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Too much 'Vision'; too little hearing

The father of President Bush the Second called it "the vision thing" – which he was widely presumed to lack. By early 1987, Time magazine reported, George H. W. Bush was using that phrase "in clear exasperation." Then, as now, journalists seemed to clamor for presidential candidates to seem visionary.

Many politicians have grandly quoted from the Book of Proverbs: "Where there is no vision, the people perish." The biblical invocation plays into the media-fed notion that great leaders succeed when they persevere according to their own lights.

But such popularized concepts of political leadership – encouraged by countless journalists – are long on vision and short on hearing. With apparent self-assurance, politicians often have a way of filtering out the messages they don't want to hear, even from their own supporters.

President Lyndon Johnson epitomized the alpha and omega of a leader's visionary determination. To his enormous credit, he pushed hard for civil rights legislation soon after becoming president. But meanwhile, he plunged ahead with the Vietnam War – and he didn't want to hear what many people, including some in his own administration, were trying to tell him. Johnson had "the vision thing" down, all right – and, as a result, Vietnam became a place of mass carnage.

The news media are at their best when telling leaders what they don't want to hear. But candidates for president rarely seem to be good listeners. On the contrary, the preoccupations with polls and focus groups are about searching for buzzwords and facile images.

Candidates attaining mass-media favor are up the rungs in efforts to appear visionary and "presidential." Yet a capacity to be caught up in one's own vision tells us nothing about the quality of leadership – which should include an eagerness to hear.

For decades, one of the most important public voices of clarity has come from Ralph Nader. First known as a "consumer advocate" in the 1960s, his focus soon broadened to include the fundamental imperatives of fighting corporate power and promoting genuine participatory democracy. When he ran for president in 1996 and more

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vehemently in 2000, he seemed to embody a cause much greater than himself. Nader was a leader with a keen sense of hearing ordinary people – including activists strategically at work to improve our country.

But now, Nader seems to be so transfixed with his own vision that he's much less inclined to be listening. Many who supported his previous presidential campaigns (myself included) are opposed to a 2004 Nader race – and aghast that he's on the verge of deciding to go ahead with it.

Last month, Nader announced that he won't seek the Green Party presidential nomination but may run as an independent. He plans to make a decision by the end of January.

Early this month Matthew Rothschild, the editor of *The Progressive* magazine, wrote that "above all, today there is a recognition, even among many Greens, that the risk of another four years of Bush may be too great to bear." Referring to Nader's prospective independent presidential campaign, Rothschild added: "There is no groundswell of grassroots support for such a move; it is almost totally individualistic."

In politics, with media coverage devoting an inordinate amount of attention to individual personas, mainstream news outlets frequently present the individual as the engine that pulls history forward. But progressive leadership can't be successful when it is out of sync with social movements. Often it's much more difficult to challenge those you hold in high regard than those you disdain. So far, many progressive leaders and journalists who don't think twice about denouncing George W. Bush or criticizing Democratic presidential candidates have hesitated to make public their private negative views of a Nader presidential campaign this year.

Overall, we're acculturated to perceive stubbornness – adherence to a "vision" – as a sign of strength. Sometimes it is. But at other times it is a weakness. Allies can assist us to distinguish between the two. That's what friends are for – to help us understand when we might be truly visionary and when we're just seeing things. ●