

CONSCIENCE IN AMERICA, 2004

by Cat Woods

This essay is addressed to people of conscience. That is, people who value truth, fairness, and the good of all above loyalty to a particular political party or government; people who understand that injustice, theft, and violent behavior are ultimately self-destructive as well as destructive of others; people who know that justice is a practical benefit to all it touches, not just a word to manipulate people. I am writing to you about politics – and by that I mean *your power* in a democracy. If you have ever felt that you don't have enough power or are not being heard, then please hear me out. I'm talking about a few ways to change that and start transforming our country into one that listens to our concerns and welcomes our influence in decisions that matter.

LITTLE KNOWN FACTS ABOUT DEMOCRACY

You have a legal and moral right to vote for what you want. You don't have to vote for what the media tells you other people are going to vote for. Voting only for what the media tells you other people are going to vote for is called self-fulfilling prophecy. It's also called the power of propaganda.

Many people fought, over centuries, to achieve the right to have input into their own government. In this country, people fought for the right to have a government independent of England. People fought for the right of people who didn't own property to vote, for women to vote, for people of African ancestry to vote, and for young people old enough to be drafted to vote. People fought again during the civil rights movement so that black people who had won the right to vote would not have that right stolen from them through fraud. Many people have died in the struggle to give you a vote.

Let's get this straight: they died so that you would be able to vote for what you believe, according to your conscience. They did not die so that you could let the media and other people dictate your vote. Since almost all media corporations are owned by less than 1% of the population, letting the media determine how you vote amounts to the same thing as letting that small elite rule you despotically. If you are going to do that, you may as well stop the pretense of voting and call that elite group of people your kings and queens. You may as well admit that you are enslaved to them.

What does it mean to have a vote if you're simultaneously told you must not vote for what you really believe in? It means nothing. It means the manufacture of false consent.

Your vote is not about backing a winning horse. Unless you are in that tiny elite that owns 98% of the wealth and corporations in this country, you do not get a kickback or a payoff if you vote for the winning candidate. Voting is about expressing yourself, using your voice, exercising your power. When many people vote the same way on an issue that is important to them, it is called a mandate. Unfortunately, these mandates are often interpreted by the same media owned by the elite that owns most of the wealth and wants us to go along with its agenda. For this reason, on important issues, it is essential that a mandate be clear and unambiguous, not open to

misinterpretation. It is essential to vote for what you *actually* believe in; otherwise your vote is wasted, regardless of which candidate wins, because your voice has not been heard.

THE POWER OF BEING HEARD

Being heard is important. Mandates are important. Because the elite that owns most of the wealth is such a small percentage of the population and because we still, technically, have a democracy, they are vulnerable to public opinion. We may not have much of the money, but there are a lot more of us than there are of them. We do most of the real work while they siphon off the profit from it. They need us to cooperate to a certain extent, so when we speak up clearly enough and consistently enough, they start throwing us bones to appease us. If we spoke up clearly enough, we could even elect people to Congress and to the White House who represent our own interests. They're afraid of that, so they start appeasing us a little when they think that's a possibility.

Catherine Austin Fitts (www.solari.com) often tells a story about something that happened when she worked for the Bush Sr. administration. Jack Kemp told her to do something illegal. She pointed out that it was illegal; he told her to do it anyway. She pointed out that it was a felony and she could do jail time if she got caught; he told her to do it anyway (she was expendable). Then she pointed out that the administration could "take a bad headline"; this gave him pause and he backed down in his demand. We the people hold a power that shows itself in that story, so remember it.

The elite that owns most of the wealth never gives the public a thing as long as the public is obediently going along with their scams. When we passively accept everything they tell us, they take more and more from us, make us work harder and harder for less and less, steal the wealth of this country, lie to us, take away our freedoms that generations of people fought so hard to win, and get us to violently attack other countries in the name of those same freedoms. To fight this, we need to look at who "they" are and who represents them. We need to look at the game being played. When both major parties are serving the same elite, pouring our energies towards one of these parties, when that party does nothing to oppose and quite a lot to help the elite's agenda, is simply *not* fighting the agenda at all. It is falling for it. It is buying in. It is, ultimately, serving that agenda by refusing to question or oppose the scam which enables it to keep going.

MAJOR CRIMES AGAINST AMERICAN CITIZENS

The last four years have given us three huge crimes against America – crimes that were practically unimaginable by most people before they happened. The first is the electoral fraud in the 2000 election and subsequent cover-up. The second is the theft of our Constitutional freedoms through the USA PATRIOT Act and the subsequent legislation that made many of its provisions permanent. The third is the illegal invasion and occupation of another sovereign nation based on baseless claims and deliberate lies. (I have skipped a fourth, very significant crime of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. While there is significant evidence that the U.S. government was involved in this crime, too, to ensure its excuse for the Patriot Act and the invasion of Iraq, I will, for the purposes of this argument, stick to the acts that are uncontestably those of the U.S. government. See www.fromthewilderness.com for meticulously researched documentation of the evidence I mentioned.)

THE THEFT OF DEMOCRACY

We have flaws in the U.S. system of voting that make it much less democratic than it could be. I will discuss some of these later – along with ways we could correct some of these flaws. On top of these systemic flaws, fraud is increasingly a problem. In the 2000 election, 16 congressional Representatives protested gross fraud in Florida, where many voters were deprived of their democratic rights. Investigations into the purge of voters have shown, for example, that people were disqualified in 2000 for felonies committed in “2007.” These voters were largely African American, largely Democrat, yet no one in the Senate would sign the Representatives’ protest of the theft of the voters’ democratic rights, and the crime was thereby covered up.

I’d like to point out that it was the duty of *every* Senator, regardless of party affiliation, to defend those democratic rights of American citizens. It’s part of their *job*. But not even one of the 50 Democratic Senators, who might be expected to defend constituents of their own party, would sign the protest. Apparently, the Democrats and Republicans had cut a back door deal to share power; democracy was considered by both to be an expendable casualty. On January 6, 2001, they betrayed the entire nation and the democratic principles that nation is supposed to stand for.

THE THEFT OF OUR BILL OF RIGHTS

The USA PATRIOT Act has made it so that the only thing the government or intelligence agencies have to do is call you a terrorist or a suspected terrorist and you no longer have the basic protections of our Bill of Rights. They don’t have to prove that you’re a terrorist. They don’t even have to make a good case. All they have to do is call you one, and they’re quite willing to call you one simply for disagreeing with their acts of violent terror against others.

Many of the provisions of this act originally had “sunset” clauses which would cause them to expire at the end of 2005. However, many of these provisions have already quietly been made permanent through additions to other bills. For example, the Intelligence Authorization Act was signed into law December 13, 2003 without much news coverage or protest. This sneaky piecemeal strategy makes it more difficult to track the theft of our freedoms and more difficult to repeal later.

When the World Trade Center attacks happened, I knew immediately that this would be used as an excuse to take away our civil liberties. This is an ongoing pattern that goes back decades. As cynical as I felt about this, I was completely unprepared for how blatantly and sweepingly our rights, freedoms, and privacy were stolen from us. I’ve never been able to understand how many Americans went along with this. If it had been done to them by a foreign government, we would have had riots and militias in the streets. But when the theft was committed by our own government, it was passively accepted and even cheered with waving flags. Something has gone gravely wrong in our national conscience.

THE INVASION OF IRAQ

The U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq is still deeply shocking to me. I find it difficult to discuss without getting very upset. I don’t understand how otherwise good and principled people

can condone this action of our government. I have discovered that this often depends on lies, distortions, and persistent pro-war propaganda presented as news on the television. I don't watch TV, so the effects of its barrage are often baffling to me.

The central rationale for this invasion was the supposed existence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Before going on, let's look at this rationale: how is it at all tenable? The only country to ever use nuclear weapons on civilian populations was the U.S. in its bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It later came out in the Pentagon Papers, leaked by Daniel Ellsberg, that Truman knew that the Japanese were already ready to surrender. The "million U.S. lives saved" was sheer invention by Truman after the fact. By the WMD rationale, this means that all Americans should expect to be "liberated" from our oppressive, terrorist government which treats life with such contempt, through the bombing and armed invasion of our towns, without regard for international law and without exhausting the possibilities for peaceful diplomacy. The U.S. has the biggest arsenal of weapons of mass destruction in the world. Do the purveyors of this rationale apply it to the U.S.? No. It is a lie from the very beginning – such a bizarre excuse that it is amazing that anyone ever took it even slightly seriously, never mind accepted it as justification for invading a country that had not attacked us.

