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## Net Free Nader

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By [Paul Demko](#)

### *Political advertising of and for the underground*

The young man on the blue leather couch is livid. "I'm sick of this," he rants, the words *teddy's web cam* flashing on the screen. "If everyone who complained about the establishment would vote for Ralph Nader he'd become the next president of *our* United States. Stranger things have happened in Minnesota."

Teddy rises from the couch and walks toward the camera until his face is no longer visible. He grabs his crotch, denounces the "Democratic and Republican corporations," and belches out a barely bleeped-out expletive. "It's time for a change," he concludes.

At that very moment, a beefy Secret Service type--donned in dark suit, sunglasses and an earpiece--appears on the screen, delivering a body blow to Teddy, who wilts to the floor. The Secret Service agent covers the camera lens with his hand. The screen dissolves. Then text appears informing viewers of a rally for Green Party presidential candidate Ralph Nader, which was held at Target Center in downtown Minneapolis on September 22.

Watching the 30-second commercial for the third time in less than an hour, its creators howl with laughter. Then they play the spot again. The three men are seated around a computer screen in a brick-walled, Warehouse District studio, where the advertisement was filmed. Teddy Maki is the angry young man of the commercial, and a 24-year-old freelance photographer who frequently works for *City Pages*. Jeff Fabre Stahly plays the Secret Service agent (or "The Man", as he prefers). Stephan Cole is the group's cinematographer.

The fledgling political propagandists paid to have their commercial aired 29 times on stations such as Comedy Central, MTV, and FX over a 48-hour period leading up to the last month's Nader rally. But they've only seen it once on a big screen. "None of us had cable TV because we're all too broke," explains Stahly, a 33-year-old filmmaker. "We had to meet at a friend's house that had cable."



Guerrilla advertising: The Contra Club has plans to screen their commercial spots in other cities hosting Nader rallies

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"It was really interesting to see it actually coming across the television into our house, and however many other people's houses," recalls the 27-year-old Cole, who makes his living as a furniture maker. "It was a commercial like any other, but yet it was like nothing I've ever seen in my life."

"We appeal to human nature in the sense that everybody wants to hear somebody say 'fuck you.' And everybody wants to see somebody belted in the stomach," adds Stahly, prompting another outburst of laughter.

The Nader commercial was the first public communiqué from the Contra Club ([www.contraclub.org](http://www.contraclub.org)), a loose-knit group of about a dozen like-minded Minneapolis artists formed earlier this year. Cole, Maki, and Stahly are the core of the organization. The group's aim is to exploit the media to advance their political philosophy, a hodgepodge of environmentalism, anti-globalization, and the belief that credit-card companies are exploiting young people. Their affinity for Nader is less about a devotion to the consumer advocate than it is disgust with the present state of political discourse.

"I just can't even express what the Republican and Democratic parties are to me," says Stahly, the Contra Club's instigator in chief. "They're both to the right of center. I like Ralph Nader's message. A very finite group of people who control the media are deciding who gets attention and who doesn't get attention. What we're trying to do is take back the airwaves, which belong to the people."

The Nader commercial was produced in a three-day frenzy of sleep-deprived activity on a budget of \$11 (if you don't count the cost of beer and cigarettes). "The tape was \$10 and the tie that I bought at Ragstock to go with the suit was a dollar," notes Stahly. The trio fleshed out a script over a few pitchers at Pizza Lucé in downtown Minneapolis, shot the spot the next day in digital video, then edited it on a Macintosh G4 computer. When it was in the can, Stahly plunked down almost \$500 to purchase airtime. "It tapped me out," he says of the expense.

The Contra Club didn't bother to inform the Nader campaign of their stunt until after securing TV time. And when they did finally get around to calling the Green Party's local chapter the reception was chilly. Jason Morgan, one of the lead organizers for the Target Center rally, asked that the advertisement be pulled. "His concern was that we were going to damage the campaign because the commercial was too edgy," Stahly recalls. "I said, 'I don't think I can do that.' I'd already paid for the time."

Morgan, now in Boston organizing a Nader rally for October 1, concedes that the foul language (even bleeped out) made him uneasy. "There were some concerns," he laughs. "Not enough for us to do anything about it though." Morgan and the campaign did eventually come to appreciate the group's efforts, however. "It's a perfect example of grassroots organizing," Morgan allows. "It's the kind of stuff that Ralph talks about all the time, people getting involved in their own politics." Even so, Nader's staff encouraged Stahly to send off a letter to the presidential candidate confirming that the Contra Club is not affiliated with the Green Party campaign.

About 12,000 people paid \$7 each to hear Nader at the Target Center, joined by lefty icons like Phil Donahue and filmmaker Michael Moore. And it's unclear what impact, if any, the Contra Club's advertisement had on attendance. The commercial was broadcast to about 200,000 Time Warner Cable subscribers in the Twin Cities area, but channels such as MTV command only a small fraction of that audience. Morgan says that several people did approach him that night and mention that they had seen the advertisement. Stacy Malkan, a spokeswoman for the Nader campaign, adds that every little bit helps: "The Minnesota event was hugely successful with 12,000 people and we certainly appreciate any help that allowed that event to happen. It was a very creative, well-done commercial."

Clay Steinman, a professor of communication studies at Macalester College, and co-author of the book *Consuming Environments: Television and Commercial Culture*, says that he sees the Contra Club spots as part of a wider trend: young people using advertising to rebel against consumerism. He cites the anti-tobacco "truth" commercials, made by a group of teens who have used body bags and parodies of the Marlboro Man to make their case. "There seems to be an interesting, young, counter-advertising culture developing that is at least as, or more, creative than the establishment advertising agencies," he observes. "I'm looking forward to ads like this against the [World Trade Organization]."

The members of Contra Club admit Bill Hillsman, who made his name by helping secure victory for outsider candidates Sen. Paul Wellstone and Gov. Jesse Ventura, is an idol. But Hillsman, who is currently working for the Nader campaign, claims he has never seen the commercial.

Lucky for Nader partisans, the members of Contra Club aren't sitting around waiting for a congratulatory phone call. Spurred on by positive feedback, they've already created a second commercial featuring "teddy's web cam." This spot presents the ill-fated protagonist from the first commercial naked in a bathtub smoking an unidentified substance, pontificating on why Nader should be included in the upcoming presidential debates. "And they say a vote for Nader is a vote for Bush," Teddy concludes, his offending body parts blurred. "A vote for Nader is a vote for *Nader*." At this, Teddy jumps from the tub, tossing off another bleeped-out expletive as "The Man" returns to beat him down.

"It was so hard not to laugh while the shot was going on," recalls Cole, noting that the commercial deals with serious issues like social and economic injustice. "That's a reasonably weighty statement to be delivered to you by a guy smoking a something-or-other naked in a bathtub."

Another spot featuring Teddy on the toilet is also in the works. The Contra Club hopes to continue buying up airtime in locations across the country where Nader is going to be making appearances. They've already pulled together almost \$1,000 to secure 50 commercial slots on Chicago cable for a rally later this month. "We're digging into our own savings to get this done," says Stahly.

To help raise more money, the Contra Club plans on hosting some fundraisers at their studio, featuring DJs and alcohol. The initial benefit takes place Friday, October 6. Stahly and Cole have also designed a section of the group's Web site that will implore other people to purchase airtime and run the advertisements.

If all goes as planned, the commercials will continue to showcase Teddy in a series of political misadventures leading up to Election Day. "If we can keep this up, little by little Teddy's gonna start winning," Stahly says. "Right before election day, Teddy Cam will finally beat The Man."

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