

FEBRUARY 23

Ralph Nader's tin ear ...

With his announcement Sunday on "Meet the Press" that he's running for president in 2004, Ralph Nader appears to be politically tone deaf in a year when the crying need to defeat George W. Bush could hardly be louder or more urgent.

After decades of helping to build progressive movements, Nader has now launched a presidential campaign that is – at best – tactically oblivious to many of those movements. After a career of demanding political accountability, he has opted for an "independent" candidacy that makes him accountable to no institution but himself.

Nader is proceeding so that not a single guideline, from the Green Party or any other collective entity, will have the power to deter him from campaigning wherever and however he sees fit. If Nader – in effect, making decisions as the unremovable CEO of his presidential race – wants to campaign for votes in closely contested states, that's the way it's gonna be.

By any measure, large numbers of Americans who supported Nader's campaign in 2000 do not intend to vote for him this time. But mainstream radio and TV producers are likely to be more hospitable; their professional concerns revolve around putting on a good show, not defeating Bush. After getting 2.7 percent of the popular vote in a razor-thin presidential contest, Nader has become more capable of presenting himself to media as an electoral player – while regard for him among progressives has plummeted.

In the world of political spin, television is a very big gear – but to have sustained impact it needs to mesh its sizable teeth with other gears that are close to the ground. Nationally, Nader's on-the-ground machinery has rusted and fallen into severe disrepair.

Obviously, Ralph Nader finds his own priorities to be compelling, but as a practical matter they seem indifferent to the task of building viable progressive coalitions. Getting onto networks as a talking head is a very different matter than serving the interests of activism for the long haul. The post-election scarcity of momentum from

Nader's 2000 race speaks volumes. His independent campaign this year offers even less beneficial prospects.

Now that Nader has made his decision, people who are more interested in preventing a second term for the Bush-Rove administration should avoid compounding the likely destructive aspects of Nader's 2004 campaign. Among the advisable approaches: Never stoop to personal invective. (It's pointless and counterproductive.) Ditch the term "spoiler." (It's a stupid word that leads to canned arguments.) Keep our eyes on the prize. (Organize, organize, organize. And vote Bush out.)

In a recent interview, referring to this year's presidential race, Noam Chomsky pointed out:

The current incumbents may do severe, perhaps irreparable, damage if given another hold on power – a very slim hold, but one they will use to achieve very ugly and dangerous ends. In a very powerful state, small differences may translate into very substantial effects on the victims, at home and abroad. It is no favor to those who are suffering, and may face much worse ahead, to overlook these facts. Keeping the Bush circle out means holding one's nose and voting for some Democrat, but that's not the end of the story. The basic culture and institutions of a democratic society have to be constructed, in part reconstructed, and defeat of an extremely dangerous clique in the presidential race is only one very small component of that.

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