

The Rats Revolt. Ralph Nader

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There is no American who has fought with more tenacity, courage and integrity to expose the crimes of corporate power and to thwart the corporate coup d'état that has destroyed our democracy than Ralph Nader. Not one. There is little he has not tried in that effort. He has written investigative exposés on the unsafe practices of the auto industry; published best-sellers such as "[Who Runs Congress?](#)"; founded citizen action and consumer groups; testified before countless congressional committees; written a raft of environmental and worker safety bills that were passed in Congress under the now defunct liberal wing of the Democratic Party; and, when he was locked out of the legislative process by corporate Democrats, been a candidate for president. He even helped organize the first Earth Day.

His latest assault is a fable called "[How the Rats Re-Formed the Congress.](#)" (And though at times the prose can be a bit stilted and the scatological jokes on par with the humor of the average 10-year-old—the rats crawl up out of the toilet bowls as congressional leaders are taking a dump—Nader is deadly serious about the revolt the rats engender.)

The key in Nader's story to the citizens retaking control of Congress and the government is sustained mass nationwide demonstrations and rallies. These demonstrations, like all protests that are effective, are organized by full-time staff and steadily build in numbers and momentum. The demonstrations are funded by three enlightened billionaires. I don't share Nader's faith—also expressed in his other foray into fiction, "[Only the Super-Rich Can Save Us](#)"—in a renegade wing of the oligarchy funding the overthrow of the corporate state, but he is right that successful movements need to be sustained, grow in size and power, have dedicated organizers and amass significant cash and resources so they do not disintegrate.

Nader writes in his new book:

Protests rise and fall in the ether for the most part. They generally don't ripple out from the core group of concerned people who originate them. Experts on crowds attribute this to little planning, minuscule budgets, poor leadership, and the lack of focus which induces protest fatigue among the core before they make an impact. The core never convincingly answers the questions, "Just How Far Do the Majority of Our Fellow Citizens Want To Go and How Do They Expect to Get There?"

Another explanation for the lackluster showing of protest movements in this country is that American politicians, over the past twenty-five years, have learned to quietly dismiss big rallies, demonstrations, and even temporary "occupations," because they have gone nowhere. The lawmakers never consider them when making decisions. Remember, too, that in Washington, giant rallies, such as those against the Iraq War, for the environment or for a jobs program were traditionally held on weekends when neither the members of Congress nor the journalists were around. These crowds are lucky to get a

picture in the Sunday newspapers. The lack of publicity curtails any impact they might have had. The smaller gatherings, even those by [Veterans for Peace](#), get zeroed out completely, rating at best a paragraph squib deep in the paper.

The demonstrations for the restoration of our democracy take place in cities around the country. They also see enraged citizens pour into Washington, D.C., to surround and occupy the Capitol and the headquarters of other government agencies and institutions to demand a return to democratic rule. The ruling elites become afraid.

Indeed, it is *only* when the elites become afraid of us that there will be any hope of destroying corporate power. Politics, as Nader understands, is a game of fear.

As Nader points out, elected officials have surrendered their constitutional power to do the bidding of corporations in return for corporate money. It is a system of legalized bribery. The consent of the governed has become a joke. Politicians in the two ruling parties are the agents of corporate exploitation and oppression, the enemies of democracy. They no longer hold public hearings at the committee level. They govern largely in secret. They pass bills, most written by corporate lobbyists, and appoint judges to protect corporations from lawsuits by those these corporations have wronged, injured or defrauded. They deny our standing in the courts. They divert money from the country's crumbling infrastructure and social services to sustain a war machine that consumes half of all discretionary spending. They run up massive deficits to give tax cuts to the ruling oligarchs and orchestrate the largest transference of wealth upward in American history. They suppress the minimum wage, break unions and legalize the debt peonage that corporations use to exact punishing tribute from the citizenry, including from young men and women forced to take on \$1.5 trillion in debt to get a college education. They revoke laws, controls and regulations that curb the worst abuses of Wall Street. They abolish our most cherished civil liberties, including the right to privacy and due process. Their public proceedings, as was evidenced in the one held for new Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh, are shameless political theater that mocks the democratic process.

"Congress itself is a clear and present danger to our country," Nader writes. "It feasts on raw global corporate power and is oblivious to various fateful degradations of life on the planet." He calls Congress "a concentrated tyranny of self-privilege, secrecy, exclusionary rules and practices."

