

OCTOBER 30

Nader's game of chicken

Ralph Nader won't receive more than 1 percent of the vote nationwide on Election Day, but he's already the winner in a spectacular game of "chicken." After the vast majority of former allies jumped off his electoral vehicle, Nader kept flooring the accelerator — while scorning them as "scared liberals" who "lost their nerve."

For decades Nader's signature issue has been corporate power. But David Korten, author of the seminal book "When Corporations Rule the World," is one of the many high-profile Nader 2000 endorsers who've opposed his 2004 venture. "Your campaign is the wrong war against the wrong enemy for the wrong reason," Korten wrote in an Oct. 21 open letter to Nader. "Tragically, it has come increasingly to appear that its primary intention is to throw the election to Bush to extract your personal vengeance against the Democratic Party."

As a former Nader supporter, I've come to similar conclusions. His campaign has been a pointless project — unless the point is to again prove that he can hurt the Democratic Party in a big way. With most polls showing a dead heat, Nader insisted on the need to keep running all-out, even — and perhaps especially — in the closest states. Nader's travel schedule for late October, putting him in Florida and several other battleground states, must have been appreciated at the White House.

More than any other American reformer of the last half-century, Nader kept showing that the emperor had no clothes. Now, at a crucial moment in history, Nader has become a de facto ally of the current emperor.

Ever since he announced his 2004 candidacy on NBC's "Meet the Press," Nader's most significant base has been network TV producers, who have repeatedly booked him onto many of the biggest shows in the country. Yet his poll numbers have plummeted in recent months, now fluctuating between 1 and 2 percent.

If it's true, as some recent polling indicates, that the Nader effect of boosting

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Bush's prospects has diminished, that's no thanks to Nader himself. He has proceeded as though defeating Bush hardly matters, while many people he derides as faint-hearted liberals have worked overtime to mitigate Nader's utility to the Bush campaign.

Any power that Nader enjoys in the closing hours of this presidential contest is not in the number of votes he'll draw but in the apparent tightness of the Bush-Kerry race. Eight months ago, on the day Nader announced his campaign, he vocally rejected the term "spoiler," calling it "contemptuous." But now the Nader campaign not only accepts the "spoiler" label but actually revels in it.

On Oct. 7, a Nader campaign email to supporters began this way: "Spoiler cards and t-shirts are going fast, get yours while supplies last!" The email asked: "How can you spoil something that's already spoiled?" According to such rhetoric, the election process is so rotten that it's impossible to make things worse.

In contrast to his avowed idealism, the candidate has descended into nihilism blended with macho posturing. A few weeks ago, when 75 members of his handpicked Nader 2000 Citizens Committee — including such stalwart figures on the left as Howard Zinn, Noam Chomsky, Barbara Ehrenreich, Jim Hightower and Studs Terkel — pointedly urged support for Kerry in swing states, Nader publicly declared that they'd undergone "a total loss of nerve."

To hear Ralph Nader tell it, his current supporters are intrepid visionaries while ex-supporters are apostates who lack sufficient courage to keep the faith. Among the fallen is Nader's running mate from the 1996 and 2000 campaigns, the Native American activist Winona LaDuke, who wrote an eloquent endorsement of John Kerry in mid-October.

Now, for the 2004 election, the only thing that Nader can plausibly accomplish is to be exactly what he started out this election year proclaiming he was absolutely not — a spoiler.

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