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# An Impolitic Politician

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To take a stand, to be passionate . . . is  
the politician's element, and above all  
the element of the political leader.

—Max Weber, *Politics as a Vocation*

ON THE MORNING of October 25, 2002, Senator Paul Wellstone, a liberal Democrat from Minnesota, was killed in a plane crash along with his wife, daughter, and three campaign aides. Later that day, Wellstone's colleague Pete Domenici was called on to comment. In an interview on CNN, the conservative Republican immediately broke down in tears and was unable to continue. Several hours later, Domenici regained his composure and agreed to another interview. He paid tribute to a senator with whom he had worked to pass legislation that would help people suffering from mental illness, a disease that had affected members of both men's families. The Domenici-Wellstone mental health parity bill, which would require

insurers to treat mental illnesses the same as physical illnesses, had passed the Senate but was held up in the House. Addressing the dead Wellstone, Domenici promised to carry on: “You can bet, my friend, it will be started up this coming year and it will be named exclusively for you.”<sup>1</sup>

Throughout that day, members of the political community from the full ideological spectrum paid tribute to Wellstone. “Today, the nation lost its most passionate advocate for fairness and justice for all,” said Senator Ted Kennedy. “It was impossible not to like Paul Wellstone,” said Senator Patrick Leahy. Paul Krugman of the *New York Times* wrote, “In an age of fake populists, Paul Wellstone was the real thing.” The conservative *National Review* editorialized, “Even right-wingers must admit that he would have made a good neighbor.” Conservative pundit Robert Novak admirably observed that “the fighting left-wing professor from Carleton College had not altered his views, but he did soften his style.” Even the Senate’s most fervent conservative, Jesse Helms, joined the chorus: “He was my friend and I was his.”<sup>2</sup>

Wellstone was not always so admired.

Few new senators have landed in Washington with such an emphatic thud as Paul Wellstone. A day before being sworn into office, he pulled his green bus in front of the Dirksen Senate Office Building, a violation in the perk-conscious capital. The following day, he held a news conference at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, urging President George H. W. Bush not to attack Iraq. The move enraged veterans’ groups and angered many Minnesotans who objected to his using the memorial to make a political statement. The day after that, he ignored a Senate tradition by refusing to be escorted by Minnesota’s other senator to the well of the Senate chamber for his swearing-in ceremony.

He declined to be accompanied by his colleague, Republican senator Dave Durenberger, and instead asked former vice president and Minnesota senator Walter Mondale to escort him. That afternoon, Vice President Dan Quayle presided over a public swearing-in ceremony attended by reporters. As television cameras and reporters recorded the scene, Wellstone surprised Quayle by handing him an audiotape of a Minnesota town meeting in which Minnesotans express strong antiwar sentiments. In just a few days, Wellstone discovered that his abrasive style would undermine his effectiveness in Washington.

The media, Wellstone's political opponents, and even many of his allies castigated the new senator. The headlines were devastating: "A Star's Crash Landing," "Blunt Minnesota Senator Pays Price," "Wellstone Faces Fallout of Anti-War Offensive," "Under the Senate's Skin."<sup>3</sup> Barely into his first term, his approval rating in Minnesota was under 35 percent. Bumper stickers cropped up throughout the state: "Don't blame me: I voted for Wellstone, but I didn't think he could win." Mistrusted and disliked by many of his colleagues and alienated from Minnesotans back home, Wellstone was confronted with a crisis. "With the people of Minnesota not listening to him and the Washington bureaucrats dismissing him, Paul Wellstone is facing the possibility of becoming a six-year irrelevancy," said one political consultant.<sup>4</sup>

Wellstone had been warned before not to alienate his colleagues or to set overly ambitious goals. Prior to taking office, he met with Mondale, who told him that his success depended on his ability to choose his fights carefully and to produce results for his constituents. Wellstone's new colleagues Paul Simon of Illinois and Howard Metzenbaum of Ohio gave him the same advice. He ignored the advice at

first, but as he settled into the Senate, it became evident that something was happening to Wellstone. The advice of Mondale and others began to sink in, and he began adjusting his style.

In a November 1991 *New York Times Magazine* article, "The Education of Paul Wellstone," correspondent Richard Berke describes a senator eleven months into his first term, with an ambitious goal: to become an outsider effective on the inside. "I want to continue to be a voice here for working with people on the outside of the process," Wellstone told Berke. At the same time, he was trying to find his own voice as a respected lawmaker. "I want," Wellstone put it simply, "to do it both ways."