Furthermore, as it came out, the weapons of mass destruction never existed. Soldiers who fought in the first Persian Gulf war could have told you that. They reported that we bombed everything flat. No weapons of mass destruction could have survived. Colin Powell is on record admitting there was no threat, before the war. The Bush administration now admits that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. This was the excuse. Why are our troops still there?

The reason the U.S. is there is quite obvious and fits long-standing historical precedent for empires. In this country it goes back to the murder of the native Americans and the theft of their land. Much of U.S. land legally belongs to native Americans through treaties that the U.S. government has broken without cause. In Iraq, the profiteering, theft, and taxpayer welfare to U.S. corporations are extremely blatant. People seem to have become so accustomed to this, through things like the privatization of public resources, that they accept it without question, but it is *not* government's job to violently assault people and steal their land and resources for corporations owned by a small elite. It has been a consistent pattern over many generations, but it is an abuse of power, not a fulfillment of duty.

The invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq have been on the elite agenda for many years. As brought to public attention by Mike Ruppert, Zbigniew Brzezinski published a book in 1997 predicting where these wars would be necessary in order to ensure the global dominance of American-based corporations. The issue is oil and land. It belongs to the Iraqi people, not to Halliburton, Unocal, or any other corporation profiteering off the war. It is unconscionable for our government to bomb, invade, and take these resources from Iraq. Violent theft is wrong.

WHAT'S AT STAKE / URGENCY / MORAL CRISIS

This is a crucial year for the United States of America. The government of our country did not give us a referendum on its actions of the past four years. We are facing the first presidential election since these major crimes were perpetrated. It's our first real chance at a referendum, and

with the loss of democracy being one of the major issues, it could easily be our last chance, if we don't take a firm stand. To treat this as a normal election year horse race is unacceptable. We have something to say. Something *has* to be said, while we still have any vestiges of our freedoms and democracy. To let the perpetrators off the hook and actually vote for them is a betrayal of both our history and our future.

I feel that these are extremely urgent days for America – days of great consequence. I feel that our moral survival is at stake. We *invaded* another country without cause. In footage from Iraq, you see soldiers wondering why the Iraqi people are fighting us so hard, as if it's at all ambiguous. How would *you* feel if a foreign military dropped bombs on you for over 10 years and then came marching down your streets with guns, shooting things up and claiming to do all this for a good cause? Would you say, "Oh thank you so much, Foreign Soldier, this is such lovely freedom to be shot at and to have our families killed and mutilated, our water supplies polluted, and our houses destroyed. Let us turn over our land and our oil to the corporations who pressured your government to do this"? *Of course not*. You would call upon your deepest principles and face death rather than give in to such conquerors. It is not so mystifying. Just use the Golden Rule and put yourself in their position. The crimes in which we have been participating, through our taxes and our inability to take effective action against them, have only worsened as this occupation has continued. There are not only reports but videotapes of Iraqi children being sexually abused by our soldiers. This cannot be condoned. We may find understanding, forgiveness, and healing, but first we must *stop* this immediately.

The invasion of Iraq is the one of the most egregious crimes against another country we've ever committed, even including Hiroshima and Nagasaki, since there was more of a case to be made that those were legitimate acts of war (however faulty that case happens to be). The PATRIOT Act is one of the most egregious crimes we've ever committed against our fellow citizens and the posterity of this country. It flat out dismantles the freedoms that people have used for so long to rationalize our attacks on other countries (however lame those rationalizations happen to be).

I believe that this is a very serious moment for us as a nation: will we stop hiding our heads in the sand, take responsibility for our collective actions, and respond appropriately to being confronted on these massive crimes against others and ourselves? If not, I see the future of America as very bleak. We barely survived the moral debacle of Vietnam.

But I do hold out hope. This is not when we should sit on our hands and curse and bide our time. There is no time to bide. There has to be a turning point. As Starhawk once put it, "That hope sways on an edge so delicate that it is possible that the choices any one of us makes could tip the balance." I don't think we have the luxury this time of indulging our fears or short-term pragmatism. If we love this land and the people on it; if we care about stopping cruel violence being committed in our names and with our money; then we have to act on our hope and our conscience.

I'm not appealing to people who think that people and nations can behave any way they choose without consequence. I'm appealing to the people who know through the faith in their hearts and the knowledge in their guts that immoral behavior is self-destructive. I am appealing to people of *conscience*. I believe there are more people of conscience in America than the policy and media-makers think. One problem is that many of them don't vote or take action politically. Another is

that people who do vote have little opportunity to vote their conscience, and when they do, don't take it. I don't believe that any of this is because people don't care. I believe many people who don't vote are disgusted with the current two-party scam of dueling corruption and recognize it as a deceitful fraud. I believe many people who vote against their conscience have not truly considered the power of voting for what they believe or the futility of voting for what they don't believe.

But at this point in time, we can't afford to have people of conscience sit out. I believe that if we wait much longer, we may no longer have a country to heal. We may go the way of other countries who have lost their sovereignty and democracy. Electoral fraud and unaudited electronic voting machines may continue to provide an illusion of democracy, but we will no longer be at all democratic. There has even been serious talk about deferring or canceling this election. That is how arrogant and secure the elite has become.

It's time for people of conscience to examine the facts, examine their conscience, and withdraw their complicity in national violence. When gas prices are raised to give you a perceived interest in the theft of Iraqi resources, you need to remember those innocent citizens whose tortured and destroyed bodies have made cheap gas our blood money, our thirty shekels of silver. You need to refuse to let the hush money hush you; you need to find out the truth and speak it through every avenue available, including your vote.

THE COLLUSION OF THE SO-CALLED OPPOSITION PARTY

These three crimes I have named were not perpetrated by the Republicans over the principled opposition and objection of the Democrats. Not one of them could have been accomplished without the full support and active participation of the Democrats – the supposed opposition. I question the opposition between the Democrats and the Republicans. While there are some people of integrity in Congress, by and large the Democratic and Republican parties serve the same interests.

Never was this clearer than that day in January 2001 when every Democrat in the Senate abandoned the constituents of their own party in a matter of a most basic right – when the Senate unanimously refused to defend the democratic rights of Florida citizens. Maxine Waters finally cried out, “The objection is in writing, and I don't *care* that it is not signed by a Senator.” Gore, the man most of these disenfranchised voters were trying to vote for, replied contemptuously, “The chair would advise that the rules *do* care.” Those smug Senators applauded him and *laughed* at her for it. That's how much contempt they have for democracy. I'm grateful to Maxine Waters for being willing to endure that humiliating scene and thus reveal something essential about the state of American democracy. It's nice to know that at least one person in Congress sincerely believed that democracy and justice should be more important than such blatant manipulation of the rules.

The excuses and stories people tell themselves about this psychological theater are surprisingly weak and unfounded. I've heard several people claim, “Gore preferred to be a gentleman about it.” This was not *about* gentlemanly pride. It was about *democracy* stolen. It was about his and the Senators' *jobs* as employees of a democratic people. It was about protecting the essential

democratic rights of citizens. Of course, the “back door deal” gives lie to this theory anyway. I consider it much more likely that their real reason was simply, as usual, corporate profits. The Dow Jones was being affected by the delays in the democratic process, and that was considered more important than trifling concerns about actual democracy. When I watched the Senate scene with my mom, she turned to me and asked “Why would Gore go along with this?” Trying to minimize my whispering in a movie theater, I summarized my view succinctly, “He’s owned by the same people.”

So nice of Democrats to help the Republicans cheat so smoothly – almost as if the Democrats *wanted* Bush to be in office to take the blame for what they were all about to do.

In “Fahrenheit 9/11,” Michael Moore interviews Representative John Conyers about the USA PATRIOT Act and why it was passed without our Senators or Representatives even reading it. Conyers says to Moore, “Sit down, my son... do you know what it would entail to read every bill we pass?” Moore doesn’t answer. Well I have an answer to that – an extremely obvious answer. Yes, I know what it would entail. It would entail *doing... your... job*. It would entail earning the money we pay you.

