

# AN unreasonable MAN

Ralph Nader: How do you define a legacy?

A DOCUMENTARY BY  
STEPHEN SKROVAN AND HENRIETTE MANTEL

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Whoever said, “One person can make a difference” must have been talking about Ralph Nader. For over forty years Nader has taken on big business and corporate America all in the name of the people. But lately this consumer advocate’s halo has been a bit tarnished. Is he a hero? A villain? A principled man? Or an egomaniac? You decide.



[WWW.PBS.ORG/INDEPENDENTLENS/UNREASONABLEMAN](http://WWW.PBS.ORG/INDEPENDENTLENS/UNREASONABLEMAN)



## LETTER FROM THE FILMMAKER

It feels like in this day and age of cynicism and somewhere in between losing faith and feeling powerless, that our voice as citizens gets buried. I am proud of “An Unreasonable Man” for trying to address the issues of citizenship and what it means to be a U.S. citizen. We can all be heard. Ralph Nader, whether you agree or disagree with him, has championed the voice of the citizen his entire life. I am grateful that we are being shown to millions of Americans who watch PBS and I hope the viewers enjoy it.

My whole part in “An Unreasonable Man” seems to have started when I was in 7th grade in Vermont, where I grew up, and my oldest brother wanted “Unsafe At Any Speed” for Christmas. To make a long story short, lost at age 21, I read it, wrote to Ralph for a job, and got one.

From early 1978 to late 1979 I worked as an “office manager” for Ralph at the Center for Study of Responsive Law for \$125 a week plus health insurance. I answered his phone, stacked his mail and talked to millions of insane people who thought Ralph was the answer to everything wrong with their lives. I met some of the most interesting people in my life during those years - and not just on the phone.

I found the people working for Ralph to be the most dedicated-to-making-the-world-a-better-place people I have ever known. They continue to amaze me with their selfless contributions to our planet. In late 1979 my brother was killed. I quit the job with Ralph to return to Vermont. Once again I was lost but this time (since I wasn't sure I would ever laugh again) I decided to become a stand-up comedian. Shortly after that I met Steve Skrovan in the comedy clubs in NY. He always wanted to chat about my Ralph experience which wasn't really funny but certainly a nice break from joke, joke, joke.

Cut to: 15 years later we run into each other in LA. Steve needs a sitcom idea. What's funnier than a Consumer Advocate's Office? The sitcom didn't get made but it evolved into this documentary which is a true labor of love (and comedy money). We plugged along in a tiny apartment with our producers in the kitchen and a Final Cut Pro set up in the main room. One of the gifts I was given on this movie is that the story of Ralph's life is stronger than anything else. Steve and I worked really hard to collaborate but the story was the boss. It just kept rising up and being the leader. From sitcom idea to documentary, this story has its own path and will be told the way the story-gods think it should be – it was and continues to be bigger than both of us.



So many people have SCREAMED at me since the 2000 election and almost as many have screamed at me since they were asked to even CONSIDER watching “An Unreasonable Man”. This movie is for them. They can hate Ralph or love Ralph, I don't care. I just want them to know who he was, and who he is now. That way, if they still feel the need to yell at me some more, they are at least doing so from an informed standpoint. But more than that, I truly hope this movie inspires people to become involved in civic duties, big or small. We can make a difference.

### Henriette Mantel

Four years ago, I was a TV writer on “Everybody Loves Raymond” when I got a development deal and was looking for an idea for a sitcom.

My old friend from my days as a stand-up comic in New York, Henriette Mantel, used to tell me stories about how she worked for Ralph Nader as an office manager her first job out of college. In LA fifteen years later, I ran into Henriette and asked her again about Ralph. She told me more stories and introduced me to people she had worked with at the time. I didn't know much about Nader, but started doing some reading on my own. The more I read the more I was impressed with all he had accomplished and intrigued by the fact that everyone seemed to be so mad at him, especially his friends and former allies. That seemed like an interesting conflict to me. There had never been a definitive documentary done on someone I considered to be one of the most important figures of the 20th century. I found myself in the unique position through Henriette to get access to his story. That's when the documentary took over from the sitcom. Someday, I may still do the sitcom and write this whole movie off as research.

