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An odd accusation from Ralph Nader

After several decades as one of America's great public-interest advocates, Ralph Nader has developed an extraordinary response when people say they don't think he should run for president in 2004.

During a Feb. 4 interview on NPR's "All Things Considered" program, Nader had this to say when asked about an editorial in *The Nation* urging him not to run this year: "It's a marvelous demonstration by liberals, if you will, of censorship. Now mind you, running for political office is every American's right. Running for political office means free speech exercise, it means exercising the right of petition, the right of assembly. And so when they say 'Do not run,' they're not just challenging and rebutting; they're crossing that line into censorship, which is completely unacceptable."

News anchor Melissa Block followed up: "Wouldn't censorship, though, be if anyone were physically preventing you from running? They're not saying that you can't run; they're asking you not to. They're asking you to make that decision for what they consider to be the greater good of the country."

Nader: "Well, I don't ask them not to speak. Why are they asking me not to speak?"

Block: "Well, I think what they would say is they're saying, 'Speak, but in the forum of debate and not as a candidate.'"

Nader: "In other words, exercise my First Amendment rights outside the electoral arena, not inside. No, they don't have a leg to stand on here. Now challenge, rebuttal, lack of support; they can do all that in robust debate. But to say 'Do not run' to anybody is to say, 'Do not speak. Do not petition. Do not assemble. Remain silent.' That's just unacceptable, especially coming from people like the editors of *The Nation*."

Of course Nader has a right to run for president. And others have no less of a right to urge that he choose not to do so. It makes no sense to claim that such urging amounts to "censorship."

Rhetorical overdrive carries with it the danger of conflating whatever one doesn't want to hear into some kind of straw caricature. The editorial in the Feb. 16 edition of

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The Nation – titled “An Open Letter to Ralph Nader” – provided a set of arguments for why a Nader-in-2004 presidential race would be unwise for the public-interest agenda that he has long championed. In no way did the editorial urge Nader to “remain silent.”

Ralph Nader has cogently pointed out anti-democratic aspects of corporate power and government operations for almost half a century. Now, it's far beneath this exemplary citizen to claim that those who ask him not to run for president this year are seeking to interfere with his First Amendment rights. Actually, they're exercising their own rights – in this instance, to Nader's displeasure – without in any way seeking to infringe on his.

While Nader is 100 percent correct that he has a right to run for president, that's not in dispute. The debate is over the wisdom of running this year. Like many other people who voted for Nader in 2000, I agree with The Nation's editorial. But that's not the point. Agree with it or not, there's no basis for Nader's canard about “censorship.”

No amount of such red-herring charges will shore up the scant support for a Nader-for-president campaign this year. When Nader resorts to them, he seems to be putting up a smokescreen, as if his rationales for a presidential run in 2004 can't withstand scrutiny.

Valid political debate can include the assertion that any number of legitimate actions such as electoral campaigns are not advisable – whether due to narrowly tactical or broadly strategic reasons – at a particular time. Political advocates must be able to have such debates about tactics and strategies without deferring to charges of “censorship” along the lines of Nader's claim during his NPR interview.

For a very long time, Ralph Nader has exemplified the spirit of a key observation from George Orwell: “If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear.” Now, many longtime allies are trying to tell Nader what he doesn't want to hear about his planned 2004 presidential race. Without trying to impinge on his liberty, they are making good use of their own.

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