The story goes that the Bush administration dropped the Patriot Act on Congress in the middle of the night and it came up for vote the next day. This is a constant refrain in the excuses made for the total collusion of the Democratic party: “They didn’t even read it.” This is not an excuse. First off, you don’t just pass a bill with such sweeping repercussions without either reading it or having your staff read it and report to you. If a vote can be forced so suddenly on a bill that undermines our Constitutional freedoms, then something is *radically wrong*, and it is the opposition party’s duty to contest this, not go along with it. Isn’t the way it was handled *reason enough* to vote against it? Isn’t the very least we, as citizens, should be able to expect from our brave congressional representatives that they *abstain* from voting on something before they have the slightest idea what it means to our freedom? And this whole excuse falls away once they started making the provisions in the Patriot Act permanent in subsequent bills. The opposition party had plenty of time to organize opposition by then, but they not only did not oppose, they jumped on the bandwagon and voted the provisions in.

On the matter of the invasion, only ten Democratic Representatives voted against the “resolution of unequivocal support” for Bush’s planned invasion of Iraq. John Kerry is currently presenting his vote for this resolution as only giving the president authority to invade, rather than as an endorsement of the invasion. This is just sophistry. Another lame excuse. They gave Bush explicit support for acts of war, full knowing what Bush intended to do. If the Democrats had any qualms about peaceful diplomatic options not yet being exhausted, they did not express these reservations or withhold from an unbalanced, dishonest, war-crazy man the power to engage another country in an unprovoked war. I do hold them responsible for that. It’s their job as the opposition party to oppose actions that are not aligned with democratic or just principles, not give blanket permission for violence to someone clearly lacking the intelligence and compassion necessary to refrain from using it.

Al Gore has delivered some impressive speeches criticizing Bush's handling of the invasion of Iraq. In one such speech (brucespringsteen.net/news/index.html), he says,

“Kerry should not tie his own hands by offering overly specific, detailed proposals concerning a situation that is rapidly changing and unfortunately, rapidly deteriorating, but should rather preserve his, and our country's, options, to retrieve our national honor as soon as this long national nightmare is over.”

I found this very telling. What he's saying is that Kerry doesn't have to and shouldn't have to take a stand against this war or against the Patriot Act in order to get our vote. I disagree. The invasion is *Iraq's* national nightmare; it's our national *crime*. We certainly can expect specific detailed proposals for ending this crime committed in our names.

COLLUSION OF THE PRESS AND THE ACTUAL OPPOSITION

The mainstream press, led by Fox News, has managed to define the parameters of the arguments and the spectrum of political opinion allowed in this country. The extreme right wing is defined as patriotism, no matter how violent, unjust or dishonest; while the more reasonably argued and internationally strategic right wing is defined as “left wing” or even “communist.” This keeps the spectrum of debate where the richest 1% of the population – who own most of the media as well as most of the corporations profiting from the violent invasions – want to keep it. The alternatives – the actual opposition viewpoints and evidence – are not covered at all. The first call I heard for giving up our constitutional freedoms came from a so-called “journalist” on 9/11/01, only two hours after the first plane hit. The mainstream media also backed, and even cheered, the invasion of Iraq from the very beginning.

There are no longer any semblance of journalistic standards in this country. The number of lies that have been spread and promoted by the press, without even minimal investigation, is shocking. The press has decided that its role is unquestioning loyalty to the administration in power, rather than investigative journalism. There is no attempt to cover issues or candidates fairly. For example, I have yet to see, or encounter anyone who has seen, Ralph Nader's election platform covered in the mainstream news. There seems to be very little journalism of any sort in the mainstream news, only propaganda for the war. Pro-war propaganda hardly gets any more blatant than when the anti-war position is almost universally defined as supporting an alternate pro-war candidate – when the idea that some people might actually want to say, “This war is wrong; stop it” is never even presented as a campaign issue.

The majority of people who oppose the theft of democracy in the 2000 election, the invasion of Iraq, and the theft of our Constitutional freedoms, are planning on voting for a candidate who actively participated in all those things. They expect me to do the same and often make vehement, sometimes abusive, demands that I do. Holly Near, a lifelong anti-war activist, told the members of my church, who are explicitly in favor of justice and opposed to the invasion and the Patriot Act, that “this is not the year” to vote our conscience. MoveOn.org, which did such an impressive job in creating an online movement against the wars, has made misleading commercials suggesting that Kerry will stop the war in Iraq, when in fact, he has only said that the war should have been handled more skillfully and that he would try to bring the troops home in four years. Medea Benjamin, who is a progressive celebrity for her work organizing the Code Pink protests, Global Exchange, and the Green Festivals – and who was famously arrested at the

Democratic National Convention for unfurling an anti-war banner – was a central and very vocal force behind getting the national Green Party to ignore the wishes of 73% of its members who supported a presidential ticket demanding prompt withdrawal from Iraq (Nader/Camejo). She stated publicly that the Greens should support Kerry. Apparently she prefers to be hauled off as a terrorist by the Democrats than to support an actual anti-war candidate and platform or allow the vast majority of her own party to choose this option for themselves.

This is the state of opposition in this country to these very serious crimes. The perpetrators can count on the mainstream news to act as its personal PR campaign. The fake opposition of the Democratic party, even as they participate in those same crimes, can count on unconditional support from the actual opposition. Those who refuse to accept one of these two choices are condemned as terrorists by the perpetrators, on one side, and blamed for putting the perpetrators into office by the fake opposition, on the other side. The real opposition is hidden this way, because many people against the war are afraid to take a principled stance, while many others have been manipulated into supporting candidates who do not represent their views. Everyone is told that there are only two choices, even though, clearly, and well within the law, there are other choices.

THE JOB OF A CITIZEN

Adolf Hitler was elected. The Germans said the same thing about criticism of Hitler as many Americans are saying about criticism of Bush. This was immoral then, and it is immoral now. It is wrong for Americans to ignore evidence of crimes against the Iraqi and American people perpetrated by our government, just as it was wrong for Germans to ignore evidence of crimes against Jews, homosexuals, and dissidents by the Nazi government.

Unquestioning loyalty to one's government is false patriotism. It is a cop-out and a betrayal of the principles of democracy and justice. The job of a citizen is to pay attention, keep their government honest, and fight for ever-improving democracy. *We* have failed when we trust corrupt leaders and allow them to cover up corruption and violence with impunity.

MAKING OUR DEMOCRACY TRULY DEMOCRATIC

Our country was founded through armed revolution against an oppressive, unjust government. Fortunately, we do not need to again resort to armed revolution at this point. We do still have some mechanisms of democracy remaining to us. Our democracy needs a serious overhaul, however. It is becoming less and less democratic each year.

The first electoral reform we need is to make the vote count itself reliable. The fraud in Florida in 2000 was not an isolated incident. There have been many reports of problems and potential fraud with modern voting machinery and software. Despite this, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, whose job is to ensure fair elections, has resisted instating audits of closed-source proprietary voting software written by Diebold, a right-wing company whose CEO once said he would do anything to get Bush elected (<http://www.guerrillanews.com/sci-tech/doc4330.html>). Voting software should be open source and unhackable, with multiple checks.

There also needs to be a reliable paper trail. Since the fiasco in Florida in 2000, people have turned to absentee ballots in droves to ensure a paper backup to their vote, but Greg Palast has reported how even absentee ballots have been subject to illegal attempts of interference (<http://www.gregpalast.com/printerfriendly.cfm?artid=366>). And while absentee ballots sent in before the election are counted first, absentee ballots delivered the day of the election often aren't counted for two or three weeks, long after the election has been declared. We need a better, trustworthy system of accountability.

A most pressing need for improved democracy is some form of ranked voting. Voting systems have been carefully analyzed by researchers to find out which offers the best reflection of the public's wishes. Any of the ranked voting systems will go a long way towards eliminating the heartbreaking "spoiler effect" that causes people to vote against their conscience and interests out of fear that they will otherwise help a worse candidate get elected. The most popular of these systems is instant runoff voting (IRV). In this system, candidates with the least number of votes have their votes roll over to the second choice of the voters. Australia and Ireland already use IRV. Another form of ranked voting, called the Condorcet method (<http://www.electionmethods.org/CondorcetEx.htm>), is more accurate in reflecting the wishes of the electorate; the disadvantage is that it is difficult for most people to follow, compared to IRV. I think IRV, with a certain threshold for making the runoff, is a good compromise between simplicity and maximum democracy.

