Politics at the margins

by **Alan Wolfe** || Now that George W. Bush is president, insisting on the appointment of conservative judges and responding defensively to corporate abuses, many political commentators are thinking back to the 2000 campaign of Ralph Nader. Why did this man, once viewed as a liberal, seem so unconcerned about the prospects of a Republican presidency? Does he have any doubts? Will he run again? Is he as determined to see the Republicans take back control of the Senate as he was to ensure their occupation of the White House?

SPOILING FOR A FIGHT: Third-Party Politics in America
by Micah L. Sifry • Routledge • 288 pp. • $27.50

Crashing the Party, Nader's account of his 2000 run, offers answers to all these questions. The man has no regrets. To the charge that his campaign enabled President Bush to try to stack the judiciary with conservatives, he replies, with odd logic, that some Democrats once voted to approve Clarence Thomas. Democrats and Republicans, he repeats over and over again, have no fundamental differences between them. Snide comments Nader makes about Sen. Paul Wellstone's support of Vice President Gore hint at the Green Party's unfathomable decision to campaign this fall against America's most liberal senator. If anything characterizes Nader's book, it is its lack of introspection. He was right. All his opponents were wrong. George Bush is not that bad a president. Democrats deserve to be punished. Therefore he, or someone much like him, will run again.

Two explanations can be offered for Nader's crusade. One he suggests. In this view, some people, Nader included, know the truth, which is that both of America's political parties have sold their souls to corporate interests. Nader pictures himself as the latest in a long line of American fighters for freedom, the heir to Thomas Paine and Frederick Douglass. Against his own lack of ego, he chose to run for president for entirely selfless reasons. His fight

was democracy's fight. For, as Micah Sifry also points out in *Spoiling for a Fight*— his account of the Greens, the Reform Party, and the less well-known New Party—third parties renew democracy by bringing in outside voices and new ideas when the two-party system stagnates.

Buried in Nader's book, however, is another possible explanation of his campaign. Describing a visit to Florida, Nader recounts the questions he was asked by reporters and others interested in his campaign, including ones from "a ten- or eleven-year-old boy whose questions, predictably, were the most thoughtful of all." As this vignette makes clear, Nader is a believer, not in democracy, but in innocence. The younger you are, the less corrupt you must be, by which logic babies make the best citizens. Since babies do not vote, however, Nader will settle for the next best thing: the newly enfranchised. His campaign centered on college towns and received more votes from young voters than from anyone else. "It is always the young," Nader writes with typical certainty, "who can give the people and their collective judgments that 'new birth of freedom,' in Lincoln's words, who can constrain greed and power— those classical Molochs—by civil society's motivation and action."

If Nader and Sifry are any indication,

two-party systems are not for everyone. By concentrating diverse coalitions with different interests and ideas into one party or the other, the two-party system demands a certain maturity on the part of citizens. They need to know what most adults come to realize: sometimes, unable to get everything you want right away, you have to settle for compromise and accommodation. And compromise and accommodation are what Nader hates. (Sifry is generally more moderate and reasonable). He thinks that people who know what he so casually calls the truth should have their way, right now. Anything short of that is corruption.

Nader, Sifry, and other advocates for third parties believe that the two parties constitute a powerful duopoly determined to prevent any challenges to their rule. That is why the parties, in their view, worked so hard to deny Nader his place in the 2000 debates and why they established rules in all the states that make it hard for third parties to mobilize themselves. Greater respect for the ironies and dilemmas of real politics, however, might have suggested to them reasons for questioning their assumptions.

One is that many of the symptoms they identify—reliance on big corpo-

On the treadmill to nowhere

by **Fred Siegel** "O soldiers, 300,000 fighters of the People's Army are with you in your battle, and behind them, 100 million Arabs. ... Strike the enemy's settlements, turn them into dust, pave the Arab roads with the skulls of Jews." Thus spoke Syrian dictator Hafez al-Assad in 1967 as he rallied his troops for a war with Israel. Such overheated Arab

rhetoric, argues Michael Oren in *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East*, played a key role in ensuring conflict. Insecure, the Syrian government captured in a coup by the national socialist Ba'ath party, "tried to earn prestige by picking fights with Israel." Not to be outdone in the competition over who could be more anti-Israel, Egyptian dictator Gamal Abdel Nasser escalated his rhetoric. Shortly before the war and at a time when the United States was not yet a military backer of Israel, state-controlled Radio Cairo promised a broader war. "Millions of Arabs," it warned, "are preparing to blow up all of America's installations, and your entire existence, America."

