

# Only Nader Is Right on the Issues

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Tomorrow I will go to a polling station in Princeton, N.J., and vote for Ralph Nader. I know the tired arguments against a Nader vote. He can't win. A vote for Nader is a vote for McCain. He threw the election to George W. Bush in 2000. He is an egomaniac.

There is little disagreement among liberals and progressives about the Nader and Obama campaign issues. Nader would win among us in a landslide if this was based on issues. Sen. Barack Obama's vote to renew the Patriot Act, his votes to continue to fund the Iraq war, his backing of the FISA Reform Act, his craven courting of the Israeli lobby, his support of the death penalty, his refusal to champion universal, single-payer not-for-profit health care for all Americans, his call to increase troop levels and expand the war in Afghanistan, his failure to call for a reduction in the bloated and wasteful defense spending and his lobbying for the huge taxpayer swindle known as the bailout are repugnant to most of us on the left. Nader stands on the other side of all those issues.

So if the argument is not about issues what is it about?

Those on the left who back Obama, although they disagree with much of what he promotes, believe they are choosing the practical over the moral. They see themselves as political realists. They fear John McCain and the Republicans. They believe Obama is better for the country. They are right. Obama is better. He is not John McCain. There will be under Obama marginal improvements for some Americans although the corporate state, as Obama knows, will remain our shadow government and the working class will continue to descend into poverty. Democratic administrations have, at least until Bill Clinton, been more receptive to social programs that provide benefits, better working conditions and higher wages. An Obama presidency, however, will make no difference to those in the Middle East.

I can't join the practical. I spent two decades of my life witnessing the suffering of those on the receiving end of American power. I have stood over the rows of bodies, including women and children, butchered by Ronald Reagan's Contra forces in Nicaragua. I have inspected the mutilated corpses dumped in pits outside San Salvador by the death squads. I have crouched in a concrete hovel as American-made F-16 fighter jets, piloted by Israelis, dropped 500- and 1,000-pound iron-fragmentation bombs on Gaza City.

I can't join the practical because I do not see myself exclusively as an American. The narrow, provincial and national lines that divide cultures and races blurred and evaporated during the years I spent in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, Europe and the Balkans. I built friendships around a shared morality, not a common language, religion, history or tradition. I cannot support any candidate who does not call for immediate withdrawal from Iraq and Afghanistan and an end to Israeli abuse of Palestinians. We have no moral or legal right to debate the terms of the occupation. And we will recover our sanity as a nation only

when our troops have left Iraq and our president flies to Baghdad, kneels before a monument to the hundreds of thousands of Iraqi war dead and asks for forgiveness.

We dismiss the suffering of others because it is not our suffering. There are between 600,000 and perhaps a million dead in Iraq. They died because we invaded and occupied their country. At least three Afghan civilians have died at the hands of the occupation forces for every foreign soldier killed this year. The dead Afghans include the 95 people, 60 of them children, killed by an air assault in Azizabad in August and the 47 wedding guests butchered in July during a bombardment in Nangarhar. The Palestinians are forgotten. Obama and McCain, courting the Israeli lobby, do not mention them. The 1.5 million Palestinians in Gaza live in a vast open-air prison. Supplies and food dribble through the Israeli blockade. Ninety-five percent of local industries have shut down. Unemployment is rampant. Childhood malnutrition has skyrocketed. A staggering 80 percent of families in Gaza are dependent on international food aid to survive.

It is bad enough that I pay taxes, although I will stop paying taxes if we go to war with Iran. It is bad enough that I have retreated into a safe, privileged corner of the globe, a product of industrialized wealth and militarism. These are enough moral concessions, indeed moral failings. I will not accept that the unlawful use of American military power be politely debated among us like the subtle pros and cons of tort law.

George Bush has shredded, violated or absented America from its obligations under international law. He has refused to sign the Kyoto Protocol, backed out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, tried to kill the International Criminal Court, walked out on negotiations on chemical and biological weapons and defied the Geneva Conventions and human rights law in the treatment of detainees in our offshore penal colonies. Most egregiously, he launched an illegal war in Iraq based on fabricated evidence we now know had been discredited even before it was made public. The president is guilty, in short, of what in legal circles is known as the “crime of aggression.”

The legacy of the Bush administration may be the codification of a world without treaties, statutes and laws. Bush may have bequeathed to us a world where any nation, from a rogue nuclear state to a great imperial power, will be able to invoke its domestic laws to annul its obligations to others. This new order will undo five decades of international cooperation—largely put in place by the United States—and thrust us into a Hobbesian nightmare. The exercise of power without law is tyranny.

If we demolish the fragile and delicate international order, if we do not restore a world where diplomacy, broad cooperation and the law are respected, we will see our moral and political authority disintegrate. We will erode the possibility of cooperation between nation-states, including our closest allies, and see visited upon us the evils we visit on others. Obama, like McCain, may tinker with this new world, but neither says they will dismantle it. Nader would.

Practical men and women do not stand up against injustice. The practical remain silent. A voice, even one voice, which speaks the truth and denounces injustice is never useless. It is not impractical. It reminds us of what we should strive to become. It defies moral concession after moral concession that leaves us chanting empty slogans.

When I sat on the summit of Mount Igman in my armored jeep, the engine idling, before

nervously running the gantlet of Serb gunfire that raked the dirt road into the besieged city of Sarajevo, I never asked myself if what I was doing was practical. Forty-five foreign correspondents died in the city along with some 12,000 Bosnians, including 2,000 children. Some 50,000 people were wounded. Of the dead and wounded 85 percent were civilians. I drove down the slope into Sarajevo, which was being hit by 2,000 shells a day and under constant sniper fire, because what was happening there was a crime. I drove down because I had friends in the city. I did not want them to be alone. Their stories had become mine.

War, with all its euphemisms about surges and the escalation of troops and collateral damage, is not an abstraction to me. I am haunted by hundreds of memories of violence and trauma. I have abandoned, because I no longer cover these conflicts, many I care about. They live in Gaza, Baghdad, Jerusalem, Beirut, Kabul and Tehran. They cannot vote in our election. They will, however, bear the consequences of our decision. Some, if the wars continue, may be injured or killed. The quest for justice is not about being practical. It is required by the bonds we share. They would do no less for me.



AP photo / Jose Luis Magana. Independent presidential candidate Ralph Nader speaks during a news conference outside of the Nuclear Energy Institute in Washington.

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