People who don't like how third-party and independent candidates "spoil" elections should – at the very least – be pushing hard for a ranked voting system. I can't respect the Democrats who simultaneously blame third-party candidates for their own failure to provide a winning candidate and refuse to support a ranked system that would prevent such interference. It's obvious why they are so reluctant, however. Once people don't have to vote against their conscience to prevent the greatest of available evils, the supposed lesser of two evils will quickly become obsolete.

On an ominous note, in California, we have an initiative on the ballot this election, under the misleading name of "Open Primaries," that forcibly eliminates the competition for the major parties. Under this system, people would only be allowed to vote for third parties during the primaries, and only the big parties would be on the final ballot. People who disagree with the major parties would be left to protesting abstentions. This is one of the most anti-democratic moves I've heard of.

Another very simple way to make our democracy more fair is to make the distribution of the electoral votes of a state proportional to the popular vote. This is currently being considered in Colorado. It would make people's vote count more equally, instead of making the voters in some states, with lots of electoral votes, more eagerly sought after than voters in other states.

I believe there are many other ways to make our society more democratic. The government should actively seek out the opinion of the people as a guiding force more often than during election times. There could be something akin to "truth in advertising" laws protecting voters from deliberate campaign lies. Why shouldn't politicians be as accountable to their campaign promises as advertisers are to their advertising? This is not to say that they could not negotiate

compromises, but there could be some way to ensure that politicians are making a good faith effort to keep their promises rather than deliberately betraying their constituents. They could poll their constituents on deals they are cutting, too. There could be similar protections through journalistic standards for the press.

THE CHALLENGE TO RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

The issue of gay marriage has been cynically used in the last year to distract people, especially Christians, from the truly important moral crisis we are currently facing as a nation. It conveniently stirs up divisive feelings of fear and aversion while obscuring the religious and political issues involved. Although I don't believe it is the most crucial or urgent issue in this election, I feel that this issue needs to be faced head on and confronted for what it is.

Even during the period in my life when I was not only a Christian in narrowest orthodox sense of the word, but also considered homosexuality a sin, I would have been very much against Bush's marriage amendment. Gay marriage is an issue of *religious freedom* – the thing evangelists seem to care so much about when it's their own freedom threatened or that of their right-wing friends. I once watched a broadcast of Pat Robertson explaining that taking away the religious freedom of Sun Myung Moon and his followers would eventually threaten the religious freedom of all of us – the religious freedom that many Europeans escaped to America in order to gain. (That those devout Christians then turned around and stole the land and freedoms of the native population, through tremendous violence, is not the particular hypocrisy I'm considering here.)

The broadcast I saw was of Robertson's 700 Club show in the early 80's, when the Moonies were funneling a lot of money to right-wing candidates and causes. Yet today, people like Pat Robertson are quite willing to impose their religion on me to take away my religious freedom as a Unitarian Universalist. My church does *not* define marriage according to a gender difference between a couple. My religion allows people to understand God or Loving Creator or Consciousness according to the stirrings of their own hearts. We do not tell people what God demands or whom God allows them to love. By taking away our religious freedom and imposing their religious beliefs on *civil* marriage, the right-wing Christians are threatening the religious freedom of all of us, including their own.

When you eliminate the distinction between religious marriage and legal marriage, you have fused church and state in a dangerous way. It is only a matter of time before this fused government-church complex starts dictating your religious beliefs as well. The comptroller of Texas already tried to tell my church what our religion was allowed to believe. UU of Texas was suddenly denied the status of religion because our faith was not rigid enough for the comptroller. We quickly got our status back, but the very attempt is a sign of the times. The fundamentalists themselves should sit up and take notice of this. Who is to say they will always have the upper hand? They could find their buddies out of office, and the *next* government-church complex could start taking their religious freedom away, too.

Blending churches and civil institutions is a serious mistake, no matter which direction the control goes. Civil marriage is defined by the state for all citizens, regardless of gender, race, class, sexual orientation, or religious beliefs. If your religious beliefs don't allow you to accept

homosexual marriage, then you are free to be a member of a church that refuses to marry homosexuals in religious marriage. But to take this a step further and try to prevent the state from allowing *civil* marriage for homosexual couples is to impose your religious beliefs on others through the state. This is wrong and oppressive; it will reap only further wrongs and oppression.

IMPORTANCE VERSUS PREFERENCE

I have placed such emphasis on three particular crimes of the past four years because I believe our response to these is centrally important to our future as a nation.

Personally, I prefer Kerry to Bush. Kerry's more articulate. He speaks a foreign language. He's not a moron. He's less embarrassing. As a friend puts it, he's probably more "permeable" to public opinion. Yet, especially now, I consider this a preference closer to preferring chocolate ice cream to vanilla. People keep telling me, "It's important that Kerry win." No, it's *preferable* for Kerry to win rather than for Bush to win, but it's not what's *important* at all. What is important is to withdraw our invasion forces from Iraq, repeal the Patriot Act, and restore our democracy. To me, these are much more critical than which guy gets to play president for four years. I consider the obligation to say "NO!" to both major parties, after all they've done to us, to be more important than my personal preference for Kerry.

I see the election horse race as analogous to a turf war between two mafia families. (The difference between the mafia and the two-party political system of this country is the difference between organized crime and *extremely* organized crime.) I don't choose to endorse organized crime by voting for one of them. While we still have elections, I'm going to take advantage of it to express my actual opinion, not cast my lot with one mafia don over another.

I'm convinced that our challenge this election is to be clearly and unambiguously heard about increasing democracy, restoring freedoms, and making amends for the violent transgressions of our government. That is what is important and vital. That's what I believe our country needs to do to restore its health.

An issue of importance and considerable urgency that I have omitted so far is that of the pressing environmental crisis. I will come back to this point, as it qualifies my view in relation to people whose strategy for this election differs from mine.

REAL AGENDAS VERSUS BROKEN PROMISES

American politics has tended to focus more on candidates than agendas. A charismatic character often gets further than one with excellent ideas.

However, we also have in America a tradition of agendas taking precedence and winning victories, namely when mass movements get behind particular issues. Equal rights for blacks and women, for example, were not initiated by politicians; they were taken up as issues after mass movements put these issues on the agenda. In fact, the Bill of Rights itself came about due to popular pressure for these rights.

There are two main strategies for people who work politically to change our world for the better – to make it more just, more kind, more sane, and better organized to benefit a greater number of people. One strategy is to focus on helping the more reasonable of the major party candidates to get into office and then try to influence them. The other is to spread the word about the agenda issues you’re working for, join with other people who support those ideas, and build support until an undeniable mass movement can demand change.

I believe that these two strategies can work together. The problem comes at election time, when the people busy campaigning for the major party candidate suddenly demand that the people campaigning for the agenda abandon their strategy and help the system’s candidate. This has reached such an extreme this year that even people like Noam Chomsky have publicly asked Ralph Nader to abandon his campaign (and all the people like me who believe in campaigning for an agenda) in order to support the major party candidate. And Chomsky could (and does) say a lot more than I can about all the injustice John Kerry and the Democrats have abetted. I disagree with Chomsky on this point, because I don’t believe this strategy works, at least not when used at the expense of the agenda strategy rather than in tandem with it.

We have plenty of evidence of how well the one-sided strategy of investing energy and passion into major party candidates works – or rather, how *poorly* it works. For example, in 1948, Truman added “universal health care” to his party platform. Great! Wonderful! Campaign for Truman! And Truman won! Four years later, still no universal health care. The Democrats have won and have had power and influence for many years since then, yet they never delivered universal health care. Almost 50 years later, Bill Clinton ran for president with the same promise of universal health care. And after eight years in office, the Democrats still failed to deliver. Now almost 6 decades after the 1948 campaign, the Democrats don’t bother even promising universal health care. They don’t have to. People will vote for them just for not being someone else.

In 1984, I helped campaign for Mondale. He was such a mediocre candidate that we never called it the Mondale campaign; we called it the “Dump Reagan” campaign. I seriously considered voting for the Peace and Freedom party candidate, because they had a much better agenda, even though they couldn’t win (they were limited to California). I decided at the last minute to vote for Mondale because he was promising a nuclear freeze. I deeply regret this choice. I erased my voice; I did not cast my vote for an agenda I believed in. No one could tell that I voted for a nuclear freeze, because in many other ways the Democrats were indistinguishable from the Republicans. I wasted my vote to no avail. I’m now convinced that if Mondale had won, my vote would still have been wasted. I’m convinced that he would not have given us a nuclear freeze if he had won. The other Democrats in Congress certainly didn’t try very hard for it. Meanwhile, no movement was built, and 20 years later the two evils of the major parties are much worse.

