

Ralph Nader: Public Health Advocate and Political Agitator

| Manon Parry, PhD

LAWYER, AUTHOR, AND THREE-time presidential candidate Ralph Nader has instigated major reforms to protect the health of workers and consumers ever since he first entered politics in the early 1960s. He played an instrumental role in aiding passage of key legislation across a wide range of issues, including the Wholesome Meat Act of 1967, the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970, and the Safe Drinking Water Act of 1974. His efforts to monitor and reform the activities of corporations who profit at the expense of public health continue today, led by more than a dozen organizations he founded or inspired.

Nader was born in Winsted, Connecticut, on February 27, 1934. His Lebanese parents, Nathra Nader and Rose Bouziane, moved to the United States in 1912 and had three older children. Nader was an exceptionally bright child who spoke Arabic and English and read widely.¹ He graduated magna cum laude from the School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University in 1955 and received his law degree from Harvard University in 1958. Nader volunteered for the US Army when the draft was in effect and served as a cook for six months in 1959 at Fort Dix in New Jersey. After his military service, he moved to Hartford, Connecticut, to work in a small law firm, and also taught evening classes as a professor of history and government at the

University of Hartford.²

Nader had become interested in automobile safety as a student, often witnessing gruesome accidents while hitchhiking around the country. In 1959 Congressman Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote an article on auto safety issues, and Nader began corresponding with him on the subject. In 1963 Nader moved to Washington, DC, to write a report on auto safety for Moynihan. Although the report did not garner much attention, publisher Richard Grossman heard about Nader's research and commissioned him to write a book on auto safety.

Unsafe at Any Speed, excerpted here, was published in 1965.³ Nader reported on dangerous elements of automobile design including metal dashboards and steering wheels and car doors vulnerable to open or fall off in a collision. He went on to testify on the injuries and fatalities they caused at a series of congressional hearings, which led to the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act passed in 1966, bringing car design under federal regulation. In retaliation, General Motors tried to discredit Nader, hiring private detectives and attempting to tarnish his public image. He sued the company and won, and used the settlement money he received to launch other initiatives to protect the rights of the public such as the Clean Water Action Project, the Disability Rights Center, the Pension Rights Center, and the Congressional Accountability

Project. In 1971 Nader founded Public Citizen, an umbrella organization for his numerous projects. Inspired by his example many young activists, known as Nader's Raiders, joined his efforts by establishing Public Interest Research Groups across the country. These groups have published hundreds of detailed reports and have lobbied for reforms relating to food safety, environmental issues, health care and prescription drug costs, toy safety, and access to education and legal representation.⁴

Nader's work contributed to the founding of several federal regulatory agencies, including the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Consumer Product Safety Administration. He also played a major role in the passing of the 1974 Freedom of Information Act and the 1978 National Cooperative Bank Act.

Since 1996 Nader has repeatedly run for president as a Green Party or Independent candidate, on a platform of universal health care, regulation and taxation of corporations, and in the 2004 election, as the only candidate calling for the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq. Although these political activities have cost him some of his previous support, in the coming years his concerns about corporate influence may be more positively reappraised in the wake of the recent financial crisis. His most enduring legacy is likely to be the body of

organizations he launched or inspired, which continue to champion consumer rights and expose corruption in government agencies. ■

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This article was accepted January 3, 2010.

doi:10.2105/AJPH.2009.191163

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