I have learned so much about the history of this country in these past fifty years, mainly the largely untold story of the modern consumer movement, led by Nader but manned (and womanned) by countless unsung heroes, mostly young people who did the grunt work that provided the rest of us with so many protections and privileges we take for granted today. I also learned much about the way our electoral system works or in many instances doesn't work. And I had the thrill of learning it directly from the people who lived it.

I hope that people seeing this film will be inspired. It's the story of how one person can make a difference and how a lot of people working together can make a big difference. Nader's last speech in the movie about how you have “to keep fighting, there's never a hill you won't have to climb in the name of justice” still affects me because it is so simply stated. He's not declaiming it from a mountaintop. It's matter of fact. It's genuine. It brings tears to my eyes.

### Steve Skrovan

Left: Steven Skrovan (Director/Executive Producer) and Henriette Mantel (Director/Executive Producer) of AN UNREASONABLE MAN.  
Photo: Tom Caltabiano / ITVS



## THE FILM

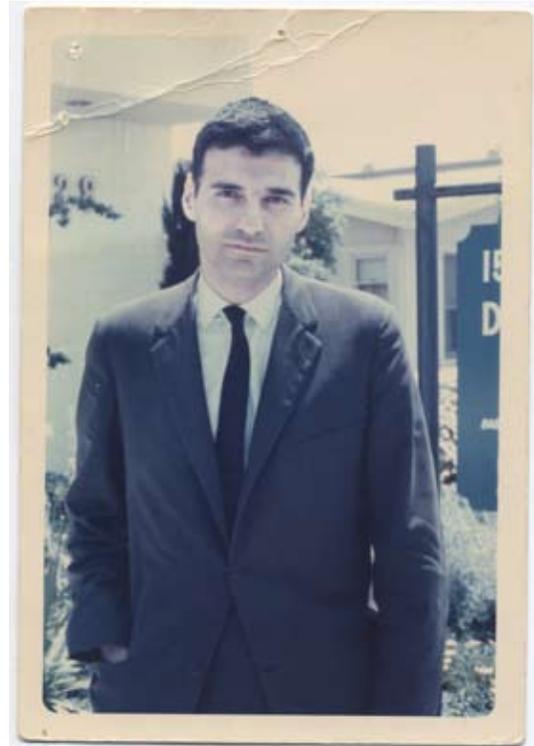
Ralph Nader's first public campaign focused on the design and safety of automobiles, singling out the Corvair, a General Motors product. His book on the subject, *Unsafe at Any Speed*, caused a sensation and General Motors fought back. But the company's attempt to discredit Nader and sully his character backfired and he won a judgement of \$425,000 against GM. After this initial success, Nader decided to take on the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), which he felt was shirking its duty to protect consumers against fraud and other harmful business practices. To carry out an extensive campaign on numerous fronts, Nader tapped into the power of young people and recruited students from all over the country. In the activist atmosphere of the 1960s, many young recruits flocked to Washington, attracted by the prospect of changing the system. This army of activists, which became known as "Nader's Raiders," published a series of book-length reports on issues ranging from workplace safety to air quality to business practices.

Nader thought he had found a sympathetic soul in Jimmy Carter, who reached out to Nader during the 1976 presidential campaign. However, tensions arose when some of Nader's employees were appointed to positions in the Carter administration. Nader felt that they would no longer be working for the changes he sought and that as political appointees, they would necessarily have to compromise their ideals. The late 1970s were a turning point for Nader as the business community became more emboldened and energized. A showdown came in 1978 over the Consumer Protection Agency Act, which was strongly opposed by big business and not supported by Carter. During this same period, Nader had a public dispute with his former colleague Joan Claybrook who, as head of the National Highway Traffic Administration, was prepared to compromise on a car safety measure.

Under the Reagan administration, many of the consumer regulations that had been put in place in the previous two decades were reviewed and dismantled. At the same time, conservative leaders began a long-range national effort to carve up political and social issues and to appeal to narrow interests. Nader was forced to re-create himself as a grassroots activist. He took his movement outside the Beltway and scored a number of successes on local issues around the country.