In 1992, Clinton promised a lot of good things. He renewed the promise of universal health care – a benefit of taxation enjoyed by citizens of many other countries, but not by those of the richest nation. No, our tax money funds weapons of mass destruction and fear-mongering. (Last I looked, “fear” and “terror” were fairly synonymous.) Clinton, in *eight years*, didn’t make good on his promises about gay rights, to all the gays and lesbians who campaigned for him, or universal health care, to all the people who thought they were voting for that. No, the promises he managed to keep – that he went all out to pass through – were those to his corporate masters:

NAFTA, GATT, all sorts of corporate welfare deals, military aid to the terrorizing military of Indonesia, and more “anti-terrorist” legislation designed to take away our freedoms. Clinton knew where his bread was buttered. NAFTA and GATT are particularly glaring examples of broken promises and betrayed trust. Organized labor has trusted and helped the Democrats for decades, only to be sold down the river with these deals.

I’m often puzzled by how few people noticed Clinton’s trail of broken promises. Sure he was *preferable* to Bush Sr. and Dole, but he didn’t represent different interests. He didn’t represent *our* interests. If enough people had refrained from taking the lesser-of-two-evils bait and instead worked all out for ranked voting, we might not be in this situation today.

The Democrats have no reason to keep their promises or do their jobs, because they know that they can count on anti-war and other caring people to vote for them, no matter what they do. All they have to do is not be the other guy, the even worse one.

Bush Sr. was in the top circle of power, but Bush Jr. is so transparently *not* that it sometimes surprises me that people hate him quite so much. Okay, he’s not too smart – and doesn’t that say something in itself? Isn’t it obvious that he’s not the one planning these actions or even writing his speeches? Isn’t it obvious that he’s playing a role he’s been given in this game that’s being foisted on us by the ruling class? They wanted their invasions, their oil pipeline; they didn’t want us to have any option of democracy to stop them. So they got what they wanted – blatantly using both arms of their two-party monopoly – and handed us an incompetent scapegoat to blame for it. Someone who quite obviously couldn’t have thought up any of this. And then when it’s all in place, all they need to do is give us a pro-invasion anti-Constitution candidate who is somewhat preferable to the scapegoat. Not very hard to find. Someone who won’t promise us anything, so we can’t even notice that he sold us out, but will still make us feel so grateful that he won – that he’s not Bush.

It’s such an easy game for them to play that if we keep indulging them, they will keep on playing it. So 20 years from now we’ll have an even worse set of evils, and so-called liberals will be urging me to vote for someone to the right of Bush because he’s not as far to the right of Bush as the other candidate. That’s certainly what has happened since 1984. Reagan, who was bad enough to get us to campaign for Mondale, looks almost attractive compared to Bush. I’ve had two people tell me that if Mussolini were running against Hitler, they’d campaign for Mussolini. Doesn’t that say it all? Not me, I’ll campaign for what I believe, and if nothing else, will leave a seed of what could be for the next generation. I don’t want to be remembered as someone who campaigned for Mussolini. As Eugene Debs once said, “It’s better to vote for what you want and not get it than to vote for what you don’t want and get it.”

Voting for supposedly lesser evils hasn’t helped the movements against war or for freedom. Conservative people of conscience, who would support peace and the preservation of our democratic rights and constitutional freedoms, have been so completely alienated by these morally conflicted movements supporting dishonest, perjuring, corrupt Democrats that they have fled to the Republicans. They, too, are voting for what they consider the lesser of two evils. Over half of the people eligible to vote are apparently disgusted enough by the choice of evils that they don’t vote at all. Supporting an evil who serves interests that are completely opposed to one’s

principles, in the hopes that this will be politically damaging to a worse evil, ultimately damages one's own cause. It also, over time, damages one's conscience. Repeatedly acting against one's conscience does not build character or make one more able to build a movement or win a political battle for a cause.

I don't believe that this election is about getting our guy to win. John Kerry is *not* our guy. He belongs to the Haves and Have Mores, just like Bush. This guy has never and will never represent people like us. This is not about getting him to win, as if he represents us. It's about getting our agenda followed. The elites have a definite agenda they stick to. We need to stop being manipulated into serving theirs and start paying attention to and serving our own.

Alexander Cockburn recently said, "The prime function of presidential contests in our age... is to keep every important issue off the table." I want real options 20 years from now. I want the real issues back on the table. So I will work with that goal in mind, not just the short-term contest.

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

What I find astonishing and exasperating during this campaign are all the people who say, "We've got to stop the war and get our rights back, so vote for Kerry." If they were comparing Kerry to Bush on these points, they'd find him differing mainly in oratory style and not at all in substance. What they are actually doing is projecting their hopes on someone who does not at all represent them. Peter Camejo has commented on how people are voting for a candidate based on a hope that he's lying. That's how little difference there is between Kerry and Bush. Americans have become so willing to believe lies and false promises that they are even willing to believe promises they *imagine* hiding behind a candidate's actual statements to the contrary.

Let's compare Bush and Kerry as candidates, starting with the moral test-case of the war in Iraq. Bush led us into the war based on lies. Or perhaps more accurately, he played figurehead while giving free rein of our country to the interests he works for. Kerry voted his unequivocal support for this. Bush thinks everything he's done is great. Kerry believes he could have done it better.

John Kerry has said, "We'll be fighting to build a strong military and lead strong alliances, so young Americans are never put in harm's way because we insisted on going it alone." He's made it clear many times that he thinks it's okay to invade other countries and put young Americans of the military "in harm's way" (not to mention civilians of all ages of the invaded country) so long as we have more countries on our side and we do it efficiently. A philosophy to make Hitler proud. I do believe Kerry would have managed the war more skillfully, alienating fewer U.S. allies in the process, but he would still have accomplished the same violent theft on behalf of the same interests, and that is unambiguously wrong.

Kerry has been against immediate withdrawal from Iraq. He has belatedly spoken about withdrawing from Iraq, but only promises to be out in four years, plenty of time for his corporate masters to steal the land and the oil. Four years is also very convenient timing, enabling him to run again on the same promise four years from now, just as Nixon did with Vietnam. The reason he gives for such a slow withdrawal is that there are terrorists in Iraq. I have heard this parroted everywhere, from the left as well as the right. They must say it on TV a lot.

I'd like to consider what the word "terrorist" *means*. A terrorist is someone who uses violence to achieve a goal. For example, the U.S. violently invading Iraq so that U.S. corporations can get rich off the oil and the contracts for "rebuilding." Even if the motive of deposing Saddam Hussein were sincere, the invasion would still be a form of terrorism. The Unabomber was upset about legitimate things and even made stronger case than Bush and his gang ever made, yet everyone manages to recognize his crimes as crimes and terrorism. It's wrong to bomb people. Period. The U.S. has been bombing Iraq for over a decade. Many thousands of innocent civilians have died. Many World Trade Centers' worth. It was wrong to kill innocent civilians in the WTC to counteract the wrongs of the U.S., and it is wrong to kill innocent civilians in Iraq to counteract the wrongs of Saddam Hussein. Considering this, who are the biggest terrorists in Iraq? The U.S. military. They have not made this decision on their own, so the soldiers themselves are not equivalent to the Unabomber or the people who destroyed the World Trade Center. But they are under the command of terrorists bigger than all those other terrorists put together: the policy-makers of the U.S. and the people like Bush and Kerry who put this policy into action. Given this, if we want to deal with terrorism in Iraq, the first thing we need to do is withdraw our military. People keep saying, "We can't just withdraw." Well, yes, we can. Stop the invasion. Reverse the conquest. If the Iraqis need help with terrorism from us, let them ask us for it. But they don't want us there. It's their country, not ours.

Nader's stance on Iraq is for a prompt withdrawal not only of U.S. troops, but also of U.S. *corporations*. This is key. If the troops withdraw but the corporations get to keep the booty, then the crime is complete. Soldiers may stop dying, but a huge crime has been committed, for which we are culpable. We let them do it in our names. We even *paid* them to do it. It is our moral responsibility to stop this crime.

