most crucial function in a republic. Whether that goal is possible in America anymore is questionable; whether Gore could manage it is even more questionable -- and he certainly wants to make the world safer for American money, which is to keep much of the world in misery; but unlike Bush he understands the problems and unlike Nader he seems unwilling to sacrifice the (American) poor for his ideals. The moral choice implicit in Gore's candidacy was nothing less than a test of faith: Is the United States still a republic, or could it be again? Can such a government serve both the powerful and the powerless, as the Founders designed it to? Or is the "great experiment" essentially over? Gore never made those questions explicit, and so the citizenry was left to choose between personalities rather than visions. Thus, no matter the outcome, the political will of the country has been neither tested nor strengthened.

The Bush Campaign

So the great irony of Campaign 2000 was that the hypocrisy of Nader and the timidity of Gore created a vacuum in which the most radical (viable) candidate could afford to be the most direct. Bush wants to end the right to abortion; end affirmative action; reverse many environmental protections; is against national medical insurance; would unilaterally break treaties with Russia; and wants to stuff the Supreme Court with arch-conservatives on the model of Anthony Scalia and Clarence Thomas (making for a profoundly anti-Federalist majority on the Court) -- deeply radical changes in the national direction. Yet because many found him personable, he rarely had to defend his stands and didn't have to be too openly for or against anything. His choice of the arch-conservative Cheney as vice-president sent the only message needed to the far right, and Cheney's record went amazingly unmentioned in the debates. On most issues, Bush got a free ride. That his national security adviser, Condoleeza Rice, is so popular with the oil companies that they named a tanker after her -- yes, a corporate ship carrying her name sails the seas! -- says it all; but little was made of this, or of many facts like it. Bush had no need to address the moral vacuum of the campaign because he embodied that vacuum.

His mantra ("Gore trusts government, I trust people") encouraged suspicion and dislike of the very office he was running for, but even a contradiction that blatant doesn't matter in a vacuum. In a political vacuum, where vision is reduced to personality and intelligence is seen as threatening by large numbers of focus-groups, the safest tactic is to shut up and be vacuous. Earnestly and repetitively vacuous. Unlike Nader, Bush did not betray himself (since he wasn't persistently questioned, he wasn't tempted to); unlike Gore, he didn't struggle against himself; his strength was the failure of his opponents to be true to themselves and the weakness of an electorate threatened by complexity -- so Bush had no need to strain. Which made an inexperienced, uninformed, fiercely conservative candidate look friendly and presidential.

The Outcome

Most Americans may be prosperous, but we know we are not happy. Our country may be powerful, but individually we are not. These paradoxes have thrown us into confusions we fear to face. Nader, Gore, and Bush, each in his way, played to the three major aspects of that fear: our fear of consequences (Nader); our fear of intelligence (Gore); our fear of complexity (Bush). The next president will owe his office to the confusion rather than the consent of the governed. Campaign 2000 will have been decided by a people choosing between their fears. Which makes choosing between "the lesser evil" seem like the good old days. ■

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