He did just that, turning from a pariah into one of the capital's most admired and effective politicians. This transformation started when Wellstone recognized the importance of what he called "insider ethics": "Be on top of the legislative program, make sure your word is good and stay in close touch with colleagues, let them know what you are doing, don't blindside people." He started building personal relationships, studied the Senate rules, and learned to stay focused on a realistic number of issues. Republican senator Orrin Hatch told Berke that Wellstone was adapting well after a shaky start: "He's going to be effective around here because he's sincere and not a phony and he's willing to work." Senator Howell Heflin echoed Hatch: "He's settling back and given me the impression that he wants to be a workhorse rather than a showhorse."

While he could not yet point to a list of accomplishments, Wellstone's reputation was changing. "Nearly one year after taking Washington by storm, Wellstone is not the combatant he was," Berke concluded. "He is still feisty but he is decidedly more senatorial."<sup>5</sup>

Around the point when Berke's article appeared, I met Paul Wellstone. I was a sophomore at the University of Wisconsin, where I had become friends with the senator's youngest son, Mark. During Thanksgiving break, I dropped by to see Mark at his parents' modest St. Paul condominium. I remember wondering if I should be nervous in Wellstone's presence, because I wasn't. I chatted briefly with Paul and his wife, Sheila, about college, politics, and Minnesota. I was a bored nineteen-year-old art history major who was more interested in following the Grateful Dead across the country than in pursuing professional ambitions. I needed a sense of purpose and a break from school. As I left their house that day, I asked Sheila if there was any chance I could volunteer for the office. She said yes and arranged an internship for me in Wellstone's St. Paul office. I decided to take a semester off from school to see if I would like working in politics; energized by this experience, my undergraduate studies became more focused, as did my plans following graduation.

Two days after accepting my degree in 1995, I began working on Wellstone's campaign for reelection. I was his travel aide, accompanying him on all his campaign stops. We went to rallies and bean feeds, candidate forums, parades, and debates. I usually drove him by car, sometimes in his beat-up Oldsmobile. For longer trips, and when the campaign was in the final hectic weeks, we traveled on small charter planes. Usually the plane would carry four passengers plus the pilot; in the final weeks the campaign chartered larger planes, to carry more staff and the occasional reporter.

We also traveled on the vintage school bus that Wellstone had turned into a symbol of his underdog campaigns. Purchased in 1990 for three thousand dollars and painted

green by a group of union autoworkers, it was an impractical means of transportation because it regularly broke down. But it was an effective political tool, attracting media attention and bolstering Wellstone's populist image. The bus had an unusable bathroom, a barely functioning heater, and a wobbly speaker's platform welded to the back. The seats had been removed and replaced with two throwaway couches and a diner-style table. Two volunteer bus drivers, retirees Paul Scott and Dick Miller, drove it across Minnesota, calculating our arrivals to allow time in the schedule for breakdowns.

Wellstone often delivered campaign speeches from the back of the bus, bringing the crowd alive with energy. Watching him speak was a physical activity. The people in the audience would rock on their heels and stand on their tiptoes as Wellstone's voice rose with excitement. At the end of his speech, he left an audience of cheering, smiling people, eager to support his campaign.

My job was perfect for getting to know Wellstone and for understanding his commitment to civic engagement. The most important thing he taught me was how to pay attention to people. I never used to strike up conversations with police officers, gas station cashiers, and waitresses. I was content to go about my business, like any normal person, without going out of my way to interact with perfect strangers. Then I started traveling with Wellstone. At each stop, he talked to everyone. At gas stations, rest stops, and cafés, he would bound in and shake hands and point at people and say, "Hi, I'm Paul. Your first name?" He loved meeting people, and I delighted in watching Wellstone's exuberant energy charge a room.

I had grown up in Minnesota, but it wasn't until I traveled with Wellstone that I realized how little I knew of the

state. Now, when I'm in Duluth or Hibbing or Rochester, or when I see signs on the highway for places like Little Falls and Willmar, I remember the times I traveled to those places with him. He used to tell stories, when we were a few miles from arriving, about some person or some memory he had about the place we were going. I can picture him in those places, greeting a police officer on the street with the words "Thanks for your work, officer," or stopping to talk to the cafeteria workers at a senior center—his mother was a cafeteria worker—and thanking them for the food.