It's time to listen to conscience and act on it. Now. Immediately. Let's say to Iraq, "We made a mistake in letting the decision-makers get away with this scam. We are sorry we didn't have more input into our government and our media. We will get to work on healing our democracy. Meanwhile, please keep track of the expenses for rebuilding your country, and we will send the bill to Halliburton and Unocal. We apologize for their behavior in our names."

A friend of mine said to me, "Under Kerry, we will not be blatantly manipulated, lied to, threatened, or used as cannon fodder in totally unprovoked preemptive wars." I replied that this was a good way of putting it. In a way I agree: Under Kerry we will be more *subtly* and *discreetly* manipulated, lied to, threatened, and used as cannon fodder. He'll manage the invasion and the dismantling of our democracy better. But it will still happen. And that, to me, is unacceptable. I won't support a criminal for being less blatant.

The arguments about Kerry being more likely to end the war and repeal the Patriot Act are contrary to available evidence and historical precedent. And I don't consider gaining more foreign support for our immoral wars to be any improvement at all.

On other issues, Kerry voted for both NAFTA and GATT. Mike Ruppert has said that, in the Iran-contra hearings, John Kerry "did a masterful job of keeping some of the most damaging Iran-contra secrets – especially records of CIA proprietary company operations – hidden." Both

Bush and Kerry have come out against religious freedom on the issue of gay marriage. While Kerry says he supports civil union for gay couples, there are 1,049 federal rights that go only with marriage. Nader believes adults should be treated equally under the law on this matter.

I agree with those who say that the current administration is the worst in US history, and must be stopped. But everything awful that it did, it did with the full cooperation of the “opposing” party and could not have done without. Kerry is owned by the same small class of corporate interests that owns Bush. They both work for the same agenda, one blatantly, the other more quietly and discreetly. The same agenda will be followed unless a point is made. The current administration with an uncooperative Congress could well be *less* dangerous than a Kerry administration doing the same things more discreetly.

The current environmental crisis is the only reason I can understand for voting for Kerry this year. If the U.S. had ranked voting, I would put him second, after Ralph Nader, only because of this. (Without ranked voting, even if Nader didn’t run, I wouldn’t vote for Kerry. I’d go back to protest ballots.) I admit that the urgency of the environmental crisis (for example, the oceans are turning acid) makes it important to have some improvement immediately. Bush’s administration has been the worst on the environment in history.

Yet not all of us can think only of the short term. We have to consider that corporate dominance of American politics is what is driving us inexorably to ecological crisis. To continue to support this domination by voting for the two corporate parties ultimately drives us to the same end. If you vote for John Kerry for ecological reasons, I understand, but please do your utmost to achieve a ranked voting system by the next election, so we are not held hostage to the corporate parties indefinitely.

WHOM DO THEY SERVE?

Have you ever looked at a distribution of wealth in this country? I’ve seen a poster depicting this, which if drawn to scale would have to be 10 feet tall. A few percent of the total wealth was split between almost all of the people in this country, distributed over the first several inches. Much less than one percent of the population controlled about 98% of the wealth: a tiny, tiny elite.

This elite is well-represented by both the Republicans and the Democrats. The Democrats often get called “centrist,” which is a complete fabrication. They don’t represent the center. They represent the very top, ten feet above all the rest of us.

George Bush and John Kerry attended the same elite school and are both members of the same elite club. The party machines have handed us two rich Yalees – both members of the Skull & Bones Society – who, together, gave us the invasion and the PATRIOT Act. Am I really to expect a Skull & Bones member to take a strong stance against corporate piracy? I’m not interested in their cover stories and empty promises. I’m interested in which interests they serve. Both Bush’s and Kerry’s records say, very clearly, whom they serve. That elite class who owns almost everything. The interests of that class would be completely secure in this election, were it not for the people who insist on expressing their disagreement by voting for independent or third-party candidates like Ralph Nader.

The San Francisco Mime Troupe's play this season, *Showdown at Crawford Gulch*, featured a very apt analogy between the invasion of Iraq and the conquest of native Americans. The character of the railroad magnate concocted a scheme to steal Comanche land for the railroad by fooling the town of Crawford Gulch into thinking that they were about to be attacked by the Comanche. He enlisted the mayor in this deception. Together they acquired ownership of most of the town's businesses while justifying a pre-emptive attack on the Comanche, based on fabricated evidence. At the end, when the townspeople uncovered the deception, they decided to vote the mayor out of office. The audience cheered, thinking, "Vote for John Kerry to put things right."

Unfortunately, a more accurate metaphor for the current situation would have been two candidates for mayor, both working for the railroad magnate, one whose campaign amounted to "Yeehaw! Get them injuns!" and the other who pretended to drag his feet while still stealing the Comanche land. However they voted, the people of Crawford Gulch would not get their assets back, the Comanche would not get their land or freedom back, and the railroad would go through, with the magnate making millions. (The only other voice in the play was a lone nutty character yelling "burn down the bank," hardly sober movement-building for a progressive agenda.) There is no threat to the system in voting in a different mayor if the candidates are limited to those owned by the same system and agenda. *That* is the situation analogous to the global situation now. And that is what the American election 2004 amounts to, if limited to a choice between Bush and Kerry.

POSSIBILITY

But wait! Our choice is *not* limited to Bush and Kerry! By some miracle, made possible by a man whose convictions and principles enable him to brave slanders and vitriolic, unfair attacks and blame for years on end, we actually *do* have a candidate who is not completely in the pocket of the corporations which are destroying our earth, sacrificing our young people in the military and innocent civilians of other countries, and negating our civil liberties. Great news!

The election hasn't happened yet. The media doesn't necessarily know the future. Predictive polls are based on "likely voters" – people who have voted in the last three elections – which is less than half of eligible voters. A large part of their predictive accuracy comes from people's willingness to believe the polls and act on them. This is purely self-fulfilling prophecy which we could collectively decide to debunk.

It is *possible* for people to make different choices this year. Different choices are warranted by what has happened in the past four years. Since the media polls are skewed towards the way things have been, it's repressive to beneficial change to cast our votes based on them. Why would we trust the media on a point as important as this? As if the same media that cheered the war would tell us the truth about that. As if the media could even know in advance. It's *programming*, not journalism.

What is truly sad and tragic is that the American people so thoroughly believe that their vote is owned by the two major parties, that they have no right to express their true opinion in their vote,

and that true change has no chance; that they allow the corporate media to determine their vote. True change *does* have a chance. No vote has yet been cast. Every single voter in this country could decide to go to the polls and make this election a referendum on the invasion of Iraq and the Patriot Act by voting for Ralph Nader. In states where he is not on the ballot, we can write him in. We do not have to let the media make our decision for us by telling us who other people are going to vote for.

No vote has yet been cast. Yes, Nader *could* win. If everyone who supports Nader's agenda voted for Nader, Nader could win.

A WORTHWHILE AGENDA

Let's look at Ralph Nader's stance on some important issues. You can also look for yourself on the www.votnader.org website. I've assembled a list of points from different campaign materials:

- Prompt and responsible withdrawal from Iraq
- Repeal of the USA PATRIOT Act
- A break from our addiction to fossil and nuclear fuel, along with an embrace of sustainable, clean, renewable energy
- Enactment of a living wage (\$10 per hour minimum wage)
- No income tax for people who make less than \$50,000
- Creation of a national universal health care program
- Reduction of the bloated Defense Department budget
- Enforcement of accountability for corporate crime
- Federal oversight of corporate globalization
- Reform of the criminal injustice system
- Suspension of the failed "War on Drugs"
- Authentic protections for consumers, workers, and the environment
- Electoral reform and ranked voting
- Equal rights for same sex couples

The difference between Nader's promises and the Democrats' (when they bother to make any) is that Ralph Nader has a decades-long record of fighting corporate welfare and being an advocate of justice for "ordinary people." If you want more detail on Nader's record of action, read his book, *Crashing the Party*. It's an eye-opener in many ways, revealing not only ample corruption by Democrats, but also, in a refreshingly unassuming way, Nader's own relentless work on behalf of the disenfranchised – on behalf of all of us who have been cheated by the two-party corporate scam.

Electoral reform, especially ranked voting, is key to breaking free of that scam. I don't believe that the two major parties will ever support instant runoff voting, since *both* their power bases entail being the lesser of two evils. If the Democratic party truly believed that Ralph Nader "spoiled" the 2000 election for them, they would have spent the last four years pushing for IRV. If either party cared more about defeating the opposition than about maintaining a monopoly *with* their supposed opposition, they would both support ranked voting, and the Democrats would have opposed the fraud in 2000.

