

---

## Faltering and Recovering

---

To be sure, mere passion, however genuinely felt, is not enough.

ON THE MORNING of November 6, 1990, Paul Wellstone appeared at a morning press conference and committed the first of several postcampaign blunders. Visibly exhausted from the previous night's celebration, he spoke disjointedly about his plans for the transition and then made a statement that he would later regret. "I want to give this all that I have," he said. "That means giving it 12 years, two terms. That is my post-campaign promise."<sup>1</sup> It was a politically unnecessary move—a poll later showed that Minnesota voters were indifferent to the promise—and it would prove to be a major liability when he decided in 2001 to run for a third term. It also exemplified Wellstone's tendency to speak before thinking about the consequences of his words. The decision was impulsive; he had not mentioned the pledge in the campaign and had never discussed

it with his aides. If he had, they almost certainly would have advised him against it.

Even before Wellstone was sworn in, he was off on the wrong foot. A week after his first press conference, when asked by reporters how he would get along with archconservative North Carolina senator Jesse Helms, whom he had first encountered as a student at the University of North Carolina, he responded bluntly, "I have detested him since I was 19." Attempting to clarify his remarks several days later, Wellstone was unrepentant. "I didn't say hate. I said despised," he explained. "I have tremendous respect for the institution of the United States Senate. But the fact that I respect the institution does not mean that I need to respect the racists in the institution."<sup>2</sup> Asked if he was concerned that such a comment was a breach of the Senate's long-standing courtesy of not speaking ill of another senator, he responded, "I don't know, but I don't care. It's just the truth. I don't think Minnesotans expect me to come to the United States Senate and get involved in back-room deals with Jesse Helms."<sup>3</sup> The comments about Helms made the national news and raised questions about his ability to get along with his colleagues.

But Wellstone did not care about getting along with other senators. He went to Washington determined to use Saul Alinsky's quintessential organizing tool—conflict—as leverage with his colleagues. It was a strategy that had worked for him throughout his life—as a young professor fighting to save his job, as an organizer working with farmers and laborers, and as a long-shot candidate running for Senate—and Wellstone saw no reason to alter his style after his election. To the contrary, he viewed his victory as a mandate to shake up the Senate, not to make friends. He went to Washington as a party crasher, assuming that Alin-

sky's rules for organizing would work as a framework for governing.

He was wrong.

Within weeks of his election, Wellstone would face his first political crisis: the impending war in the Persian Gulf. When Saddam Hussein's Iraqi army invaded Kuwait six months earlier, President George H. W. Bush threatened military action against Saddam unless the troops were removed. Saddam refused, and Bush succeeded in assembling a broad international coalition to help the United States liberate Kuwait. War was imminent, and it was a problem for Wellstone. During the campaign, he had supported the buildup of military forces in Saudi Arabia as a deterrent to further Iraqi aggression but argued that economic sanctions against Iraq were preferable to the use of force.

Wellstone's position was hardly radical—at the time, the national debate was revolving around the question of whether the international community should impose economic sanctions against Iraq or intervene immediately—but as the possibility of war grew in the winter of 1990, he gained attention for his vocal opposition to the war. He grew increasingly critical of the White House and tried repeatedly to confront members of the administration about what he perceived to be their rush to war. In late November, he attended a reception at the White House held for new members of Congress and chose the occasion to discuss the war with President Bush. During a receiving line exchange, Wellstone told the president that the country “would be ripped apart” if it went to war. He then delivered the same message to the White House chief of staff, John Sununu, and the national security adviser, Brent Scowcroft, and gave them a letter inviting Bush to attend the town hall meetings

he was holding in Minnesota. It was an unlikely setting for a confrontational exchange, and Wellstone's brazenness irked the president, prompting him to ask one of his advisers, in a comment overheard by a reporter and widely reported in the media, "Who is this chickenshit?"<sup>4</sup>

In the following weeks, Wellstone continued to alienate the Washington establishment with his criticism of the war. He accused the White House of pursuing a foreign policy that would lead to "mass slaughter" and criticized his fellow Democrats for not speaking out more strongly against the war. Then came the disastrous first week of January, when he confronted Vice President Dan Quayle during his swearing-in ceremony by handing Quayle an audiotape on which Minnesotans expressed opposition to the war. Days later, he held the controversial press conference at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall. When military operations finally began, he violated a basic political rule that says once war breaks out opponents should temper their criticism out of respect for American soldiers. Wellstone's self-righteousness grated on his colleagues, angered his constituents, and gave the media an easy story line—the meteoric rise and sudden fall of an upstart politician.