Beginning in the 1980s, Nader tried to get the Democrats to adopt the issues that he espoused. When the Democrats instead befriended the business community in order to solicit campaign contributions, Nader saw this as a betrayal of democracy. Finding no candidate willing to speak up about issues such as consumer rights, health care, education and good government, Nader himself became a candidate for president. He ran in three elections—1996, 2000 and 2004. It was his perceived effect on the outcome of the 2000 election that earned him the enmity and scorn of many Democrats. While Nader's supporters and some impartial observers provide strong arguments and evidence that Nader did not deliberately set out to "spoil" the election for the Democrats, bitter feelings remain among some

Democratic stalwarts. Nader continues to be one of the most trusted figures in America because of his crusades on behalf of consumer rights. Only time will tell if his foray into presidential politics has harmed his legacy.



Ralph Nader.  
Photo: Byron Bloch / ITVS

**Selected people featured in AN UNREASONABLE MAN**

David Bollier,  
*Public interest historian*

Morton Mintz  
*The Washington Post*

Lawrence O'Donnell  
*Political analyst*

Joan Claybrook  
*President, Public Interest*

James Ridgeway  
*Journalist, The New Republic*

Phil Donahue  
*Host, The Phil Donahue Show*

Pat Buchanan  
*Reagan/Bush aide*

William Greider  
*Journalist, Washington Post*

Mark Green  
*Congress Watch*

Gene Karpinski  
*Congress Watch*

James Musselman  
*Nader campaign organizer*

Richard Grossman  
*Publisher, Unsafe at Any Speed*

Joe Tom Easley  
*Early 'Nader Raider'*

Justin Martin  
*Nader biographer*

Claire Nader  
Laura Nader  
*Ralph Nader's sisters*

Theresa Amato  
*Nader campaign manager*

Gregory Kafoury  
Jason Kafoury  
*Campaign organizers*

Barry Burden  
*Government professor, Harvard University*

Eric Alterman  
*Columnist, The Nation*

Todd Gitlin  
*School of Journalism, Columbia University*

Terek Milleron  
*Nader's nephew*



Ralph Nader and Jimmy Carter.  
Photo: Courtesy of Jimmy Carter Library / ITVS



Ralph Nader.  
Photo: Matt Davis / ITVS

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

### Biographical information on Ralph Nader

- Born February 27, 1934, Winsted, Connecticut; son of Nathra and Rose Nader, Lebanese immigrants
- Education: AB Princeton University, 1955; LLB Harvard University, 1958.
- Religion: Maronite Christian
- Occupation: Attorney and political activist
- Career highlights: Consumer advocate and attorney; consultant to U.S. Department of Labor, 1963; founder, Public Citizen research group; author of several books, including *Unsafe at Any Speed*, 1965.
- Presidential candidacies: 1996 and 2000 nominee of the Green Party with Winona LaDuke as vice presidential running mate; 2004, independent candidate with Green Party nominee Peter Camejo as vice presidential running mate.

### Organizations founded by Ralph Nader (partial list)

- 1969: Center for the Study of Responsive Law
- 1970s: Public Interest Research Groups
- 1970: Center for Auto Safety
- 1972: Clean Water Action Project
- 1972: Center for Women's Policy Studies
- 1982: Trial Lawyers for Public Justice
- 1982: Essential Information  
(citizen activism and investigative journalism)
- 1983: Telecommunications Research and Action Center
- 1993: Applesseed Foundation (local change)
- 1995: Center for Insurance Research
- 1998: American Antitrust Institute (ensure fair competition)
- 1999: Commercial Alert  
(protect family, community, and democracy from corporations)
- 2000: Congressional Accountability Project  
(fight corruption in Congress)
- 2001: League of Fans (sports industry watchdog)
- 2001: Democracy Rising  
(hold rallies to educate and empower citizens)

### Legislation credited to Ralph Nader and his organizations

- National Auto and Highway Traffic Safety Act
- Clean Water Act
- Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA)
- Clean Air Act
- Federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act
- Consumer Product Safety Act
- Safe Drinking Water Act
- Wholesome Meat Act
- Freedom of Information Act
- Whistleblower Protection Act

In addition to the measures listed here, the work of Public Citizen's scores of researchers prompted the creation of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Consumer Product Safety Commission.



