

# Ralph Alone

Nader's fading crusade.

**R**alph Nader is late. So was Teresa Heinz Kerry when she came to the McDonald Theater on Oct. 7, but for her it was fashionable. While Heinz Kerry's plane taxied in Eugene, nubile college women sang a Joni Mitchell song *a capella* to a packed audience. Star-spangled Kerry banners and Kerry-Edwards T-shirts colored the theater. Media people scribbled and flashed. The air was optimistic.

But with Nader, it's different. It's a chilly Sunday evening, Oct. 10, and Nader, too, is coming to Eugene's McDonald Theater. About 400 people sit on folding chairs, waiting. Press photographers yawn in the aisles. A couple of hand-scrawled signs are taped to the stage: "Kerry for War Lord." "Democrats Betray Public Trust."

Travis Diskin, Nader's frazzled Oregon campaign coordinator, says that Nader is "just past Salem" in his volunteer Greg Kafoury's car. To fill time, Diskin rants about John Kerry's support of big entrees on Bush's neoconservative menu: NAFTA, Plan Colombia, the Iraq War, right-wing Supreme Court judges. Nader alone, says Diskin, stands up for true liberal values.

"Ralph is in this for life," he says. "He hardly *has* a life. He reads these law briefs. He doesn't have a wife. He doesn't even have a girlfriend." Diskin's voice heaves with admiration.

Instead of enjoying the fruits of his retirement, 70-year-old Nader is still on the crusade. He's founded 40 organizations and he's launching more. He's running for president for the fourth time. He keeps on the Democrats like a fly on shit.

Finally, at 9 pm, Nader's crew arrives. Kafoury takes the podium and says that the man everyone's been waiting for will be right up. "Ralph's suit is being pressed," says Kafoury, "with him still in it."

**N**ader's decision to run for president in 2004 has made adversaries of many of his former allies. Michael Moore, who stumped for Nader in 2000, went down on his knees with Bill Maher to beg him not to run for president this year. And a new organization called Repentant Nader Voters calls for people who voted for Nader in 2000 to go for Kerry this time.

In open letter to Nader published as an *L.A. Times* op-ed on Jul. 6, Repentant Nader Voter founder Jason Salzman wrote, "as time has passed, it is clear to us — as people who voted for you — that your campaign was a mistake and it's time to switch from being 'unrepentant' Nader voters to being 'repentant' ones. Why? Tweedle Dee is still Tweedle Dee, but Tweedle Dum has turned into a global tyrant. In other words, you were right about Tweedle Dee but wrong about Tweedle Dum."

Although his support today is only a shadow of what it was in the 2000 presidential race, Nader clings to the outskirts of the limelight. He regularly appears on television and radio talk shows. His campaign tour has taken him through all 50 states. No matter how many people criticize him, plead with him, heckle him and laugh at him, Nader refuses to bow out.

**H**e stands alone at the podium behind a solitary sign: "Nader/Camejo 2004. VoteNader.org." The lights are dim and the stage is bare. His suit is nicely pressed.

Nader seems to be in good health, sharp and logical, but irate. Much of his anger is directed at Oregon Secretary of State Bill Bradbury, who kept him off the state ballot on a technicality. Nader calls Bradbury a "political crook" and demands his immediate resignation.

He then directs his wrath against John Kerry and the liberal Democrats who support him. "Who's pulling Kerry-Edwards in the progressive direction?" he asks. "Just Nader-Camejo. It's not the liberals. The liberals have basically proceeded on the following mantra for Nov. 2: 'Anybody but Bush. Leave Kerry alone. Make no demands on him.' That means Kerry can take for granted the entire liberal wing of the Democratic party and move to the right."

Nader lists the many ways in which Kerry's platform mirrors Bush's. Both want a bigger military budget; both support the Iraq War. "John Kerry, in the first debate, out-hawked George W. Bush!" Nader seethes. "He should be landsliding this giant corporation masquerading as a human being in the White House. He should be landsliding the messianic militarists who think that the invasion of Iraq was fulfilling the Providence's will. Instead, he's in a tight race."