Wellstone would write in his autobiography, *The Conscience of a Liberal*, "It was a horrible beginning! I wanted to find a hole in the ground and disappear."<sup>5</sup>

### *Mathews's Rules for Governing*

If there was a single lesson that Wellstone could have learned from his difficult entry into the Senate, it was that he pulled the wrong book off his shelf when framing his approach to governing. Instead of applying Saul Alinsky's rules for radicals, he should have referenced a book that he

knew equally well: *U.S. Senators and Their World*, written by a former professor at the University of North Carolina, Donald Mathews. Written in 1959, the book is still considered one of the most influential and accurate descriptions of Senate customs. In it, Mathews describes the inner workings of the Senate club—an environment governed by what he calls “norms and folkways.” The Senate, he explains, is founded on the principles of trust, tradition, and respect. Friendships often matter more than ideology and partisanship; the best senators are those who build strong interpersonal relationships with their colleagues. According to Mathews, the ideal senator is a legislative workhorse who specializes in one or two policy areas and serves a long apprenticeship before asserting himself. To be effective, a newly elected member must maintain a low profile, defer to his more senior colleagues, and wait patiently before delivering his first floor speech.<sup>6</sup>

Wellstone knew this book intimately. He studied under Mathews after it was published, assigned it to his classes at Carleton, and borrowed its title for one of the chapters of his autobiography. He knew that it reflected more than just an academic theory of legislative behavior, because he was familiar with the wide body of literature that supported its conclusions. Yet it was not until later in his career that he came to truly appreciate its prescience. In *The Conscience of a Liberal*, he wrote, “It is amazing how much of what happens in the Senate is based on what Donald R. Mathews, in his pioneering book, . . . calls ‘norms and folkways.’”<sup>7</sup>

When he first arrived in Washington, why did Wellstone ignore the lessons he had learned from Mathews and taught to his students? He knew better than to enter the Senate with such bluster and carelessness, and yet he seemed to believe that the norms and folkways applied to everyone but

him. With a proclivity for talking first and thinking later, he did the precise opposite of what Donald Mathews said a newly elected senator must do to succeed. Where the prototypical senator was measured and deferential, Wellstone was loud and impulsive. He applied Alinsky instead of applying Mathews.

It was after this choppy start that Wellstone began to realize that if he did not soften his style he would become a marginal figure in the Senate. He began listening to the advice of former and current senators, who suggested ways to gain the respect of his colleagues and become more effective. Walter Mondale, whose presidential candidacy Wellstone had worked against in 1984 but whom he now considered a mentor, told Wellstone to be patient. "Remember," Mondale recalled telling Wellstone, "you don't have to ram the doors down now, you have a key to the door, you're a senator."<sup>8</sup> Republicans such as Orrin Hatch from Utah and Ted Stevens from Alaska suggested ways to stand firm against opponents without losing credibility. Democrats Howell Heflin, Tom Harkin, and James Exon gave Wellstone fatherly advice about how to get along with colleagues.

The liberal Paul Simon quickly became Wellstone's best friend in the Senate, offering him reassurances when Wellstone took difficult votes or made rookie mistakes. Simon counseled him to avoid turf battles with other liberals and to allow himself to enjoy his experiences. Simon also taught Wellstone that he could be a forceful and effective advocate as long as he demonstrated respect for both his colleagues and the institution of the Senate. "I think sometimes Paul [Simon] didn't appreciate enough the importance of conflict," Wellstone wrote in his autobiography. "But he reminded me of the critical distinction between disagreement and destruction."<sup>9</sup>

### *Faltering and Recovering*

Despite Wellstone's foot-in-mouth tendency, he grew on his colleagues. With his frizzy hair and disheveled oversized suits, he was a refreshing presence in the Senate club. He rediscovered his self-deprecating sense of humor, learned to control his self-righteousness, and built lasting friendships.

### *Assembling a Team*

Wellstone also began to assemble a seasoned team. Initially, he filled key policy positions in his Washington office with people who had backgrounds similar to his own—progressive activists with organizing experience. But his controversial press conference caused Wellstone to rethink his hiring strategy. “The Wall incident was I think a wake-up call for Paul that he needed people who were more seasoned, less campaign oriented, more attuned to the presentation of a senator—people who might have said, ‘Paul don’t do that,’” said former chief of staff Colin McGinnis.<sup>10</sup> Finding trustworthy and experienced Hill staffers proved easier than Wellstone might have imagined.

