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## Can Ralph Nader Get Progressives and Libertarians to Make Common Cause?

By Bill Frezza

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Eighty years old and still full of piss and vinegar, Ralph Nader should perhaps add honey to his repertoire, as he attempts to woo libertarians, and maybe a Tea Partier or two, to his latest campaign. In his new book, *Unstoppable: The Emerging Left-Right Alliance to Dismantle the Corporate State*, Nader challenges these strange bedfellows to come together to shake up Washington's dysfunctional, cronyist status quo.

Ralph Nader was my guest on RealClear Radio Hour this week, along with Brink Lindsey of the Cato Institute, examining the potential for such an alliance.

Nader describes our current political system as a duopoly that brooks no competition. "I don't think there is any other Western country that has so many obstacles to third party or independent candidate challenges," he says. "And given the way they gerrymander the districts, in 90 percent of the House of Representatives districts are essentially one party."

Libertarians certainly sympathize. But can Nader convince them to set aside their fundamental philosophical differences with progressives to tackle a specific and limited set of issues where there is agreement? In his book, Ralph lists 24 such areas, including civil liberties and subsidies to big business.

Brink Lindsey is not so sure. But he notes that "libertarians are a pretty small minority in American politics, so when anybody reaches out to us, I think we ought to be hospitable."

Nader's enemy is what he calls Corporatism, the operating agenda that says America is "better off if it is run by giant global corporations and their political allies." He believes government has been turned into either "an accounts receivable for corporations [seeking] contracts, grants, and giveaways, or a guarantor of giant corporate capitalism that becomes too big to fail."

This is music to libertarians' ears. But dig a little deeper and the picture gets cloudier.

Nader is most hostile to large businesses that use their profits to purchase access to political power. But rather than seeking to curb this practice by reducing the size and power of government, thereby removing the incentive to ply politicians with campaign cash, he wants *government* to limit the size and power of corporations. Haven't we seen this movie before?

Banks and telecommunications companies should be run as public utilities. The government should break up Google and maybe even Amazon (though Amazon could be given a little more time to see if Walmart steps up to challenge it). Federal law should limit not only the size of corporations, but also limited liability protections for investors, under the justification that greater exposure to liability might prompt investors to exercise tighter control over misbehaving and overpaid corporate executives. Nader also praises 1930s intellectuals who promoted not just income redistribution but asset redistribution, and quotes the Roman statesman Marcus Cicero, who said "Freedom is participation in power."

This is hardly a recipe for attracting libertarians.

So Brink Lindsey is proceeding with caution. The Cato Institute is hosting a book forum for Nader later this month – a "dog bites man" event, Lindsey quips. In his interview, Lindsey quickly ticks off many areas where progressives and libertarians might easily cooperate—for example, ending the war on drugs, cutting the bloated defense budget, reducing military adventurism, eliminating corporate welfare, combating crony capitalism, curtailing government surveillance, and reforming our prison system.

"It is rare to find anyone in Washington that has deep principled skepticism about power," says Brink. He believes Nader is such a person. "He's much more worried about corporate power, while I'm more worried about government power. But someone who can, across the board, be worried about unchecked power and the threat it poses to the individual is someone with whom I can do business, and someone with whom libertarians ought to be able to do business on particular issues."

So the spirit is willing. But as is often the case, the devil is in the details.

Take, for example, the problem of too big to fail banks. "Finance is complicated. The possibilities of bank runs and systemic risk are not to be discounted out of hand," Lindsey acknowledges. "In general I would rely much more on the use of market forces to discipline market actors rather than presuming that if you just have the right guys in charge of the regulatory agency and they're just blessed with enough power, they're going to make everything all right."

Will Ralph Nader go for this market-centric approach? I find it unlikely, but stranger things have happened.

As each side suspiciously eyes the other across the dance floor, Nader is determined to make the first move. I teased him about starting a new grass roots movement as he enters his eighth decade. He replied, "The only true aging is the erosion of one's ideals." On that basis, Ralph could surely outlive us all.