Ralph Nader, on the other hand, who certainly has a legal right to campaign for what he believes, regardless of the system, *has* campaigned for ranked voting in order to eliminate the "spoiler effect" that people blame him for. It is not *his* fault that the two major parties refuse to end this lesser-of-two-evils scam. The responsibility lies with the major parties themselves and with the people who continue to fall for the scam, refuse to oppose it, and continue to vote for those two parties no matter what the candidates do or how badly the candidates represent their interests. The two major parties will never support ranked voting until the people insist. They are well aware that the threat of the "spoiler effect" is how a very small group of people have kept such a stranglehold on American politics for decades. It is up to us to stop rewarding them for it.

A TRUSTWORTHY CANDIDATE

Despite the crucial importance of agenda, the character of a candidate for public office is still very relevant to us as citizens. For one thing, betrayal is far too common. For another, a clear character weakness like Clinton's sex addiction brings down the whole side and hurts the cause of the good points of the candidate's agenda.

Long before Ralph Nader ran for president the first time – long before I had any idea that he might be willing to run for public office – I used to say that what American politics needed was a Ralph Nader. What I meant was that we needed in politics what Ralph Nader helped bring to the business world in the form of truth in advertising laws. Because of Nader, businesses can't legally lie in their advertising and bilk their customers that way. Yet in politics, something far more influential upon all our lives, our honored public servants can and do lie with impunity, betraying us time and again. I felt that we needed consumer protection for citizens. I was so delighted when Ralph Nader decided to run for president – and on my own party's ballot line.

Ralph Nader is someone who has put his all into protecting the little people – the consumers – the bottom of the food chain – because he believes in justice. He didn't just use that idea to get famous and then start betraying his principles. He has stuck by the causes of simple justice for decades.

Since deciding to dedicate his passion for justice to the electoral arena, he has endured more slander, more vicious attacks, and more betrayal than anyone I can think of. Every person I know, including myself, would have given up a long time ago. Why should one give so much of oneself to help the collective good, only to be vilified for it? But Ralph Nader has not only withstood all this, he has kept to his course with great energy and enthusiasm. Even if I didn't

agree with him, he would be an inspiration to me on that basis alone. It takes a strong, principled character.

By comparison, Bush bold-faced lied about a matter of extreme importance, ending or forever damaging the lives not only of thousands of American soldiers, but of tens of thousands of Iraqis as well. He seems to have no connection to issues of importance other than those that profit his masters, and his stupidity and incompetence are simply embarrassing. (Try visiting another country these days.) Then we have Kerry, who has copped out of his responsibility in voting for authorization of the Iraqi invasion. It was quite obvious what Bush was going to do with that authorization. Kerry not only did not act on principle; he doesn't even have the backbone to own up to it, apologize, and change course.

With all the media attacks on Nader, it seems they never mention what Nader's stances on the issues are or how consistently he's upheld these. They never refer to his book, *Crashing the Party*, so people can compare someone like Kerry with someone like Nader. They never care how dishonest and unprincipled are the attacks they make on an unusually principled man.

Ralph Nader is the only person running whom I trust at all to be a good president. He has a *long-term* record of standing for the important issues and prioritizing them appropriately, withstanding widespread and unfair blame in the process. Where does one find a candidate like that, on demand? Why would one expect to always have a well-tested, honorable person willing to represent an agenda of justice, non-violence, and improved democracy?

We may never have such an opportunity again in our lifetimes.

DISPELLING THE MYTHS

I've mentioned the slanders against Nader. All his supporters have grown very familiar with them. It's amazing how constantly one hears them. As if repeating them enough times makes them true. If the mainstream news were concerned with journalism instead of serving their masters, they might bother to debunk these lies instead of spreading them. So, in lieu of trained journalists doing their jobs, I'll do my best.

It is said that Nader is funded by Republican money. Nader has never received money from either of the major parties. When it comes to contributions from individuals, it's not generally good policy for any campaign, including those of the two major parties, to ask someone who is donating money to your campaign how they are registered to vote and refuse money from those who belong to competing parties. All the parties sometimes attract the votes of people who are registered under another party. That's how Reagan got elected. Of the people who vote for Nader, 25-30% are registered Republicans. One could reasonably expect, then, that 25-30% of his donations come from Republicans. The actual percentage is far below that – about 5%. Individual Republicans contribute far more to Democrats, and vice versa.

It is said that Nader has right wing groups (anti-tax groups and anti-gay groups) campaigning for him. There may be some anti-tax people helping the campaign, especially since Nader advocates no income tax for people who make less than \$50,000 per year. If any anti-gay people have

helped the campaign, it's neither a reflection on Nader, his views on gay rights, or his campaign. Nader is explicitly in favor of gay rights, so the anti-gay people would be hindering their own cause. Perhaps they thought they were hurting Kerry. Regardless, Nader never knowingly welcomed the support of people with an agenda of hate. As with contributions, a campaign doesn't generally turn down offers of volunteer work from individuals. Personally, I suspect that, if these people existed at all, they were probably provocateurs trying to cast aspersions on the Nader campaign.

Another popular opinion goes, "Even the Greens rejected Nader." In point of fact, the Green Party membership voted 73% for Camejo, who was explicitly standing in for Nader. The Greens was waffling on whether to run a full-out campaign, so Nader was not sure whether to try to work with them again. Many Greens were shocked that even though they voted overwhelmingly for Camejo and Nader/Camejo immediately became one ticket, the national convention disregarded the wishes of the membership and selected someone who was not committed to running a full-out campaign. I personally tried very hard to get the Green party leadership in California to poll the membership on the issue of our ballot line, if they were, as they claimed, unsure what the membership intended. The leadership flat out refused and then ignored me. They also refused earlier attempts to get a poll on the issue of our ballot line. The Green party desperately needs a fresh infusion of grass-roots democracy and decentralization (two of our ten key values). The decentralized approach would leave us free at the state level to join in coalitions rather than have our ballot line dictated by some central authority whom none of us actually voted for. A new Green Committee for Democracy and Independence has formed within the Green party to work on correcting these problems for the future.

In Oregon, some members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) claimed that Nader ballot petitioners were forging names. In truth, the petitioners not only didn't forge names, the Democrats resorted to intimidating both petitioners and people who had signed with threats of being accused as a terrorist. The Nader campaign was well aware that each signature was being scrutinized, had no reason to jeopardize their efforts in that way, and, in general, makes every effort to stay within the law. SEIU was campaigning for the Democrats, and apparently, some members were willing to stoop to such slander. Nader made it onto the ballot fairly in Oregon. He was thrown off again on a technicality involving "unwritten rules" about the appearance of signatures, not fraud or forgery. The Nader campaign is continuing to fight this battle, which may go to the Supreme Court.

Of course, the most frequent tirade one hears about Nader is the blatantly, obviously, gallingly false one of "A vote for Nader is a vote for Bush!" I can't even count the number of times I have heard this lie repeated as some sort of uncontested given. These people are usually outraged at me for not voting for their supposedly less-evil candidates. Meanwhile, they fail to notice that people like me have reason to be angry at them, too. Falling into this same pattern every four years derails all attempts to create a long-term political plan to make our country more democratic, honest, and fair.

I've never understood how people in "safely" Democratic states could have the gall to make this claim, *especially* regarding the 2000 election. They went against their conscience, erased their true voice, to vote for Gore instead of Nader. For no reason. The Republicans stole the election

anyway, and their precious Democrats went along with it. Why do they not question *themselves* for wasting their vote?

The only way the Democrats get away with blaming Nader for their losing elections is by assuming that every vote for Nader would otherwise be a Democratic vote. This is absolutely untrue. Many Greens and Nader-supporters are among the set of people whose vote will never again be seduced by the Democrats who have sold us out so persistently. Many of Nader's supporters are people who refused to vote before that, because it was a pointless exercise, an insulting game. Myself, I always voted; but before Nader came along, I voted for the Peace & Freedom party candidate, simply as the closest thing to an expression of my opinion that the ballot allowed. If there had not been a third-party candidate, I would have voted on the initiatives and abstained from the presidential election in order to say: *There is no acceptable candidate.*

There are also plenty of Republicans who are voting for Nader. Nader has always pulled as much from disaffected Republicans as disaffected Democrats. In New Hampshire in 1992, 51% of Nader's votes came from registered Republicans, 49% from registered Democrats. According to exit polls in 2000, 25% of Nader's votes would have gone to Bush, 38% to Gore, and 37% to neither. So over 60% of Nader's voters would not have voted for the Democrat under any circumstances. While Nader did draw "not Bush" votes, he drew "not Gore" votes as well. In more recent times, he's pulled *more* from the Republicans than the Democrats. In a New Hampshire poll earlier this year, Nader was supported by twice as many registered Republicans (9%) as registered Democrats (4%).

