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**Ralph
Nader
Reconsidered**



RALPH NADER RECONSIDERED

By Jonathan Rowe

On a blustery evening last month Ralph Nader was speaking at the city hall in Takoma Park, Maryland, a community just over the District of Columbia line. The subject of the meeting was Buyers Up, Nader's latest undertaking, in which homeowners and small businesses combine their purchasing power to negotiate a lower price for home heating fuel. To date Buyers Up has signed up almost 3,000 members in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area. They are now enjoying heating fuel prices 25 cents per gallon lower than those offered to the average consumer.

I was there because I had fallen somewhat out of touch with Nader since leaving his organization in the seventies. You don't see him on the news as much as you used to, and it's no longer true that every other bright young person you meet in Washington is hankering to work with him. How is he faring in these conservative times?

He may not be on the news as much, but the auditorium is almost full, despite the nasty weather. Nader seems genial and relaxed—a side of the man that only close associates used to see now breaking through the guarded public persona. Patiently, he leads the gathering through the steps that connect a 25-cent-per-gallon dis-

count on heating fuel to the larger idea of an economy in which consumers—or “buyers” as Nader now prefers to call them—have real say.

“A few years ago,” he says, “I thought the government would defend the American public. Now we have to develop a new kind of power, based on the interest of the buying group.” He goads them with a little trademark Nader sarcasm: “What are you *getting* for the extra 25 cents a gallon [that dealers are charging]? I mean, they aren't giving you gourmet oil.” Then to the larger view: “The consequences of homeowners banding together goes far beyond saving a few dollars, as important as that is for the family budget.” For one thing, he says, it's a question of community. “Today people have no need to connect with their neighbors. Buyers' groups can be the early links that bond people together. Then they'll start asking questions about municipal services, the schools, pollution. Then there will be something worthy of being called a community.” Betraying a bit of a preoccupation, he adds, “and not isolated citizens ready to be prey to multinational corporations.”

“To get in the mood,” Nader continues, “the next time you go to Sears and they give you a form to fill out, cross out everything you don't like and put in things you do like, such as doubling the warranty.” He's enjoying this. “Or go to the supermarket resolved not to buy anything but just walk up and down the aisles taking notes. When the manager approaches you, inform him that you represent a group of several hundred households and that if his store passes, your group will call to set up an appointment to negotiate on such things as the nutritional value of the food he carries.” Nader conjures up a future in which consumers have their own attorneys sitting across the table from the insurance companies negotiating policies; in which leases are written more in favor of the tenant; in which “big buying groups will have more leverage and power to set their own terms in the market place.”

It's a refreshing change from the mainly top-down consumer protection style of the seventies; people are going to *do* something, instead of just being protected by a government agency, and it gets the blood moving. Nader has pretty much withdrawn from the Washington news scene and has turned his network of organizations, called Public Citizen, over to his closest associates. “Nowadays I don't even have an organization, and that's as it should be,” he recently told an interviewer. He spends his time on “empowerment” projects like Buyers Up and Citizen Utili-

