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Ralph Nader: 38th President?

A Commentary

By Nicholas von Hoffman

SAN FRANCISCO—From the Canadian to the Mexican border, from Bellingham, Wash., to San Diego, the conversational pattern is the same up and down the Pacific Coast. They make a joke about the tapes, then they speculate on how much the oil companies paid Nixon to let them have a shortage, and after that they ask who you think is going to be the next President.

It's easier to say who shouldn't be.

The only qualification most of the leading contenders for the office have is that they haven't been convicted of a felony. Reagan would have to go into the campaign where Nixon leaves off explaining his income tax payments. Percy is a closet Democrat who will never be nominated by any Republican convention. Rockefeller would be nearly 70, a spendthrift governor of a corrupt state, a man who has worked every side of every issue. Howard Baker's only achievement is being allowed to sit next to Sam Ervin when the TV cameras go on.

The Democrats have little more to offer. Humphrey is no longer worth the time to denounce; Muskie has been publicly exposed as being exactly what he appears to be; only 5 per cent of the electorate can still remember McGovern's name, and after him come the truly flashy candidates, Bayh of Indiana, that other senator from Minnesota who's rumored to be so good, the governor of Illinois and assorted long shots.

Standing to one side is Teddy, a man who has had to bear so many sorrows it's hard to tell him that he'd be doing himself and the rest of us a favor if he'd get out of the race now. Perhaps the only ones who will tell him so are those who fear that if he runs he will also be cut down by the Kennedy curse. They say they'll vote against him to protect him.

Millions more will vote against him because they think Chappaquiddick showed him to be a man who, at the very least, cracks under pressure. Believe what you want about him, but any Kennedy presidential campaign will draw forth our ugliest side. Worst would be a Connally-Kennedy contest. While each was racing for the presidency by telling the dreadful truth about each other the electorate would be racing for the bathroom.

Then the degradation of our politics would be complete. It need not be so. There is one man in public life who is clean enough, who has stature enough to restore respect for politics and public office, and that's Ralph Nader, our national ombudsman, the one person who is admired even when he is disagreed with.

Nader has always fled the imputation he would ever run for office for fear it would make his work more

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difficult. If he is a member of either political party it is only nominally. In a period when parties are generally regarded as packs of marauding thieves and housebreakers, Nader's distance from these disreputable associations only serves to make him look better.

There is no man who could be elected to the presidency who knows more about how the United States government works on every level. He has fought it and studied it through nearly every department and agency as no other political figure in our time. Not only is his knowledge unique but he has trained scores of men and women who could be brought into a Nader administration to help run it. Nobody else can attract this kind of talent.

Since Franklin Roosevelt's first two terms our presidents have been primarily occupied with foreign affairs, but the last 10 years have shown that ultimately foreign success rests on domestic success. A discredited, dishonored President with a debased currency presiding over a citizenry that doesn't trust him enough to follow him has little choice but to take refuge in the Kremlin as Nixon has done. When Nixon says that he was too busy running his foreign policy to know what his own staff was doing he is making something of the same point. Whether it is oil, gold, wheat or bombers his incapacity to govern effectively at home is bringing him to grief here and abroad. You can't have a foreign policy if you don't have a country and Nixon has lost his.

Nader, on the other hand, has a studied program and approach on every thing from taxes to monopoly. He can tell you exactly—not in the generalities they usually feed us—what he would do and how he would go about it. He knows what he thinks is needed and he knows how to communicate his ideas to our people. He's been doing it for 10 years now without a public relations man or an advertising agency. Can you imagine what a different and better place this would be with Ralph Nader picking the members of the federal regulatory agencies for eight years.

Nobody born with a bellybutton is perfect. Ralph Nader can be an abrasive unpolitic man; a stubborn character who sometimes disdains the most innocent, ethical and necessary of the political arts. He is the proud prototypal antibaby kisser, but we're ready to accept that vice. We're ready for the troubles that a man of his lack of flexibility can bring on himself.

We'll take that as the price you have to pay for a President who has two suits to his name, wears a brush cut and a 1957 narrow tie, but who will stay put in the White House, get up at 6 o'clock in the morning and work and work 'til midnight. With Nader there'll be no golf, no pompous dances and theatricals, no Frank Sinatra and Sammy Davis, no unseemly weddings, no pilfered Western White Houses, and the only people indicted may be the oil company executives.

With Nader in the White House we as a nation will not again have to bear the shame of hearing our President plead with us to believe he is not a crook. Ralph Nader is the one man whom we *would* buy a used car from but he won't sell us one.

Correction

In Wednesday's Poster column, Nicholas von Hoffman characterized Mr. C. Arnholt Smith as "Nixon's indicted buddy." Mr. Smith has not been indicted, but is under investigation by federal agencies. Von Hoffman regrets the error.