In the summer of 1991, a short, middle-aged Senate staffer named Mike Epstein approached Paul and Sheila while they were on a walk on Capitol Hill. Epstein, who had spent the preceding two decades becoming one of the Senate's most knowledgeable aides, had been watching Wellstone closely. While he admired the freshman senator's idealism, Epstein knew that if Wellstone did not soften his style he would be an ineffective lawmaker. During the conversation Epstein said to Wellstone, “You need a legislative director,” and offered to do the job.<sup>11</sup> Wellstone hired him on the spot. They became instant friends and shared much in common—similar ages, religious backgrounds, and a sense of idealism. According to Wellstone, in their first

encounter Epstein told him, "I've been here for thirty years and I still believe in changing the world." Yet Epstein and Wellstone had taken dramatically different paths in pursuit of their ideals. While Wellstone had been raising havoc as an organizer in rural Minnesota, Epstein was becoming a master insider in one of the nation's most powerful institutions.

In addition to bringing in Epstein to run his legislative activities, Wellstone also recognized that he needed someone to run his office well. It was a critical realization that reflected Wellstone's capacity to admit his own weaknesses and to look to others to compensate for them. By his own admission, he was a terrible manager. In addition to being prone to make impulsive decisions, he sometimes lost his temper and was a demanding boss. Intensely competitive and driven, he regularly called his aides early in the morning with complaints about news coverage or ideas about his legislative and political agenda. "The biggest tension was that everything that dealt with Minnesota and dealt with fighting for the underdog and fighting for real people, was a priority," recalled former aide Josh Syrjamaki. "Paul would have these meetings with the staff where he would say, our number priority is education and children, healthcare, race and poverty and gender issues, the environment, prescription drugs, veterans, economic development, fighting for steelworkers, working for farmers. So before you knew it, we were at 12, 13, 14, 15 priorities."<sup>12</sup>

Knowing that he needed to tighten the office's scope of work, Wellstone hired another former student, Kari Moe, as his chief of staff in the fall of 1991. Moe had been a student leader in the effort to save Wellstone's job at Carleton, and the two had maintained a close friendship ever since. After graduating from Carleton, Moe moved to Chicago and

### *Faltering and Recovering*

worked as a top aide to Mayor Harold Washington. Experienced, loyal, and focused, Moe would lead Wellstone's office through his chaotic first term. Her leadership, combined with Epstein's legislative experience, positioned Wellstone to start winning legislative victories.

### *Finding a Focus*

Epstein's first piece of advice to Wellstone could have been taken from a page out of Donald Mathews's book: focus on a single area and make it your specialty. While it was good advice, Wellstone's options were not readily apparent. Although health care had been a central theme in Wellstone's campaign, it was already a major issue in Congress, and senators like Ted Kennedy claimed it as theirs. Other issues important to Wellstone, such as the economy, environment, and agriculture, were too broad and high profile. Fiscal and budgetary matters held little interest for him, and he was too impatient to focus on low-profile subjects.

The issue of government reform was another story. Wellstone cared passionately about holding Congress more accountable and changing the relationship between campaign donors and elected officials. He wanted to open the doors of the Senate club and throw light on the relationship between special interests and members of Congress. By most measures, the issue was a perfect fit—he was already identified as a reformer, and few other senators had claimed reform as “their” issue. But it was also risky. By definition, he would be trying to force his colleagues to change their behavior and, in some cases, to end long-standing traditions that governed the relationship between them and special interests. Wellstone was working to improve relationships with his colleagues; pushing reform would likely mean

alienating and annoying the very people on which his success as a senator depended.

But he pushed ahead anyway, focusing first on finding ways to limit the influence of lobbying groups. He told friends that, when he arrived in the Senate, he realized that even he had underestimated the influence that lobbyists had not only on the voting behavior of individual members but also on how the Senate as an institution operates. Even his like-minded colleagues seemed resigned to the fact that lobbyists and interest groups held enormous influence over the behavior of senators from both parties. Wellstone said he was scandalized by the political tone of the weekly Democratic caucus meetings and criticized his fellow Democrats for trying to find ways to avoid issues that would alienate key constituencies and donors instead of pushing the issues they cared about.

In April 1992, Wellstone had an opportunity to take action. He was on the floor of the Senate as it finished a late-night debate over proposed legislation that would have provided a \$25 billion bailout to the struggling S&L industry, which had been shaken by a series of high-profile scandals. The bailout was highly controversial and viewed by many as a reward for corporate malfeasance. But it was strongly supported by the banking and S&L industry, which argued that the bill was necessary in order to avoid an economic crisis. A clear majority of senators supported the bailout, but few of them wanted to go on record as such. So when the Senate debate ended, Majority Leader George Mitchell, a Democrat, called for a voice vote, a long-standing and unwritten Senate tradition that allows individual senators to not go on record on controversial legislation.