Walt Disney '35

THE NADER INSTITUTE

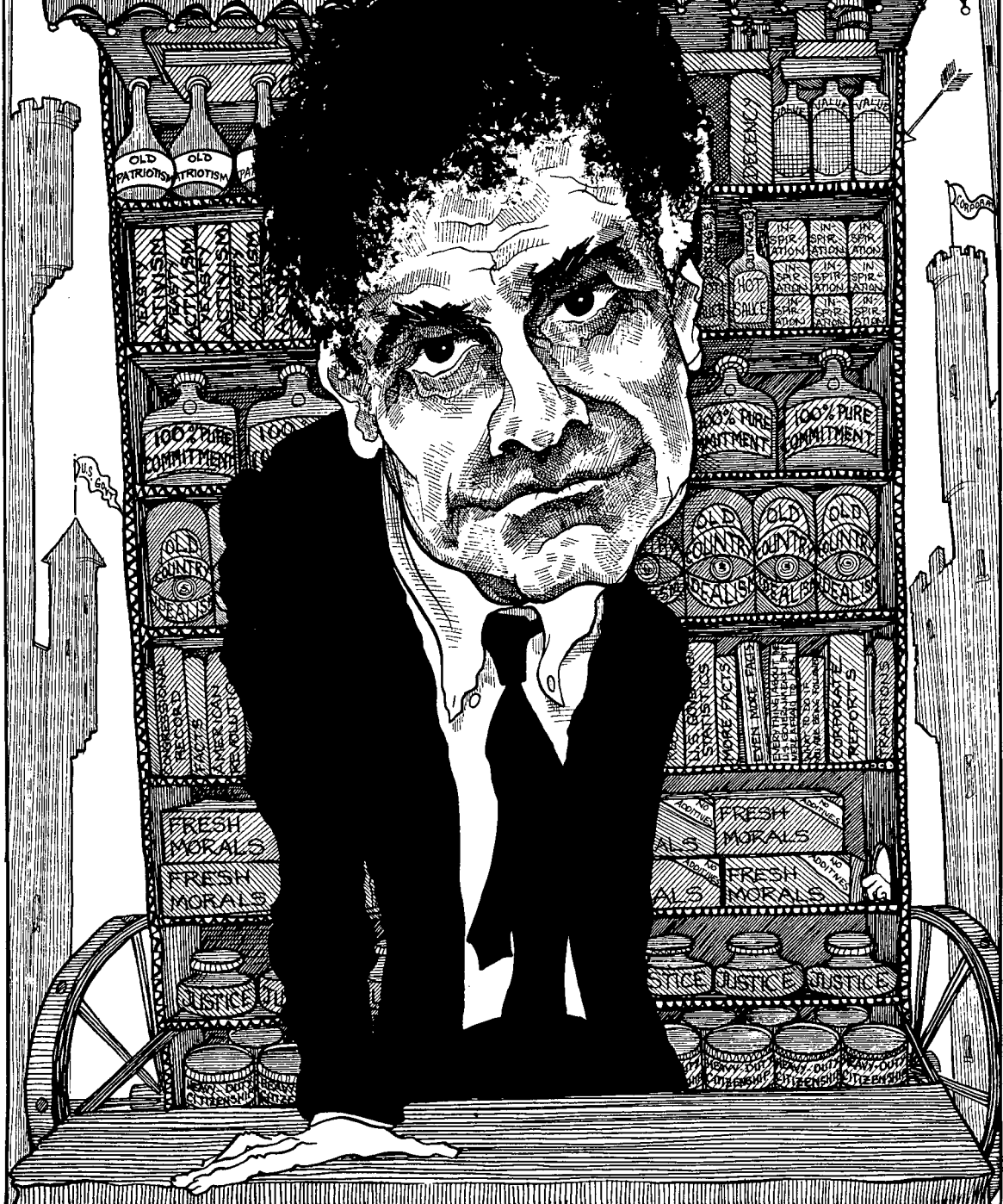


Illustration by Vint Lawrence

‘Is it so implausible, so distasteful,’ Nader asked, ‘that a man would believe deeply enough in his work to dedicate his life to it?’

ty Boards (CUBs), organizations that represent rate payers before public utility boards and that are financed through solicitations the utilities have to include from time to time in utility bills.

Fifteen years ago, when student leaders wanted to change the “system,” Nader was relentlessly empirical, talking about hot dogs and automobiles. Now that the nation has reverted back to the conservatism of the fifties, it is Nader who is saying, as he did to a law audience recently, that “it is time for us to move on the structure and strategy of power and build the institutions that can deal with these problems.”

“We gotta do something”

When Ralph Nader arrived in Washington in 1964, Lyndon Johnson was president, there was no such thing as a consumer or environmental movement, and most of the members of Nader’s class at Harvard Law School (1958) were well on their way to remunerative careers. After graduation Nader had traveled as a freelance journalist and then worked in a small law practice in Hartford, Connecticut, where he saw that most of the legal problems of ordinary people went without redress. “The cases were too small,” he said. “They’d just be pushed around.” Nader was interested in the idea of an ombudsman—a sort of public advocate for such people within the government—and traveled to Scandinavia to explore the idea. Upon his return he drafted bills for the Massachusetts and Connecticut

legislatures and wrote on the subject, but with little result. “I had watched years go by and nothing happened,” he said afterwards regarding his decision to come to Washington. “Before that, decades had gone by. I decided it took total commitment.”

In Washington, Nader developed networks among public-spirited reporters and congressional staff members, feeding them stories and issues. His own work centered on highway safety, an interest prompted by the accidents he had observed while hitchhiking around the country. Nader had written a long paper in law school on the liability of manufacturers for unsafe automobile design and had pursued this issue in his legal practice and writing. His book, *Unsafe at Any Speed*, was a stinging indictment of the Corvair and, more fundamentally, of a business enterprise that showed more concern about styling considerations than about the basic question of safety.