Issues off the table in the race between Kerry and Bush, says Nader, include the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the drug war and corporate crime. "There is no end to the cowardliness of these two parties," he says. "It's like they're in a race to the bottom, and they're dragging our country down with them, and the Republicans are a little bit closer to Hades, and the Democrats are just behind them saying to the liberals, 'Come on! Come on! You got no choice! We haven't reached the Republican party yet!'" Nader's voice is clowny, dripping with sarcasm and frustration.

He segues from criticizing Kerry to blasting environmental groups, the AFL-CIO and Howard Dean. He says that America is under complete commercial control.

"It's now a corporate government," says Nader grimly. "It is now a government of the Exxons by the General Motors for the DuPonts. And that alone. The surrender of our elections to big corporate money, the surrender of our politicians and government institutions to corporate power, that *alone* provides the rationale for resistance against both parties. Or shall we call them one corporate party with two heads wearing different makeup."

Nader is personally offended. "Our government is fooling us under their corporate control, and the corporations are laughing at us!" he says. "Most people want health care for all. Who says no? The HMOs, the drug companies and the health insurance companies. And who do the politicians obey? They obey the corporations'."

Nader lowers his chin and levels with the audience. "Don't let yourself be trivialized," he says. "It's very easy to be trivialized. It's very easy to be trivialized. It's very easy to be trivialized."

A sympathetic laugh ripples through the crowd. "It's very easy to be trivialized," Nader says again. The crowd falls silent. "It's very easy to be trivialized," he says a fifth time.

It's either a joke or a nervous breakdown.

**A**fter Nader's speech, Kafoury returns to the stage to pump the crowd for money. "There is nothing in the world that is more fulfilling than giving Ralph Nader more than you can afford," says Kafoury, whose law firm donated \$31,000 — the biggest contribution to the Nader-Camejo campaign. "Who can give \$1,000?"

Meanwhile, Diskin paces backstage. He tells me that his work for Nader has become a part of his spiritual journey. "I eat breakfast with him sometimes, and I see him mechanically shoving in energy," says Diskin, pantomiming Nader wolfing down food. "I get the idea that he's a vessel channeling a higher spirit. It takes a toll on the vessel, but he's sacrificed his life to fight for what he believes in. That's what we call a patriot."

It's nearly midnight by the time Nader wraps up the question-and-answer session. He plans to drive back to Portland, sleep, and then get to UC Berkeley in the morning — but he still makes time for an interview.

He tells me that he's running not to win, but to "affect the content and the tone of the conversation between the candidates" and to "encourage and give heart" to progressive voters. Despite records showing that he's received several tens of thousands of dollars from Republican donors, Nader insists that none of his \$3.5-million campaign funding comes from Republicans.

I ask him why the Green Party broke with him. "To be charitable, they have low expectation levels," he replies. "They don't represent the underdogs."

I ask him why former allies like Michael Moore and Howard Dean have come out against his 2004 presidential campaign. "They don't understand that the corporations are already in," he says.

An aide signals that time is up. Nader nods and stands to leave. It's late. He's got work to do.

**I**n all his idealism and sincerity, Nader strikes a refreshing contrast to Bush and Kerry. But he is no longer the powerful third-party crusader he was in the 2000 presidential race. Now, Nader seems frustrated and diminished — an alienated progressive victim complaining to other alienated progressive victims.

Just days before, Teresa Heinz Kerry stood onstage in Eugene and offered answers in her charming South African accent. She promised that under her husband's presidency, children will learn the arts in well-funded public schools. A reformed health care system will lower premiums, and Oregon's depressed economy will recover. The government will support the development of alternative energy sources, recognizing the vital connection between a clean planet and human health. The scheme to pay for it all while halving the debt, said Heinz Kerry, is outlined in *Our Plan for America*, available free through the Kerry-Edwards website.

Heinz Kerry is so confident, her husband so *presidential*, that I want to believe her.

But something makes me wonder if the state of the nation is really hopeful or easy to fix, or if Kerry is corrupt like the rest. And I really *do* believe what Ralph Nader says about America. I believe it deeply, in that shuddering doomful part of me that only sees absolutes: the blackness of reality, the bright light of idealism. I believe Ralph, because he's still courageous and alone after all these years — unrelenting, unrepentant, making so much dismal sense. Insisting that "surrender is not an option."