Wellstone was expecting the move and immediately rose

to object. He believed that voice voting was simply a way for members of Congress to have it both ways with their constituents—senators could support a piece of unpopular legislation in the Senate and simply tell their constituents that they opposed it. Not surprisingly, the maneuver irked Wellstone's colleagues. In his autobiography, he recalled a "wave" of senators walking up to him on the Senate floor, insisting that he back down. As one newspaper columnist wrote at the time, "They came singly and in pairs, and they were seething. Some of them used four-letter words. What the four-letter-word do you think you're doing? Why do you look under rocks for trouble? Take a walk. This is grandstand stuff."<sup>13</sup> The pressure served only to make Wellstone deepen his resolve. "All the guys coming to him on the floor pleading with him to step back made him dig in his heels more," said Colin McGinnis. Wellstone insisted on the recorded vote, and he defiantly voted *for* the legislation in an effort to show his colleagues that "my greater principals are reform and accountability."

Despite angering some of his colleagues, Wellstone received a political lift from the S&L vote. The incident was widely covered by the Minnesota press; he was praised for standing up to his fellow senators and for delivering on one of his key campaign promises: pushing for greater government accountability. Back in Minnesota, people shouted, "Give 'jem hell, Paul"; one columnist wrote a story that headlined "True News Flash: A Politician Keeps a Promise."<sup>14</sup> Wellstone also found that the fallout from his fellow senators was surprisingly mild. By holding his ground, he earned the respect of his colleagues. A senator who had strenuously lobbied Wellstone to back down later approached him on the floor, patted his back, and said, "Son, you did right."<sup>15</sup>

*Wellstone Hits His Stride*

By the end of his second year in Washington, Wellstone had made significant progress in refurbishing his image among his constituents and the press. His approval ratings nudged above 50 percent, and the Minnesota media began reporting about his transformation into a serious player in the Senate. For example, a long article headlined “New Gains by a New Wellstone” was published in January 1993 in the Minneapolis-based *Star Tribune* and described Wellstone as “an emerging force to be reckoned with.” The article portrays a senator who used persistence and charm to transform himself from a career protester to an effective lawmaker and popular politician. “He has been on a nonstop mission to convince citizens that his system-rattling politics are in their interest, or, failing that, to get them to at least like him as a person.” Wellstone’s efforts were the result, the article concluded, of a three-part approach: “He’s fought to control his own energy, passionate idealism and sensitive ego. He’s struggled to accomplish something in the Senate without selling out. And he’s tried to keep in contact with his liberal-labor coalition in Minnesota while winning over other Minnesotans.”<sup>16</sup>

In the spring of 1993, his efforts continued to pay off, as he pushed a legislative agenda defined by the issue of government reform. That spring he joined with Senator Carl Levin, a liberal Democrat from Michigan, in sponsoring a bill that sought to plug loopholes in existing lobbying laws to assure that all lobbyists are registered and to improve enforcement of the rules. Levin viewed the modest bill as the first step in accomplishing the larger goal of banning the practice of gift giving by lobbyists to members of Congress and their staffs. Wellstone, who had grown close to

Levin, shared his friend's incremental approach but wanted a provision added to the bill that would require lobbyists to fully disclose their gift-giving activities. When the bill came to the floor of the Senate in May 1993, Wellstone added an amendment that said that gifts exceeding a value of fifty dollars a year given by a lobbyist to a member of Congress or his or her staff must be disclosed. This included meals, entertainment, and travel—all of which were routinely provided by lobbying groups without disclosure. Levin preferred an outright ban on gifts and believed the amendment would weaken momentum for a gift ban, but Wellstone persisted and, after accepting some minor modifications, forced the Senate to vote on the proposal. Although many senators had little interest in exposing their relationships with lobbyists, the proposal passed handily.

It was a huge victory. Two days later, the *New York Times* ran an editorial titled “The Wellspring of Lobby Reform,” which praised Wellstone for his persistence in passing the amendment. “All it takes is one good man or woman,” the editorial began. “In this case, the good man is Senator Paul Wellstone, a Senate outsider who’s one of its most idealistic members.”<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the lobby disclosure amendment generated momentum for an outright gift ban. Although the House version of the lobby disclosure bill was held up and ultimately killed by Speaker Tom Foley, Wellstone and Senator Frank Lautenberg of New Jersey introduced a comprehensive gift ban in the Senate. The bill called for a forthright ban on gifts of meals, travel, and entertainment given to members of Congress by lobbyists. Although the legislation stalled in committee for the remainder of 1993, by the next spring it was up for consideration by the full Senate and passed in May 1994.