The industry had always preferred to keep safety discussions focused on the driver and the road; now Nader was changing the premise of the debate, directing attention to the car and the company that made it. In a blunder that has entered the American folklore, General Motors put a private detective on Nader’s tail to dig up dirt about his personal life. When GM President James Roche had to apologize publicly, before a Senate committee, it propelled Nader out of his backroom obscurity in Washington and made him a national hero.

GM’s snooping on Nader helped ensure passage of the Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act of 1966, the basic auto safety legislation. Then followed a spate of laws on kindred subjects, such as contamination of meat and poultry, natural gas pipelines, and coal mine safety. Nader seemed to personify the nation’s concerns aroused earlier in the decade by books, such as Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, about the mounting detritus of industrial society. He was being called a “consumer advocate.” But more significantly, he tapped a vein of social concern among scores of young people then in college or law school, myself included.

I remember the day, in a law school dorm, that I happened upon a *Playboy* interview with this Nader fellow. The magazine dubbed him the “zealous consumer crusader,” but it was the crusader rather than the consumer part that lit the fire. Here was a man who lived in a cheap rooming house, owned no car, and kept his material wants to a minimum so he could do the

work he really cared about. The pictures on the opening spread showed him in varying degrees of discomfort, as though defying the feel-good aura of the magazine. There was a touch of defiance, too, in the narrow collars and ties that were decidedly uncool at the time. "Is it so implausible, so distasteful," Nader said, "that a man would believe deeply enough in his work to dedicate his life to it?"

Nader's circle of associates grew into teams of students, unfortunately dubbed "Nader's raiders," investigating everything from the ownership of land in California to the company state of Delaware to (in my own case) the Interstate Commerce Commission, the oldest federal agency and assuredly the most boring of them all. These teams evolved into the network of organizations that today employ between 75 and 100 people carrying on the research and lobbying work that Nader started.

If Nader became an inspiration for young people, he also became a national symbol for taking on the big guys, an indication that one man still could make a difference. "Americans are starved," he said, "for acts of the individual in a conflict situation outside the sports arena." Everyone who worked with Nader in those years remembers the thousands of letters, many on ruled dime-store paper and addressed simply to "Ralph Nader, White House, Washington, D.C.," imploring his intervention in all manner of life problems and complaints. And incidents like the time, during the ICC study, a group of truck drivers drove seven hours from upstate New York to show us firsthand evidence of the safety violations in which their companies were engaged. "Look here, Ralph, look at these logs. They're makin' us run 12, 13 hours—can't make those runs in the time they say. Guys are takin' pills to stay up, then it's booze to go to sleep. Look at these equipment reports, Ralph. I've been reporting this brake problem for months now and look at this. Nothin'. People are gonna get killed, Ralph. We gotta do something."

The problems often seemed overwhelming, and you could see why Nader was thinking in terms of new organizations and agencies to do something about them. Sometimes he could provide tangible assistance. When two of his young attorneys helped tiny (population 905) Anmoore, West Virginia curb Union Carbide's plant, which was spewing horrendous industrial wastes over the town, Buck Gladden said simply, "I'd like to say one thing to Ralph Nader. I'd like to thank him for being."

Bad neighbors

Not everyone, of course, was thanking Nader for being. Free market conservatives accused him of trying to substitute his own judgment for that of the "market"—as though you and I actually get to stand over the shoulder of the auto designers and choose the safety features we would like built into our car. Their stock epithet became "self-appointed," as in "self-appointed consumer advocate," as though Nader should have gotten an official appointment before presuming to act like a citizen. Business mavericks like Robert Townsend of Avis, author of *Up the Organization*, liked the way Nader was jostling the sacred cows, but in the boardrooms alarms were sounding. The mood was represented by a memo Lewis Powell wrote for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce before he was appointed to the Supreme Court, urging a corporate counteroffensive against the Nader menace. "No thoughtful person can question that the American economic system is under broad attack," Powell wrote, calling Nader "perhaps the single most effective antagonist of American business." Quoting *Fortune*, Powell went on to warn that Nader "aimed at smashing utterly the target of his hatred, which is corporate power."

Powell was bewildered at this turn of events. "As every business executive knows," he went on, "few elements of American society today have as little influence in government as the American businessman, the corporation, or even millions of corporate stockholders." But Powell was right that Nader was raising fundamental questions about a subject that had receded from public debate in the prosperity of postwar America and has been swept aside again today—the economic and political power of the large corporation. Carping and obsessive as Nader can sometimes be on the subject, it was an analysis that rang true and was rooted not in foreign ideologies but in native American values.

