



# Abel: Postcard from Washington: America's Grapes still griping at 80

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“What does Ralph Nader want THIS time?” we find ourselves wondering as the founding father of consumer protection, gadfly of governments, five-times-futile presidential candidate, and all-around pest of profit-hungry capitalism gets ready to give a talk.

It's high noon on a weekday at the Cato Institute, Washington's nucleus of leave-us-alone libertarianism. The right-wingers-in-residence seem delighted to have lured Nader into their warren, even though many of his positions historically have placed him to the left of even such liberals as Elizabeth Warren, the new senator from Massachusetts.

“Ralph is much more worried than I am about corporate power,” jests the Cato vice-president at the microphone, warming us up.

While we are waiting, I look up Nader's biography and notice that he was born in Connecticut in February 1934, the same month of the same year that a certain Donald S. Cherry came into this world in Kingston, Ont., giving us a pair of 80-year-old mahatmas, cemented in their own certainties, who seem a long way from going gentle into that good night.

In this country, Ralph Nader has been the Grapes of gripes against corporate cronyism, death-trap cars, choking skies, poison food, and the military-industrial-financial-governmental-judicial-media complex for more than 50 years. In 2006, when *The Atlantic* asked 10 historians to compile a list of “The Top 100 Influential Figures in American History,” they ranked Nader 96th, ahead of Richard Nixon.

This was two years after the CBC's coronation of *The Greatest Canadian*, a less academic referendum in which Don Cherry placed seventh, ahead of Sir John A. Macdonald and Alexander Graham Bell.

(Only three of *The Atlantic*'s Top 100 lived to read the issue. Albert Einstein was placed 32nd; Walt Disney 26th; the same A.G. Bell 24th. But neither the physicist nor the cartoonist nor the telephonist ever earned 2,882,955 votes for the presidency of the United States, as Ralph Nader did for the Green party in 2000, when he may or may not have cost Al Gore the White House by seducing some swing-state Democrats.)

What we learn now, as Nader begins to speak, is that the years have not diminished his passion to rage, rage. He is angered, especially, by the fact that not a single Wall Street grandee has gone to prison for what he labels “the impunity and immunity” of “crime in the suites.”

It is an issue such as this, he argues, that could unite both extremes of America’s stymied politics. To bolster this argument – it is the subject of his latest book, entitled *Unstoppable: The Emerging Left-Right Alliance to Dismantle the Corporate State* – Nader enumerates points of grassroots near-unanimity, including juvenile justice reform, a re-evaluation of the war on drugs, and taxpayer-funded stadiums.

Ninety per cent of poll respondents from both parties agree with breaking up the largest banks, he tells us, adding that “When you ask them if we should prosecute big-time Wall Street crooks, it’s off the charts.”

“Nobody is more fearful of a left-right alliance than the plutocrats and the oligarchs,” Nader maintains. “But we’re up against an alliance of big corporations and big government that is inextricably linked to a double-standard criminal justice system. People define themselves as powerless and take themselves out of the equation and that is self-fulfilling.”

To the rescue, Nader argues, must ride the very oligarchs themselves.

“There are so many billionaires in this country that there’s got to be a few enlightened ones in their seventies and eighties who are not thinking about acquiring wealth, they’re thinking about posterity, thinking about the children and their grandchildren,” he says. In principle, these might include Bill Gates (number 54 of *The Atlantic’s* Top 100), or Oprah Winfrey, who even didn’t hit the chart eight years ago.

These would NOT include Ralph Nader, who is a couple of billion beans shy of the plutocracy.

“Somebody’s got to ask you about your thoughts for 2016,” I rifle at him when the microphone comes to me at the end of the session.

“Right now, if you wanted to guess, it’s the two dynasties, Jeb Bush and Hillary Clinton,” Nader answers. “Big Business is going to get behind Jeb Bush, unless the Republican Party decides to implode on people like (Mario) Rubio or (Ted) Cruz.

“Jeb Bush is not the same as George W. Bush,” he adds. “He is known to read a lot of books.”

“Are you running for president again?” I needle him a few minutes later, as we walk together from the auditorium.

“I’m not running,” Nader vows. “Can’t get on the ballot. Can’t get media.” The Democrats, he says, sued him 24 separate times in 2004, trying to keep him from sinking John Kerry’s swift boat.

“Well, never say never.” the crusader smiles. And a quote from the lecture – think Nader; think Cherry – sticks in my head:

“The only real aging is the erosion of one’s ideals.”