

GUEST ESSAY

## How Liberals Can Attack From the Left — and Win

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**By Paul Sabin**

Dr. Sabin is a history professor at Yale. He is the author of the book "Public Citizens: The Attack on Big Government and the Remaking of American Liberalism," which will be published this month.

In the fall of 1965, Ralph Nader, then 31, published a blistering attack on the poor safety record of the American automobile. Tens of thousands of Americans were dying needlessly every year on the nation's highways, and the blame lay with the federal government, Mr. Nader argued in his first book, "Unsafe at Any Speed."

Instead of requiring automakers to build safer cars, the nation's traffic-safety agencies too often served the interests of private enterprise and treated citizens with "contempt or indifference," he wrote. Mr. Nader called on an awakened public to force the government to protect American consumers.

Amid outcry and congressional hearings, Mr. Nader became a national celebrity and won a landmark regulatory victory. One year after his book was published, Congress wrested some power from the auto industry to create an independent government agency, today called the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. The new agency overrode industry opposition to seatbelts, airbags and other safety measures and, in the process, saved hundreds of thousands of lives.

When most Americans hear Mr. Nader's name today, they tend to think of his divisive role in the 2000 presidential election. But decades earlier, he helped lead a much greater, yet now largely forgotten, attack from the left on establishment liberalism. Beginning in the 1960s and continuing through the 1970s, Mr. Nader and others, including those in the growing environmental movement, defined themselves by crusading against what they saw as misguided and often corrupted government agencies.

Rachel Carson, the author of the environmental classic "Silent Spring," attributed the rampant use of pesticides in part to government "propaganda" and "the authoritarian control that has been vested in the agricultural agencies." Like Mr. Nader, she urged Americans to stop trusting the government to act responsibly.

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Today, with an onslaught of attacks on the regulatory state coming from the right, it may seem counterintuitive to study how Mr. Nader, Ms. Carson and their allies contributed — from the left — to criticizing government. But in the 1970s, it was as if liberals took the big-government bicycle apart to fix it and then couldn't figure out how to get it running properly again.

Now, as Democrats double down on using the government to address the urgent problems of our era, like climate change and economic inequality, they should absorb the lessons of this history. If you attack government but still want to wield its power for social good, you have to show you can make it work better.

In the mid-1960s, the administration of Lyndon B. Johnson was at the height of liberal power, laying the foundation for Medicare and Medicaid and for civil and voting rights. Yet the civil rights movement and the war in Vietnam led the way in raising doubts about whether expert-led government agencies could be trusted. The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund and the American Civil Liberties Union also showed how lawsuits against the government could bring about important societal change.

A broad public-interest advocacy movement took shape and flourished by picking apart government's flaws. David Zwick, a clean water activist working with Mr. Nader, captured liberals' newly ambivalent attitude toward government when he said, in testifying before Congress about water pollution, "We need laws which are essentially 'government-proof.'"

Mr. Nader and his allies were right about the dangers of a government captured by industry and labor and unchecked from the outside. In their time, the government was testing nuclear weapons in the atmosphere, encouraging the spraying of millions of tons of pesticides across the land and plowing highways through urban neighborhoods. The government was allowing strip mines to ravage the Appalachian Mountains and leaving coal miners to suffer from black lung disease with little compensation. Government policies were letting oil refineries, factories and power plants discharge toxic emissions into low-income communities and communities of color.

But as the liberal coalition that supported — and relied on — a strong and active federal government broke down, it became harder for the government to do big things. The liberal attack on “big government, big business, and big labor — all combined into one giant coalition,” as the 1972 best seller “Who Runs Congress” phrased it — left the administrative state vulnerable to challenges from the right.

When Ronald Reagan announced his first presidential campaign in 1975, he mirrored this liberal critique by framing his candidacy as an attack on “Congress, the bureaucracy, the lobbyist, big business and big labor.” The survival and progress of the American people, Mr. Reagan declared, depended on “a leadership that listens to them, relies on them and seeks to return government to them.”

Mr. Reagan and the conservatives broke with the liberal critics, however, in questioning whether the federal government had any productive role to play in so-called free markets. When former President Donald Trump chose appointees who were actively hostile to the missions of their own agencies, his administration embodied this decades-long conservative attack on government.

Now, liberals want to do big things again, including remaking American energy and transportation systems to address climate change. The lessons of the 1970s show why the “better” is so vital in President Biden’s “Build Back Better” slogan. Some parts of the new bipartisan infrastructure bill would still lock us into old errors, like the highway network that traps us in a petroleum-centered landscape. Other provisions would do more, by fixing the messes of the past: reconnecting communities divided by those very same highways, for example, and replacing lead pipes that can poison drinking water.

That’s welcome, but the best parts of the proposed new spending and regulating would actively move the country forward. They would create new systems, like an energy grid that could better distribute wind and solar power and a clean energy standard that slashes air pollution and improves public health. That’s how liberalism responds to its own critique of government and propels itself into the future.

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