The starting point was simply to apply to these institutions called corporations the same standards of civil behavior that we apply regularly to individuals. What would we say about a neighbor who poured toxic wastes into our air and water? "I don't know of any hoard of hippies or yuppies who have managed to smog New York City or contaminate the Gulf of Mexico," he would say. The new nature of corporate violence tended to make us oblivious to it. A hundred years ago companies subjected workers to conditions that were tangible and given to graphic

depiction. But such hazards as radiation and carcinogenic additives to food assault us silently and invisibly. We are “biologically obsolete” regarding the new violence that surrounds us, Nader said.

Then there was the broader realm of corporate economic crime, which was similarly elusive because abstract. “If you were to send ten pickpockets to New York and each of them were to do 50 jobs a day, that would, I suppose, make front-page news. But set up a system of acquisition that is derivative and obscure, like the oil depletion allowance or import quotas and nobody pays any attention. . . .” Often, such behavior violated the corporation’s own professed standards of free market principle. Pollution, for example, was really a form of socializing costs. Instead of cleaning up its smokestacks, the company shifts the costs onto the people in the community who have to pay doctor bills for emphysema resulting from the plant’s pollution.

These problems of course had implications for consumers, but they raised much broader questions of public policy.

Why do institutions called corporations behave in this manner? That the question itself sounds naive suggests how inured we have become to an unsatisfactory system. The answer, Nader said, was the erosion in law of a very old-fashioned value—personal responsibility. “I am responsible for my actions,” he said, “But who is responsible for those of GM?” The corporation had become an institutional shield buffering people from the consequences of their own actions or omissions.

Sheer economic power is part of it, but also at fault is the form of corporation that has evolved in this country. As Nader and two associates pointed out in *Constitutionalizing the Corporation*, the U.S. Constitution doesn’t even mention corporations, as improbable as that would seem today. Like the federal bureaucracy, they were not anticipated in the system of checks and balances which the framers devised to prevent the concentration of power. A “corporation” back then was granted a special charter by a state legislature to perform a specific public function, such as building a toll road or a canal. To undertake projects like these required large amounts of capital, which investors would not put up if they were to be personally liable for the whole enterprise. The corporate form shielded investors from personal liability for the actions of their business; but in exchange for this extraordinary exemption from common law rules of responsibility, the enterprise had to keep strictly within the bounds of the specific project for which it was chartered.

The charter thus served to keep the corporation generally within the compass of community values.

But in the middle of the last century, this bargain unraveled. “Free incorporation” laws permitted anyone to adopt the corporate form for any undertaking they desired. They could enjoy the benefits of limited liability without the corresponding responsibilities. As states like Delaware and New Jersey began to bid against one another to attract the burgeoning corporations, the erosion of individual responsibility extended to the managers of the business as well as the owners. Charters became an exemption from responsibilities rather than a statement of them. It is common, for example, for by-laws to provide that corporations will pay for the legal expenses of officers and directors accused of breaking the law. Nader is commonly called “anti-business,” but the overriding theme in his work has been to find ways to bring corporations back within the pale of individual responsibility.

Secular monks

But Nader saw that it wasn’t enough merely to point the finger at corporations. “The most important question that can be asked about any society at any time is how much effort do citizens spend exercising their civic responsibility,” he said. And again, “We can’t possibly have a democracy with 200 million Americans and only a handful of citizens.” For the past 15 years he has goaded every conceivable audience, from trial lawyers and doctors to psychologists and engineers, to do more. “You are too high on rhetoric, too short on commitment, and perhaps too self-indulgent,” was a typical remark to college audiences in the early seventies.

He was, in short, drawing the connection between social policy and life practice. How could you be committed to citizenship, to achieving your ideals, if you were preoccupied with making money? How could you expect to deny corporate power in the political arena without saying no to its intrusions in the personal arena in the form of consumption that we don’t need or that may be harmful? He complained about institutions like Harvard Law School (“a high-priced tool factory”) that train professionals without an ethic of commitment or service. “Harvard Law School never raised the question of sacrifice. . . . Nothing. The icons were not those who had sacrificed at all.” Nader was even talking about the need for “secular monks” to com-

mit themselves to the work of change with the same single-mindedness and indifference to material rewards of the religious orders of past ages. "You've got to practice what you preach," he said, "so you can preach what you practice."