Ralph Nader at Madison Square Garden.  
Photo: Greg Kafoury

## THINKING MORE DEEPLY

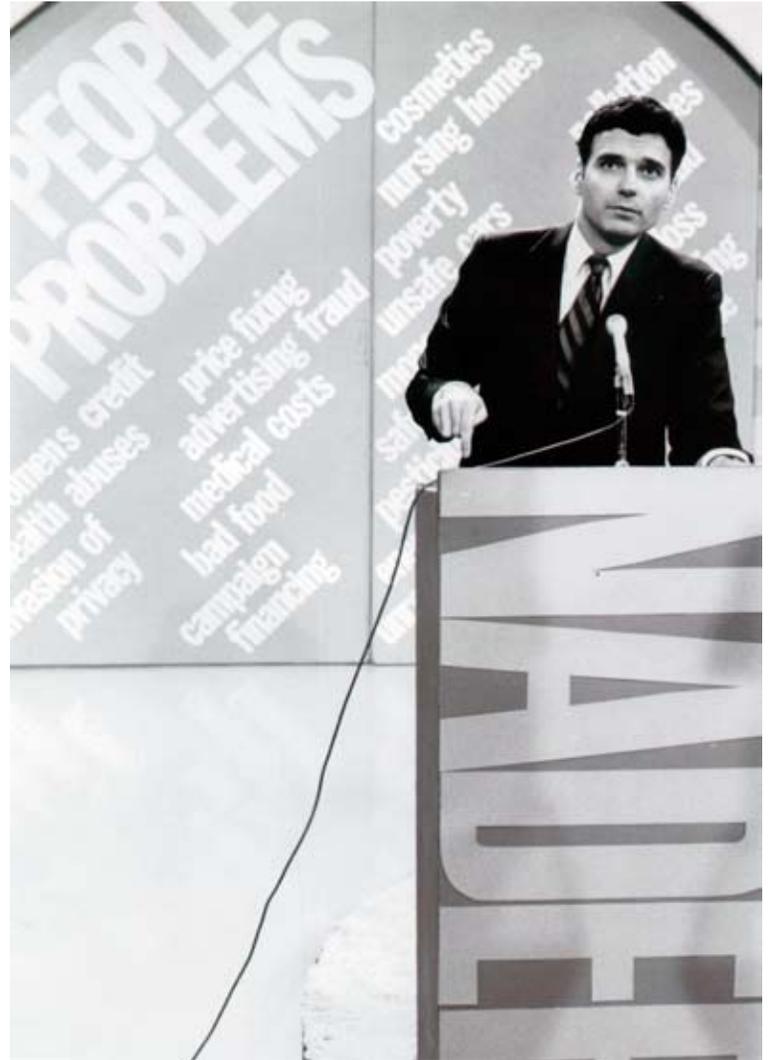
1. Think about the many ways consumer safety comes into play in your personal life. How much of this is due to the work of Ralph Nader or one of his organizations?
2. Is there a public issue today that could benefit from the actions of "an unreasonable man"? Please explain.
3. Is the criticism about Ralph Nader's effect on the 2000 presidential race fair? Do you think Nader deserves the bad press he gets for his political activities? Why do you think he has come under such strong attack?
4. Why did Nader's celebrity supporters in 2000, such as Susan Sarandon and Michael Moore, turn against him in 2004? Why do you think they supported him in the first place?
5. Do you agree with Pat Buchanan's statement that "our democracy is a fraud"? Why or why not?
6. What role should the news media play in the election process?
7. What is your reaction to Nader's treatment when he tried to attend the 2000 presidential debate in Boston? What does Nader's—or any third-party candidate's—experience say about American democracy?
8. In the film, Pat Buchanan explains how the conservatives set out to carve up issues by appealing to narrow interests. What relationship, if any, do you see between that deliberate effort and the divisiveness within the American electorate today?
9. Is there room for idealism in American politics and public life? Why or why not?
10. In the film, Nader is variously described as secretive, cautious, suspicious, dour and gloomy, but also hard-working, humorous, inspiring and a good example to his staff. Do you think there is a difference between Nader's private and public personas? To what extent do you think his being criticized is a matter of style rather than substance? Is there any advantage to his uncompromising approach and his unwillingness to make change incrementally?
11. Based on the title, what were your expectations of the film? Were your expectations fulfilled?
12. Did you learn anything new about Ralph Nader from this film? After seeing this film, what is your assessment of Nader?

## SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Together with other audience members, brainstorm actions that you might take as an individual and that people might do as a group. Here are some ideas to get you started:

1. Get involved in a cause or issue that's been bothering you.  
If there isn't already a group or organization working on it, start one!
2. Contact your Congressional representatives with your views on an issue that affects you as a consumer.
3. Campaign for a candidate in an upcoming election.  
Vote your conscience in the next election.
4. Find out what happens to unsafe or defective products that are recalled. Contact the Consumer Product Safety Commission for information (see Resources).
5. Write a letter to the editor of your local newspaper (or the news director of a local TV station) asking that it report on all candidates in an election, and that it cover the issues and not just the "horse race."
6. Keep track of how your representatives vote on key issues. Public Citizen, founded by Ralph Nader, maintains a chart of Congressional votes that serves as a gauge of a senator's or representative's commitment to the public interest (see Resources).
7. Educate yourself on who's funding political candidates.  
Check the Open Secrets Web site (see Resources).

For additional outreach ideas, visit [www.pbs.org/independentlens](http://www.pbs.org/independentlens).  
For local information, check the Web site of your PBS station.



Nader at a podium.  
Photo: Courtesy of Nader Family / ITVS

## RESOURCES

### Information about Ralph Nader

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ralph\\_Nader](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ralph_Nader) – In addition to biographical information, the wikipedia site contains a long list of organizations founded by Ralph Nader, along with his books, articles and speeches.

[http://www.amconmag.com/2004\\_06\\_21/cover.html](http://www.amconmag.com/2004_06_21/cover.html) – Nader reveals his “conservative” views in an interview with Pat Buchanan in *The American Conservative*.

### Activism

<http://www.citizen.org> – Web site of Public Citizen, the organization founded by Ralph Nader.

<http://www.britell.com/text/tgrassroots.html> – “Organize to Win: A Grassroots Activist’s Handbook,” by Jim Britell, is a downloadable booklet with strategies for organizing community campaigns.

<http://www.november.org/BottomsUp/index.html> – “Bottoms Up: A Guide to Grassroots Activism” by the staff of the November Coalition.

### Consumer Issues

<http://www.cpsc.gov> – Web site of the Consumer Product Safety Commission

<http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/consumer.shtml> – Practical information on consumer topics and consumer rights, in English and Spanish, from the Federal Trade Commission.

[http://www.usa.gov/Citizen/Topics/Consumer\\_Safety.shtml](http://www.usa.gov/Citizen/Topics/Consumer_Safety.shtml) – A comprehensive alphabetical list of Consumer Guides and Protection information from the U.S. government (in English and Spanish).

### Electoral Politics

[http://thenation.com/directory/electoral\\_politics](http://thenation.com/directory/electoral_politics) – Web site of the progressive publication *The Nation* contains a collection of recent articles on electoral politics.

<http://www.opensecrets.org> – Presents political positions of parties and candidates, along with information on campaign finance and sources of candidates’ funding.

<http://www.fec.gov/index.shtml> – The Federal Election Commission Web site, containing information on administering and enforcing federal campaign finance laws, including Campaign Finance Reports and Data.

### Monitoring Congress

<http://projects.washingtonpost.com/congress> – The Washington Post maintains a database of every vote in Congress since 1991.

<http://www.congress.org/congressorg/megavote/> – The Congress.org Web site provides voting reports each week that Congress is in session.

AN UNREASONABLE MAN WILL AIR NATIONALLY ON THE EMMY AWARD-WINNING PBS SERIES *INDEPENDENT LENS* ON December 18, 2007. CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS. AN UNREASONABLE MAN was produced by Steven Skrovan and Henriette Mantel. The Emmy Award-winning series *Independent Lens* is jointly curated by ITVS and PBS and is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) with additional funding provided by PBS and the National Endowment for the Arts.

ITVS COMMUNITY is the national community engagement program of the Independent Television Service. ITVS COMMUNITY works to leverage the unique and timely content of the Emmy Award-winning PBS series *Independent Lens* to build stronger connections among leading organizations, local communities and public television stations around key social issues and create more opportunities for civic engagement and positive social change. To find out more about ITVS COMMUNITY, visit [www.pbs.org/independentlens/getinvolved](http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/getinvolved)

