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PROGRAM The Today Show

STATION WRC TV
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DATE August 30, 1982 7:00 AM

CITY Washington, DC

SUBJECT An Interview with Ralph Nader

JUDY WOODRUFF: We all talk about the Reagan administration as a whole. But any administration is made up of many individuals. And a new book called Reagan's Ruling Class is just out, which profiles a hundred of the President's top officials. It's just come out under the guidance of Ralph Nader. Mr. Nader is in our Washington studio this morning.

Good morning. Nice to have you with us.

RALPH NADER: Thank you.

WOODRUFF: Mr. Nader, the book concludes that the top people are very pro-business, that they are quite conservative, that they're trying to dismantle the traditional role of government. Isn't that what people voted for in 1980?

NADER: No, I don't think they voted for dismantling the health and safety programs, such as pollution control or auto safety. I don't think they voted for the use of government as an instrument for the wealthy and the powerful.

The elections were generally over the issues of cutting the deficit and making taxes less burdensome. But the government is doing so much more than that. As we know, the deficit is at an all-time record under the Reagan administration.

WOODRUFF: But they did vote for a lesser role for government in the lives of all of us, didn't they?

NADER: But not for a lesser role of government as a policeman against corporate crime, fraud or abuse, or monopoly.

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That's the difference. If you ask people "Are you against red tape and regulation?," a lot of people will say yes. But if you ask people "Well, would you like your lemon car recalled; would you like fair interest rates; would you like corporations to be subject to law and order?," most people would say yes.

WOODRUFF: Well, let's get down to specifics. Did you find any surprises in this research? I read in the introduction you didn't have very many nice things to say about these people. I think it's rather predictable that they wouldn't fit the Ralph Nader mold of what a government should look like.

NADER: Well, actually the book is very factual and very analytic, and it has some interesting anecdotes. And it lets the top 100 officials speak for themselves, to a large extent. Over 57 of them gave us personal interviews.

But what we found unique, even in comparison with prior Republican administrations, such as the Nixon and Ford administrations, is the sameness for most of the hundred people. They're very much alike, similar backgrounds, similar thoughts. It's very hard to find a dissenter or a maverick. Perhaps William Niskanin (?) in the Council of Economic Advisers is the principal maverick. The libertarian part of the administration and the New Right have been pretty much stifled, and the dominant theme is mainstream corporate.

WOODRUFF: What's the profile of the administration? It's overwhelmingly white, male....

NADER: That's right.

WOODRUFF: Are there some other characteristics?

NADER: Ninety-six of the top 100 are male. Only four are female. There are very few blacks, one Hispanic. And I think generally quite wealthy. About 30 of them are millionaires or multimillionaires. And many of them have experiences that are quite remote from the everyday problems of ordinary Americans.

WOODRUFF: Well, we normally don't prearrange questions. But we did prearrange to ask you about a few of the superlatives that you picked out yourself. One of them was, who was the most cooperative of all the people you interviewed?

NADER: Well, given the super-secrecy of his agency, it would be CIA Director William Casey.

WOODRUFF: You mean just given the fact that you wouldn't expect the CIA to answer your questions.

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NADER: That's right. Yes. Yes.

WOODRUFF: What about the least cooperative?

NADER: The least cooperative, I think, is Attorney General William French Smith, because, as the Attorney General, I would think that he'd want to get his views across. Some of his subordinates, however, gave us good interviews.

WOODRUFF: What about the most ambitious?

NADER: Hands down, Secretary of the Navy John Lehman. He's under 40. He wants to be President, and he's just drooling with ambition.

WOODRUFF: Your term, "the most devious?"

NADER: Auto safety director Raymond Pecht. If you picked him up, he'd slip through your fingers. He does have a good sense of humor, though.

WOODRUFF: Another term of yours, Mr. Nader, "the most cold-blooded?"

NADER: Secretary of Transportation Drew Lewis. He has enormous safety responsibilities, can be a great life-saver, but seems to be grossly indifferent to his responsibilities in auto safety, railroad safety and aviation safety.

WOODRUFF: We may need to give him equal time.

NADER: I hope so.

WOODRUFF: Who are the brightest?

NADER: Well, brightest and shrewdest, Secretary of the Treasury Donald Regan. He was a joy to interview, and I think he enjoyed the interview as well.

WOODRUFF: We don't have time for any more pictures, but who would you say was the most conservative?

NADER: The most conservative, Donald Devine of the Office of Personnel Management. He runs the personnel aspects of the federal government.

WOODRUFF: Okay. And the most liberal?

NADER: If you call liberalism an opposition to government being used as an instrument for the powerful and wealthy, the answer is no one.

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WOODRUFF: All right, Ralph Nader on the top 100 officials of the Reagan administration.

This is Today on NBC.

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