It was Nader's commitment to the old-fashioned virtues of individual hard work, thrift, and civic responsibility that put him right at the geological fault line between profession and practice in American life—between the values a Reagan kitchen cabinet member might profess and the values his company spreads among the populace through its advertising. Self-indulgence has become a form of social control. As long as we are preoccupied with our own advancement, we are not asking the questions that need to be asked. Corporations could deal with a government agency. But how were they going to recruit talented young people if these kids insisted on asking bothersome questions about the worth of what the company was doing? How were they going to market consumer goods to abstemious people?

If this could seem a specter in the nation's boardrooms, it was also unsettling in Washington, D.C., where commitment is expected to remain within polite limits, and where many people see no inconsistency between aspiring for a six-figure salary on the one hand and social values that include a cleaner environment or helping the poor on the other. Nader was saying that there was an individual price to be paid, and ordered his own life accordingly.

It was enough to make people squirm a bit, and reporters were not exceptions. Granted, Nader's unconventional manner, and frugalities such as buying 12 pairs of shoes and four dozen socks at the PX before leaving the Army, might understandably arouse curiosity. But reporters have tended to dismiss Nader's life habits as eccentricities or as dark symptoms of psychological disorder, and have been reluctant to come to grips with the life values that inform them. Typical was the somewhat querulous observation by Juan Williams in *The Washington Post* Sunday magazine a couple of years back: "He's too busy for fiction, just as he's too busy to own a car, too busy to have a family, too busy to care about clothes, or anything but reforming the nation for consumers." And Ralph, you call yourself a citizen? Still others have taken Nader's reputation as a test of their journalistic spurs. An example is David Sanford, who, when with *The New Republic*, wrote a mean little tract that inflated petty failings into high matters of state, in

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a manner that suggested Sanford might have a promising second career in divorce law.

Loving the law

This is not to say that Nader is above criticism. One is a lingering ambivalence regarding the electoral arena.

Early on, Nader was accused of operating in a "Lone Ranger" manner, using the press and congressional allies almost single-handedly to generate momentum for legislative reform. The results he achieved in the early years did arise more from the way members of Congress feared the bad publicity he could generate than from the clout of an actual army of citizen supporters.

This was understandable. Nader had stepped into the breach and become a lobbyist for the public when no one else was. Furthermore, many of the issues he addresses are not the kind that individually stir a continuing groundswell of support. People with hundreds of life concerns will

never work up as much intensity on an issue like automobile bumpers as the industry for which those bumpers are a form of daily bread. But at the same time, Nader has shown an impatience with representative government when it is slow to see the light.

Early on, Nader's imagination was captured by the role of the crusading attorney who prevailed because law, facts, and tactics, rather than a majority, were on his side. "The judiciary is the citadel for the minority view," he told *Rolling Stone*. "They don't count votes in court, they count rights. And also, when it works well, it works because courts are insulated from the usual manipulative power plays in the executive and legislative branches," such as campaign contributions and the like.

The proposed Consumer Protection Agency, for which Nader worked tirelessly for almost a decade, illustrated a tendency to seek solutions in this judicial mold. Federal agencies like the Federal Trade Commission and the Food and Drug Administration are besieged by industry lobbyists on hundreds of matters affecting daily life, from fairness standards for advertising to the drugs permitted on the market. Rarely are representatives of a larger public able to weigh in with equal measure on the other side. The CPA was to be a sort of institutional lawyer that would make up for this failing, participating in—or initiating—proceedings at the other agencies on the consumers' behalf.

The problem was that those agencies were set up to protect the public in the first place. If they aren't doing their job—which in many cases they aren't—isn't the answer to elect a president and a congress who will give us tough minded regulators who really want to protect the public? "Power has got to be insecure to be responsive," Nader has observed. "It's got to have something to lose." Electoral politics are our basic engine of governmental responsiveness, messy and imperfect as they are.

Nader has done his share to put heat on congressmen he regards as wrong. And nobody has done more speaking around the country to build a constituency for the kinds of reforms he represents. But there hasn't been a corresponding effort to develop better candidates and mobilize a genuine electoral base. On the whole, Nader has kept at arm's length from the electoral arena.

Electoral democracy is not, of course, the only kind. The groups and causes Nader has supported certainly enrich the climate in which electoral politics take place. Members of a Buyers

Up are likely to be more attuned than others to consumer issues. Then too, one man can't do everything. But while we are building new institutions, don't we have to attend to the oldest and most basic, the way the Right wingers like Richard Viguerie are? Ultimately, it's a *political* movement the country needs.