Underlying these accusations is the false assumption that people are obligated to vote for one of the two major parties. It is just as true to say that people who voted for Gore in 2000 are responsible for putting Bush in office. If they'd voted for Nader, we not only wouldn't have Bush, we'd have a fair and sane agenda in the White House. I know many people who preferred Nader but voted for Gore. I know no one at all who preferred Gore but voted for Nader. Almost all of the people I know or encounter intend to vote for Kerry this year. Of those, only one among them is voting *for* Kerry rather than merely *against* Bush. (I have news for you all: Ralph Nader is also not Bush.) The rest would vote for Nader first, if we had ranked voting. So it is much more accurate to say that Kerry's votes are coming from Nader than to say that Nader's votes are coming from the Democrats.

But it's faulty reasoning, either way. The people responsible for putting Bush in office are the people who voted for him, the people who committed the electoral fraud in Florida, the Supreme Court, and the entire U.S. Senate (including John Kerry).

The Democrats do not *own* anyone's vote. They are not *entitled* to anyone's vote. They lose elections through their own corruption, their own failure to stand up to the totalitarian war-based agenda, and their stubborn refusal to support fairer elections through ranked voting. With ranked voting they wouldn't completely lose the people who vote their principles but prefer the Democrats to the Republicans... until we reached a majority, and there's the rub. They'd then have some real competition and would have to run actual progressive candidates instead of corporate-bought liars who sell us out.

People campaigning for the major parties need to understand that there are many people who don't look at our vote as the property of one of the two corrupt mainstream parties. We look at our vote as an expression of our voice, our opinion. It is anti-democratic to tell people that they must not vote their conscience but must endorse the two-party stranglehold by voting for one of the two parties instead. Those who feel threatened by third parties should work to achieve ranked voting. Those who don't support ranked voting should stop accusing third parties of stealing the vote for their guy. Their guy is responsible for my not voting for him. Period.

I don't understand how anyone can claim to be in favor of democracy if they are intolerant of people actually using it.

SENDING A MESSAGE

Remember that every important political change – from the abolition of slavery to child labor laws to women's rights – began with movements, often small at first, which ultimately succeeded in delivering a message from the people.

I believe that reality, especially human reality, has feedback loops built in which, if not stifled, serve to correct imbalances and injustices. One form of feedback is confrontation. Injustice upsets us. We express ourselves and confront the injustice until the perpetrators are unable or unwilling to continue. To work well, this requires that people pay attention to their conscience, their own interests, and the interests of others. It means noticing when they are being manipulated and deceived.

Bernie Sanders talks about an early third-party campaign of his where he raised important issues in his community. He didn't come close to winning, but later, a few of the ideas he popularized were picked up by a major party candidate and implemented. Bernie had a truly positive impact on his world and community with his campaign, despite the fact that he couldn't and didn't win. This is another feedback loop: people speaking up for what they think is important; people campaigning for what they believe.

Neither Bush nor Kerry will withdraw from Iraq or repeal the Patriot Act if they are merely elected with no protest from the people. There is no precedent for a candidate being more moral in office than he was willing to take a stand for while running for office – not without strong outside pressure. Kerry will not bring the troops home promptly, repeal the Patriot Act, or improve our democracy unless there is a *strong* mandate for this.

The invasion of Iraq and the theft of our Constitutional freedoms *could not* have happened without the full cooperation of Congress. No one in Congress stood up for our liberties or the conscience of the nation, because they didn't think we'd do anything about it. A strong showing for Nader says: "We intend to do something about this." It says it regardless of who wins the election. So even if Bush wins, he is less likely to be able to push his policies through Congress. But a Kerry win without a strong showing for Nader does not make an effective statement on these crucial issues at all. Kerry stands for the status quo, the same status quo that let Bush get away with all the crimes of the past four years. We do not need a mandate for the status quo at *this* point in time.

Voting for Nader sends a clear message to Congress and to the media: “do your jobs.” If we can join the voices of all those who have had enough of the lies, corruption, and negligence of duty, we can make a difference. We can send a message that *clearly* opposes the war and the Patriot Act, *clearly* confronts corporate welfare, and *clearly* advocates defense of the environment. The groundswell of public opinion around such clear statements could make Congress take notice of our feedback. The project doesn’t end with an election, but it can start with an election. The election can give a groundswell boost to the forces of integrity confronting corruption. Even if Nader does not win, we will have communicated to Congress, the press, advertisers, the global community, and most importantly, to *each other* that we the American people do not agree with the violent and immoral acts ordered by our government and that we do not agree to give up our freedoms to the very people who are perpetrating this act. The government can’t do these things without our money and our consent.

MANDATE OF CONSCIENCE

As I have mentioned before, while I am passionately in favor of the strategy of voting for the best agenda by voting for Ralph Nader, I’m also comfortable allowing for multiple strategies. If your conscience says vote for Nader, vote for Nader; if your conscience says vote for Kerry, vote for Kerry; if your conscience says vote for Bush... please – please, please PLEASE – examine the evidence a little closer before voting. Just consider the unaltered footage of Fahrenheit 9/11 and disregard the interpretation and the gags. Just read the reports of Mike Ruppert (www.fromthewilderness.com), Catherine Austin Fitts (www.solari.com), Alexander Cockburn (www.counterpunch.org), Greg Palast (www.gregpalast.com), Noam Chomsky (www.chomsky.info), and many others working to get out the truth in a society where news is strictly censored by the financial interests of the media corporations who sell it. I am convinced that no person of conscience can truly consider the evidence of the past four years and still, in good conscience, vote for George W. Bush.

If your conscience tells you that John Kerry offers a real chance of changing U.S. policy – the *only* real chance – then vote for him. That doesn’t bother me. I want all the bases covered, too, and I trust our consciences to arrange us in the best way. What bothers me is the number of people who, when their conscience tells them one thing and the media tells them another, decide to trust the media. The same censorious, dishonest media that has cheered violent invasions and has told us repeatedly that we *have to* surrender our freedoms to the very people in our government who decided to conquer others. The same media that long ago abandoned any semblance of journalism, investigative reporting, and diversity of opinion, and has given us, instead, endless quotes of governmental and corporate lies. The media that serves the Haves and Have Mores who sign their paychecks.

This I believe is simply wrong. I’m appealing to your conscience and your morals, yet I’m also appealing to your pragmatism. It’s a longer-term pragmatism. It’s the kind of pragmatism that knows that in the long run, conscience will always lead to a better place than fear. It is impractical as well as immoral to follow your fear when your conscience is calling. *Especially* now.

I am writing this because I don't think our country's democracy can survive this betrayal of conscience a moment longer. We may not have four more years to "build a movement" under another right-wing Democrat who is explicitly against such a movement. People have said such things for decades. They said it during both of Clinton's elections, and here we are twelve years later much worse off.

No political movement in the history of the world has ever achieved its goals by campaigning for the opposite of those goals at the outset. You don't build movements by acting against your principles. You don't do it by, every four years, turning your back on your truth and then trying to switch gears and allegiances in between campaigns. You don't do it by completely erasing your political voice. You build movements by giving your best shot to spreading and supporting your true views, taking what benefits come from having waged a campaign and publicized the real issues, and continuing to do this through the next campaign and the next. You do it by speaking your truth, over and over, until others decide to give it a fair hearing.

As strongly as I disagree with what is presented as popular opinion in this country, I am still convinced that people of true conscience, the people to whom this essay is addressed, are in the majority. We have often been misinformed and misled, but we have good principles and care about keeping ourselves and our country aligned with those principles. I have been called to remind you of this about yourselves and consider carefully what it means this election. If I have helped you to be any more likely to act on the stirrings of your own conscience, then I have done my job.

Thank you for your attention.