Nader warns that any uprising has to be swift to prevent the ruling elites from organizing to crush it. It has to capture the public imagination. And it has to have a sense of humor. He writes of the fictitious uprising in "How the Rats Re-Formed the Congress":

A contingent from New York and New England, led by nurses and students, delivered a truck load of "Wall Street Rats" with the sign explaining that they would obviously be welcomed by the Congress that had refused to pass a Wall Street speculation tax, such a sales tax would have provided \$300 billion a year that might have been utilized to provide healthcare and reduce the student loan burdens. Millions of postcards were being sent showing one giant black rat on the Capitol Dome with a sign saying, "You Didn't Listen to Them—The People—But Now You're Going To Listen To Us." This was only a sliver of the corrosively critical anthropomorphism attributed to the rats and their imagined political agenda. They had become the voice of the public! Little

statuettes of [House Speaker] Blamer, [Minority Leader] Melosay, and [Senate Majority Leader] Clearwater, wearing crowns upon which lolled a pompous rat, were selling like hotcakes. Poster art rose to new heights of imaginative, symbolic, and real-life portrayals of what was increasingly being called the perfidious “Withering Heights” of Washington, DC.

The calendar was filled with non-stop street action: rallies, soapbox speeches, marches, and sit-ins at zoos where the protesters said the rats should be given luxury cages as reward for their heroic takeover. The media couldn't have enough of it. Ratings soared and increasing print, radio, and TV time was being devoted to what was making a very deep impression everywhere. Protests—across the country, red state, blue state, north, south, east, and west—were moving into mobilization stages with overdue specific demands for justice, fairness, and participation qua citizens replacing control qua wealth as the sine qua non of government functioning. And, the most ominous sign of all for incumbents: there were early indications of candidates, holding the same beliefs as the protesters, readying challenges to the lawmakers in the upcoming primaries.

Petitions were circulating on the Internet demanding the members go back to their jobs regardless of the rat infestation. Millions of workers show up every day at jobs far more dangerous. They don't cower in fear. If they did, they would have their pay cut or be fired by their bosses. The petition pointed out that Members of Congress were getting paid while they stayed home in bed. Outrageous! These petitions contained common left/right demands—the kind that really scare politicians.

No revolution will succeed without a vision. Nader lays out the basics—a guaranteed living wage, full government-funded health insurance, free education including at the university level, the prosecution of corporate criminals, cutting the bloated military budget, an end to empire, criminal justice reform, transferring power from the elites to the citizenry by providing public spaces where consumers, workers and communities can meet and organize, breaking up the big banks and creating a public banking system, protecting and fostering labor unions, removing money from politics, taking the airwaves out of the hands of corporations and returning them to the public and ending subsidies to the fossil fuel industry while keeping fossil fuels in the ground to radically reconfigure our relationship to the ecosystem.

He writes of the popular convergence on the centers of power:

Meanwhile, by car, bus, rail, plane and even by bicycles and by foot, people of all ages, backgrounds, and places continued to pour into Washington. They filled the restaurants and the motels. They usually had to find a room in a city where there were few affordable apartments but many large, under-inhabited houses whose longtime owners wanted to make some money to pay for their property taxes and repairs. So they were renting to the new arrivals.

The ways these visitors made their voices heard were quite imaginative. There was a cavalcade of horseback riders in a procession down Constitution Avenue resplendent with the signs, “Pass this ...” or “Pass that ...” always ending with the ominous “or Else.” One horseman was using his trumpet to raise the emotional level of the demonstration, which was fully covered in the press. Others joined the daily “resign ... or else” rally going on at the backside of the Capitol while mini-demonstrations were becoming daily events in front of the White House and at other major government buildings containing departments and agencies. Even those agencies in the suburbs, such as the Pentagon, the CIA, the Patent Office, or the Food and Drug Administration, where the

employees had thought they would be beyond reach, did not escape the rallying.

It is a wonderful vision. I hope it comes to pass. But even if it does not, we should try. Appealing to the ruling elites and the two corporate political parties, as well as attempting to have our voices and concerns addressed by the corporate media, which has blacklisted Nader, is a waste of time. The corporate state will be overthrown by a citizens' revolt or we will continue to barrel toward a political and ecological nightmare. Nader dares to dream. We should too.

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