Are goods good?

Why does this man call himself a "consumer advocate" in the first place? He's about as close to a nonconsumer as you will find. Sure there are consumer problems, like one-sided warranties and defective products. But these hardly define the universe of important issues, let alone the qualities of citizenship and commitment Nader has embodied so eloquently. Doesn't he risk trivializing his movement by casting it in the image of *Consumer Reports*?

Nader really regards consumer issues like unsafe cars as teaching devices. As a student, he said, he used to talk in terms of broad world problems. "Then I realized that you have to be more concrete if you want to reach people." Start with the cars, then people might begin to ask questions about the kind of companies that make them. Then too, there are tight strictures upon public debate in this country; it's hard to talk about corporate power through media that are prime examples of that power. Addressing these concerns as consumer issues allows Nader to reach an audience broader than the readers of the leftist magazines.

In Nader's mind a real consumer movement represents much more than the smart shopper mentality of *Consumer Reports*. In a recent essay in a volume titled, *Beyond Reagan*, Nader gives the consumer movement a surprisingly rich theoretical basis, sketching out the links between his personal nonconsumption and his "consumerist" concerns.

Nader sees the consumer movement as a fundamental challenge to the premises of Western economics both left and right. From Ricardo to Marx on down, he writes, Western economists have viewed the world "from the production side of the market—from capital and labor and selling." This fixation with production, Nader argues, causes us to ask the wrong questions. If the gross national product goes up next quarter, the economists will break out the champagne. But what if a closer examination reveals that the larger GNP was due primarily to increased consumption of alcohol and tobacco and to a rash

of automobile accidents that caused the purchases of medical services and replacement parts to soar? The public—as consumers—would be better off without them—with less tobacco and alcohol and fewer automobile accidents. But since we see the equation from the production side, and automatically deem production as “good,” we don’t even raise that question. “It is the number of cars and drugs sold that is the measure, not what the auto and drug industries add and subtract from the transportation usage and health of people,” Nader writes.

A true consumer economy, in other words, would be measured in terms of consumer well-being, not in terms of the amount of production. It is the production premise itself—and not the consumer movement as Nader defines it—that is really responsible for the commodity fetish that people associate with “consumerism.” When the needs of production come first, then producers resort to every strategy and artifice to get us to consume more, even if such consumption is unnecessary or unhealthy. The driving force in the economy becomes getting us to consume more rather than to serve our needs, which might be better served by consuming less. “Enormous skill, artifice, and resources are used in getting consumers to buy what the sellers want to sell notwithstanding the availability of efficient, safe, economical durable and effective alternatives, *including that of buying nothing at all*” (emphasis supplied).

Nonconsumption is not even a tolerated item of public discussion, Nader observes. “Media that live off advertisements urging people *to buy* are not about to give much time to announcements or programs urging people *not to buy*.” Enormous waste results. “If in the last 50 years the consumer value had the power to prevail, our nation would be humming along on one-third of the energy.” The implications of this production bias are enormous. When production comes first, then more and more of our lives get redefined as new frontiers for consumption. What we now call “leisure,” for example, used to be the time when people visited with neighbors, got involved in the PTA or civic association or politics. Now we have a burgeoning “leisure industry” from health spas to dish antennae to fill that time with consumption. “Television alone takes 25 hours a week,” Nader noted recently. “And that’s consumption.” The consumer movement that Nader envisions would put less emphasis on consumption—and on the income necessary to support it. Production would be

geared to needs rather than wants. There would be more time for other activities such as civic affairs. “The movement goes to the core of the value system of the society,” Nader told a recent interviewer. “It isn’t just \$200 off the price of a car.”

The corner pharmacy

If this is what the consumer movement really means, then let’s have more of it. Given the current infatuation with the “supply side,” it’s especially important to raise questions about the social impact of production. Still, I worry about the gap between the theory and the actuality. Once you’ve cast the movement in consumer terms, can you ever get it up to the high ground Nader surveys? When Nader starts talking about consumer information banks at shopping centers and “professional consumers” to help people make wise shopping decisions, it really does begin to sound like the gospel of *Consumer Reports*. Cooperative buying efforts like Buyers Up are great ideas. But Nader is the first to acknowledge that history is not encouraging on the possibility of their becoming a movement with larger political goals. For example, at CENEX, the cooperative oil company started in a burst of idealism years ago by the North Dakota Farmer’s union, officials speak today like members of the oil industry, not a social movement.