What I will remember most about Wellstone was his faith and trust in everyday people. Wellstone loved the people of Minnesota and believed in their goodness. The foundation of his political philosophy was the conviction that people want their concerns to matter to politicians. Wellstone was successful because Minnesotans, regardless of whether they always agreed with him, felt that he cared about them. They liked his honesty, appreciated his willingness to take controversial stands on issues, and saw him as one of them.

Wellstone's constituents were responding to a leadership style that he developed over the course of a career, a unique amalgam of idealism, pragmatism, and inspiration. He had high ideals and ambitious goals—equality of opportunity for all citizens, the protection of civil liberties, and a commitment to economic and social justice that placed priority on the often neglected lower- and working-class Americans—from which he refused to retreat. Yet throughout his career, he defined success as the ability to translate his ideals into results. In his two terms in the Senate, Wellstone went from outsider to respected legislator, while maintaining a group of loyal, able supporters who helped him accomplish his goals. With his powerful speaking skills and magnetic presence, he recruited a dedicated staff and a cadre of volun-

teers. He was a physical person who backslapped union members and offered reassuring touches to seniors and people with disabilities. It was through the laying on of hands that he won trust and moved people.

Like many others, I felt a deep compulsion to work for Wellstone. His closest friends, staff members, and advisors were people Wellstone had known for decades. Wellstone would say to his aides, "We will take this journey together," and they readily signed on. I worked for two years on his 1996 reelection campaign, and then I took my idealism abroad, serving two years as a Peace Corps volunteer in West Africa. When I returned, I went back to work for Wellstone in St. Paul. Then, after two years of working as his political organizer, I left Minnesota and started graduate school. My service for Wellstone added up to five years over the course of a decade.

I went to graduate school to study international development and made several international trips as part of my studies. I was in London's Heathrow Airport between flights on a field trip to Africa when I heard the news that Paul and Sheila, in the final days of Wellstone's campaign for a third senate term, had been killed. After a dazed moment, I canceled the second leg of my trip and booked a flight to Minnesota. For the next two weeks, I traveled with the Wellstone sons, Mark and Dave, as I had for their parents. I drove them to the funerals and joined them on campaign stops for Wellstone's replacement for his Senate campaign, Walter Mondale. The scenery and the people we saw in Duluth, on the Iron Range, and in the Twin Cities looked so familiar, and I was grateful to be back home. But, of course, the joy that I associated with those places was now replaced by overwhelming grief.

After the election, I returned to school and tried to

resume my studies in international development, but I was distracted and unsettled, thinking constantly about Wellstone and the magnitude of the loss. I requested and received permission from the school administration to devote significant time to researching Wellstone's career and potential impact on politics. Early in that process, I came upon the classic 1919 essay by the German political sociologist Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," a searching treatise on politics and politicians. The son of a German politician, Weber was one of the twentieth century's greatest intellectuals. He lived in the Kaiser's Germany, a political environment in which career bureaucrats like his father dominated the government. Weber viewed these politicians not as leaders but as mere administrators, engaged in favor trading and patronage. He wanted a new kind of political leader to emerge, one who had a *calling* for politics.

Weber says that such a leader is driven by high ideals but does not merely stand on the mountaintop proclaiming this vision. Those who have a true political calling also demand results. The politician who combines idealism with pragmatism is someone for whom politics is not merely a career but a vocation. Whereas a career is something a person chooses to pursue, a vocation is a summons from within, like that of a deeply religious person drawn to the priesthood.

Weber's essay was an eye-opener, and it provides this book's introductory and chapter epigraphs. The essay pointed to what is missing from most accounts of Wellstone, which picture him as an accidental politician—a college professor who in his middle years stumbled into politics. Wellstone may have been an unlikely political candidate and U.S. senator, but he spent his life engaged in what Weber called the "strong and slow boring of hard boards" that defines effective politics. For thirty years, he organized,

agitated, and inspired—he was never content with the status quo. Wellstone liked to say, “If we don’t fight hard enough for the things we stand for, at some point we have to recognize that we don’t really stand for them.” He fought hard, but he knew that simply *standing* for ideals was not enough; there had to be action that led to results. He was an emotional, untiring, and optimistic man who never seemed daunted by the enormity of the challenges in front of him. He had embarked on a career in academia, but politics proved to be Wellstone’s vocation.