

In Defense of Ralph Nader

By *Toby Shepherd*

In 1848 Zachary Taylor, running on the ticket of the Whig party, had an interesting campaign strategy: avoidance. Instead of adopting a stance on the hot topic of the day - whether or not slavery ought to be permitted in the recently acquired territories - he focused his campaign on his military heroism and the 40 years of killing Indians and Mexicans he had under his belt. Sure, "Old Rough and Ready" owned 200 slaves of his own, but he had something his opponents lacked: resolve.

Taylor ran against two opponents. The first was Democratic candidate Lewis Cass. Cass had adopted an ambiguous position on slavery, toting a lukewarm proposal of allowing each state to decide for itself whether or not to institutionalize the practice. Taylor's second opponent was aging politician Martin Van Buren who ran on the ticket of the anti-slavery, "free soil" party. (To be fair, the "free soil" party was not abolitionist in the sense of William Garrison's Bostonian radicalism. They stood opposed to expanding slavery in the west, for, among other things, fear of white people losing jobs.) Angry northerners, disappointed with

Cass's hand-wringing and Taylor's calculated silence, voted for Van Buren, giving him a respectable if not overwhelming 10%. In the end, Taylor narrowly won the election over Cass, which in turn sent the Democrats reeling.

How could Van Buren be so belligerent, no, so egotistical as to run for President? Didn't he know he'd siphon potential votes away from Cass, who was quite obviously the lesser of two evils? What the hell was Van Buren's problem?

Things have changed in the last hundred and fifty years, but not everything. Instead of slavery, we have "outsourcing." Instead of the Alamo, we have Fallujah. Free Soilers have been replaced with fair traders. And instead of disappointing politicians - well, I guess we still have those.

Skull & Bones frat brothers Bush and Kerry are this year's disappointers. While Bush's presidency has, inarguably, been one of the worst in recent memory (quagmire in Iraq, plummeted economy, record deficits, swelling unemployment, setbacks in civil liberties), Kerry doesn't offer much in the way of reversing Bush's mistakes. (Well, not mistakes, wouldn't want to use