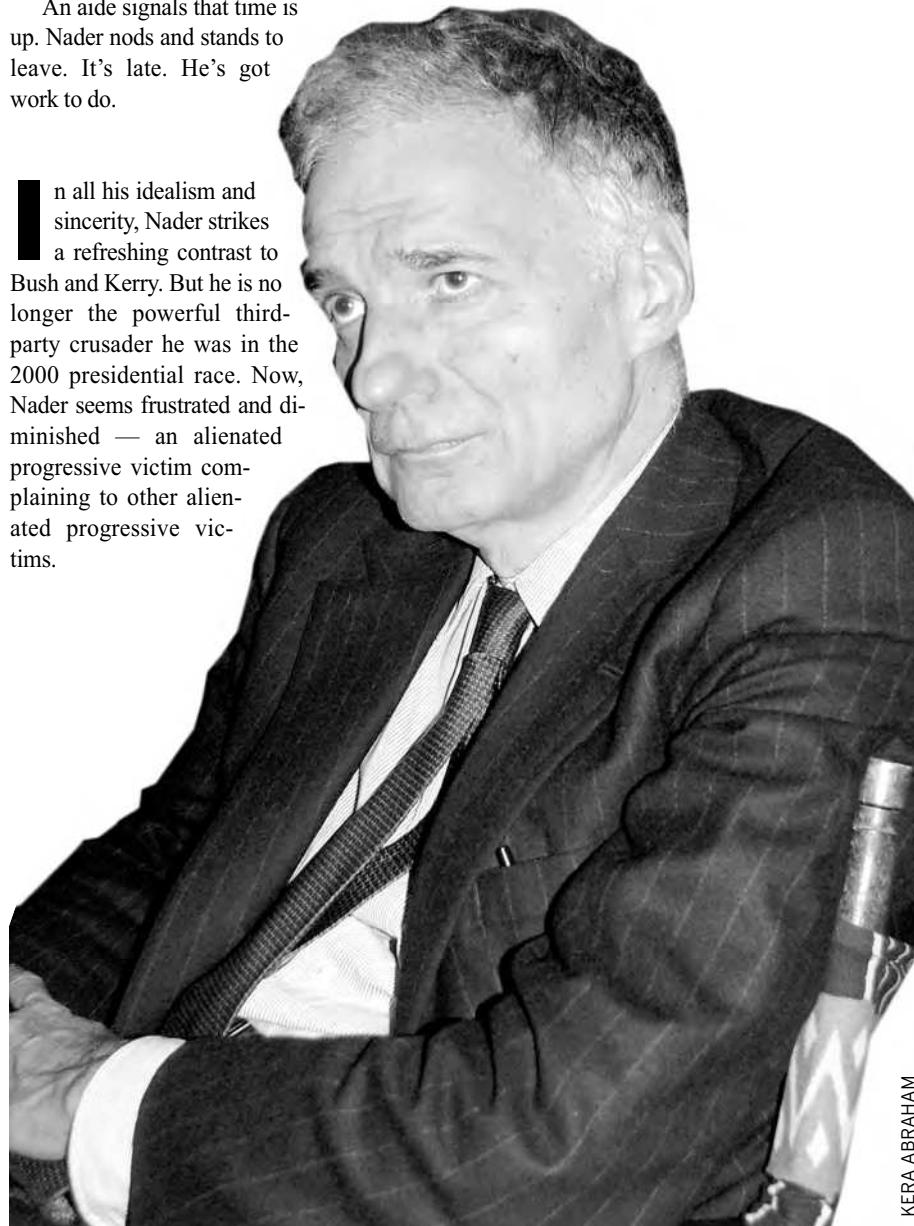
And it reminds me of George W. Bush.

Nader is the uncompromising, bullheaded believer of the left, even if the left thinks he's *right*.

And although Heinz Kerry's smile is just a bit forced when she promises that her husband will bring health care and free education and fabulous hair to all Americans, one thing she says rings sincere:

"Enjoy complexity. It is a treat. We need a president who enjoys complexity and embraces it."

**EW**



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