The consumer movement is an important way to mobilize a constituency group to counteract corporate power. But the large corporation does not define the universe of production. The small-scale business in particular can serve a social as well as economic function. I often cringe at the results of consumer price surveys—of drugs, for example. Generally it is the little corner pharmacy that comes out at the bottom. Sure, there are some sharks. But what if the little corner pharmacist is like the one I know who contributes to clean-up campaigns on a declining Main Street and takes a personal interest in his customers, often suggesting that they just go home and get a good night’s sleep instead of taking more drugs? He’s the bad guy because he can’t sell as low as Walgreen’s out at the shopping center?

Enterprise *can* be a locus of community values, no less than a buyers coop can be. Worker ownership in particular holds promise in this regard. Nader is wary of worker ownership because there’s no guarantee worker-owners will be any more enlightened on consumer issues than absentee shareholders are. A justifiable concern.

But worker-owners are less likely to want to pollute the community they live in, and are less likely to want to move the plant to Singapore. They can enjoy a healthier connection to their workplace than mere employees. Consumer values aren't the only important ones. We need some way to bring together large amounts of capital, and worker ownership is a more benign way of doing so than the absentee-owned corporation.

Nader has spoken at business schools about the social possibilities of business. He's also spoken about the value of small business. But often he lapses into a Manichean universe in which the consumer is always right and the producer—especially if it is a corporation—always wrong. Combatting corporate self-interest with consumer self-interest is better than not combating it with anything. But at some point, self-interest itself becomes the problem, in whatever form. Yes, you can call the environment a consumer issue because dirty air is a form of “involuntary consumption.” But at some point the lines on the graph cross and our self-interest as consumers must take back seat. Not all the social harm comes from the production side.

Chernenkos in the boardroom

If Nader tends in some ways to neglect enterprise, he broadens our horizons regarding what enterprise can be about. When people like Ronald Reagan and Jack Kemp talk about enterprise, it is always in the pecuniary realm, always something we might be bribed to do by a cut in taxes. Nader reminds us that this is not the only possible channel for individual initiative, that citizenship is a form of endeavor calling forth no less the qualities of imagination, persistence, risk-taking, and pluck that are commonly associated with business success. For all the talk about innovation, it is the realm of citizenship, from PTAs to electoral politics, where this quality is most needed.

I've always suspected that one of the things that so unhinges Nader's corporate critics is how much closer his own life is to the rags-to-riches American archetype than are their own. Here's a man who came to Washington with nothing and built an organization and a movement by dint of his own diligence and persistence and who has maintained complete independence of thought and action. Compare that to a James Roche, the GM chairman who had to apologize to Nader for the company's spying on him. Roche had joined

GM at age 21 and stayed with the company all his life. Which one was the Andrew Carnegie, the builder and originator, and which one was the Khrushchev or Chernenko working his way up the bureaucratic ranks? Nader can even sound like the individualists of the bygone era. “Almost every significant breakthrough,” he once told an audience, “has come from the spark, the drive, the initiative of one person. You must believe this.”

If consumerism alone is not large enough to define the political movement the country needs, neither is it as large as what Nader really represents. The sin of the Reagan administration has not been in neglecting the consumer so much as in disparaging the concept of public life. To grouse about the inadequate returns of public service, to declare government itself the enemy, is to deny the dignity of working toward public solutions to common problems. When Reagan assures us that we can entrust life's cares to the “invisible hand,” what he's really saying is, “Don't bother me, Jack. I don't want to worry about it.” It's a way of thinking about economics and life that precludes the need for thinking—let alone commitment and sacrifice—at all.

You can disagree with Nader here and there. But on what really counts—a commitment to making democracy work and a willingness to sacrifice to that end—he is profoundly right.

The best hobby of all

When I return to most of the Nader offices these days, I state my name and business, just like any other visitor. The days of working out of fraternity houses with crumbling plaster ceilings are long past. By design, the Nader network has become an institution; Exxon doesn't go home and the consumer advocates can't either. The groups now operate largely out of modestly comfortable offices at Dupont Circle and on Capitol Hill. The only ones that haven't changed much, despite three moves, are Nader's own.