Arab leaders, writes Barry Rubin in *The Tragedy of the Middle East,* "manipulate the masses but then become to some degree prisoners of the very public opinion they have labored to produce." Looking back, "I now understood that the streets of Cairo reflected the concept that had seized the leadership," noted an Arab commentator, "namely that the destruction of Israel was a child's game that only required the hooking up of a few telephone lines at the commander's house and the writing of victory slogans."

Rubin, who is editor of *The Middle Eastern Review of International Affairs,* de-emphasizes a clash of civilizations between the Islamic world and the West in favor of an argument that places considerable blame on a style of political

SIX DAYS of WAR
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MICHAEL B. OREN
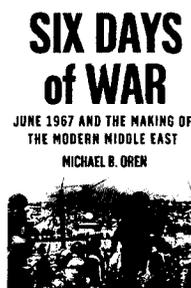
SIX DAYS OF WAR: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East
by Michael B. Oren
• Oxford University Press • 512 pp. • $30.00

leadership. Time and again the Middle East gets tangled up in its overwrought anti-Israeli, anti-American rhetoric because that language, argues Rubin, allows a cynical and narrowly self-interested leadership to manipulate the masses without delivering a better life.

"Propaganda," he writes, "is a tool, a way of ensuring control at home and leverage over" other states in the region. The Arab leaders, he says, are "like coachmen who whip the horses to go faster but keep tight control of the reins."

But the rhetoric has a life of its own. Radicals, who blame the West for all the failings of the Arab and Islamic world, ask with some logic why the leadership is so restrained in actually fighting the enemy. "Why don't the hypocrites in power practice what they preach?" And so it is logical, Rubin explains, "that about every 10 or so years some alchemist blows up the Middle East in an experiment to prove that" delusional ideas are workable. Thus we got the Six Day War of 1967, the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the Gulf War of 1991, and most recently 9/11 and the war in Afghanistan.

Oren's masterful *Six Days of War* is the near-definitive account of one of these gaseous explosions. It is drawn from Israeli, American, Canadian, British, and Soviet archives; from interviews with veterans in Egypt, Jordan, and Syria; and from decisionmakers such as former U.S. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara. Written with the sure hand of a good storyteller, Oren's book takes the reader through the steps that became the proximate trigger for the war, such as Soviet cynicism in stirring up the Arabs as a way of gaining leverage in the Cold War. In the wake of Syrian-sponsored raids by Palestinians along Israel's northern border, the Soviets told Egypt that Israel had reacted by massing 10 to 12 divisions along the Syrian border as a prelude to toppling the regime. There was no such troop buildup. But Nasser, caught up in the intra-Arab game, sent Egyptian troops into Sinai, expelled United Nations peacekeeping forces, and, in an act of war, blockaded the Straits of Tiran to Israeli ships.

Egypt, unprepared for war, nonetheless expected an easy victory. "Soon we'll be able to take the initiative and rid ourselves of Israel once and for all," said Nasser's Egyptian rival, Field Marshal Abdel America, to the Palestinians. In a similar vein, Arab leaders from North Africa to the Arabian Peninsula echoed the Syrian call to annihilate Israel. Israeli leaders were both intimidated and unwilling to yield—a quandary that Prime Minister Levi Eshkol described as "Sampson the nerd." The pressure was so great that army chief of staff Yitzhak Rabin suffered a temporary breakdown. But when war came, Israel's pre-emptive strike quickly routed the Egyptians. Two days into the war, when Nasser still hadn't told his people of the disaster his army had suffered, he and King Hussein of Jordan agreed to blame their defeat on fictional British and American air strikes. It was what President Johnson called the "the big lie."

"Beyond the goal of eliminating the Egyptian threat and destroying Nasser's army," notes Oren, "no other stage of