A fixture now on the Washington scene, it was inevitable that the Nader media presence would fade somewhat. The day we spoke, Nader pointed to a tiny auto recall story on the federal page of *The Washington Post*. “Fifteen years ago that would have been front page news,” he said. Then too, the climate today is not what it was in the sixties. At the hearings on GM's snooping, in 1966, Robert Kennedy was able to shame the GM chief by asking him how much the company spent on safety research and how much it made

in profits. By the late seventies you couldn't shame an American auto executive by asking him about profits. The auto companies had become objects of national solicitude instead.

But when Nader speaks before audiences, as he still frequently does, the response seems indistinguishable from what it was a decade ago. The idealism that isn't supposed to be there any more still is. A senior at Tufts University told the journalist Ken Auletta, "One of the reasons he's important is that he tells me to be idealistic. I'm constantly told, 'Be realistic...don't be a dreamer.' He tells me that's not true, that I can make a difference..." Richard Levick of the Michigan Public Interest Research Group told *Post* reporter Williams, "He's a hero to me. He's the only one in Washington I'd like to be like." At Takoma Park, a young engineer nervously volunteered his services. I thought that I knew just exactly how he felt.

The consumer issues strike a chord as well, at least among the middle class audiences I witnessed. People nod in agreement when Nader raises questions such as why they can't have more say in the insurance policies they buy or the kinds of food that the supermarket carries on its shelves. In the Takoma Park meeting, one man

raised his hand to suggest that Nader keep 5 cents of the 25 cent per gallon price differential on the heating fuel to build the Buyers Up idea and extend it to other goods and services. It reinforced a feeling I have had that Nader's star is going to rise again on the national scene. The anger brewing on the telephone rates could almost do it alone. But my hope is that Nader puts more stress on the citizen role—and responsibility—and less exclusively on the consumer, because the latter isn't big enough, and doesn't do justice to what Nader represents.

After a talk in Virginia the week before, also on the subject of Buyers Up, Nader was approached by a little man of the type that always seems to show up at his speeches—a thick European accent, a clutch of papers under his arm, eager to confer on a highly important matter. A female law student broke in, "I just wanted to say, 'Keep it up, Mr. Nader.'" "Oh, don't you worry about that," Nader replied, chuckling, in a way that I found surprisingly reassuring. Nader was asked recently for the three-zillionth time what he did for pleasure. "Trying to make a democracy work better—what could be more pleasurable. And how many countries in the world can you do that in these days." ■

WHO'S WHO in the Administration

You may have thought budget director **David Stockman** was exaggerating when he went before the Senate Budget Committee this month and charged that "institutional forces in the military are more concerned about protecting their retirement benefits than they are about protecting the security of the American people." But when **Ronald Reagan** proposed a military pay freeze back in 1983, **Charles A. Gabriel**, Air Force chief of staff, said he would have preferred to cut weapons....

Liberals and moderates took the appointment of **Patrick J. Buchanan** to the position of White House communications director as a sign of a rightward tilt in the administration. But he won't have all that much policy input. There's potential for real trouble, though, in the new division of responsibilities between the communications director and the press secretary, a position still held by **Larry Speakes**. Speakes used to report to **David Gergen**, a system that led to some bickering. Now both Speakes and the more temperamental Buchanan will report to Regan, who probably won't have the time to coordinate their responsibilities in dealing with the press. The likely result of this effort to soothe Speakes's ego will be that both Speakes and Buchanan will set up independent lines of informa-

tion to the press, confounding White House efforts at news management....

The **Baker-Regan** job switch raises a question: Who will become the next **Richard Darman**, the man who played such a big role at the White House as **James Baker's** assistant? Our sources say no one. Regan's deputy secretary at Treasury, **R.T. McNamar**, has never been close to him and is rumored to be looking into private sector prospects. Of the few people Regan took to the White House with him, none have Darman's depth of experience or lust for power. We'll probably see a more collegial group of equals functioning together, with **Alfred Kingon**, assistant secretary at Treasury coming over to assume **Craig Fuller's** responsibilities for cabinet relations, **Thomas C. Dawson**, another assistant secretary, handling business and consumer relations, **Christopher Hicks** and **David Chew**, both executive assistants, filling **Margaret Tutwiler's** shoes as all around expeditors, and **Richard P. Riley**, special assistant to the secretary, performing the role of valet.... Three key members of the White House staff are not in Regan's camp: **Max Friedersdorf**, **Ed Rollins**, and **Larry Speakes**. But Friedersdorf has his own line of communication with the president, and Rollins is a protege of Stuart Spencer, who has