*Making Amends with Veterans*

As Wellstone was making his mark as a legislator, he also took a series of extraordinary steps to improve his relationship with the veterans he had so deeply offended with his ill-advised press conference at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1991. "Paul should not have done the press conference," said former campaign manager and state director Jeff Blodgett. "Veterans groups are mostly focused on what happens to veterans once they get home, so they were not necessarily Paul's opponents by any means. But when he went to the memorial, it raised the ire of all the veterans' groups, particularly the Vietnam vets."<sup>18</sup> Wellstone was devastated. "I never should have held a press conference at or anywhere near this sacred memorial," he wrote in his autobiography. "I wanted to dramatize the dangers of military action. Instead, I deeply hurt many Vietnam Veterans, really all of the veterans' community."<sup>19</sup>

Wellstone set out to make amends with veterans, starting with an apology. Shortly after the press conference, his office set up public meetings with veterans throughout Minnesota, where he apologized for his insensitivity and listened to their grievances. "Paul was very touched, and he learned as he listened to their stories and to the struggles that veterans had," said Josh Syrjamaki, who served as Wellstone's liaison to the veterans' community.<sup>20</sup> Wellstone discovered that the issues affecting veterans were similar to those facing the people he had spent a lifetime organizing. He found a tight-knit community of men (and some women) who had experienced indescribable tragedy in service to their country yet had been largely forgotten when they returned home. They suffered from inadequate health care, debilitating mental illnesses in some cases,

and, above all, the indifference of government officials.

To rebuild his relationship with veterans, Wellstone assigned several staff members to serve as liaisons to veterans' groups. "There were several different ways that we would go out and listen to veterans and find out what was happening in their lives," said Josh Syrjamaki, who led the efforts. "One of them was just to answer the phone calls and letters of veterans. The other way was old-fashioned Wellstone community organizing. We would travel throughout the state and we would convene community discussions with veterans. Paul would simply sit down and say, tell me what's going on in your lives. What can I do? How can I be helpful? And a million ideas would come at him and usually throughout the conversations, we'd be able to distill it down to 2 or 3 projects to work on."<sup>21</sup>

Back in Washington, Wellstone worked to act on the stories he heard from veterans at home. He joined the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee and began lobbying vigorously on behalf of veterans. After hearing about a group of Minnesota veterans who had been unknowingly exposed to atomic energy testing by the U.S. government in the 1950s, he demanded a government investigation and passed legislation to compensate the veterans, who became known as the "Atomic Veterans." He became deeply involved in efforts to compensate veterans who had been exposed to Agent Orange in Vietnam. Wellstone also worked to improve the quality of health-care services delivered by the Veterans Administration and engaged in heated debates over appropriations funding for veterans' health care. The efforts paid off. By the end of Wellstone's first term, he had received awards from the Vietnam Veterans of America, the Paralyzed Veterans of America, the Disabled American Veterans, and the Military Order of the Purple Heart.

After a difficult start, Wellstone could claim an impressive record of accomplishments for a freshman senator. He had delivered on a campaign promise to reform the way the Senate operates, built friendships with members of both parties, and forged an unlikely alliance with the same veterans' groups that had once bitterly denounced him. He had learned from his mistakes and grown into an effective legislator. But while he had made great progress as a senator, he also began worrying about his next great challenge: winning reelection.

*The Republicans' Number One Target*

In the fall of 1994, the Democratic Party was pounded in the midterm congressional elections. The Republicans, led by the bombastic new Speaker of the House, Newt Gingrich, regained majorities in both houses of Congress with a campaign manifesto called the Contract With America. The contract read like a handbook for conservatives: tax cuts, term limits, restrictions on immigration, benefit cuts to welfare recipients, and increased defense spending. The Republican victories were decisive and overwhelming, knocking the Democrats and President Clinton on their heels. Back in Minnesota, the Republican Party held a triumphant election night victory party, with the activists gleefully chanting, "Wellstone's next!"

Although many Democrats were despondent and sullen, Wellstone was energized. He believed the Republicans would overreach their mandate with an agenda that was too extreme for average voters. He insisted that the Democratic Party and the progressives fight the Republican majority with every possible effort. "We will not roll over! This isn't a Con-

tract With America,” Wellstone shouted to party activists on election night. “It’s a Contract On America, and I’ll be on the floor with amendments, I’m going to take this Contract on, and we’re going to defeat this extremist agenda!”

True to his word, Wellstone spent the next two years as a constant presence on the floor of the Senate. In nearly every legislative debate regarding the Contract With America, he used parliamentary procedures to block, amend, or delay the Republican majority. In the process, he perfected his law-making skills, mastering the technique of objecting to unanimous consent agreements. “To have power in the Senate,” Wellstone later wrote, “you need to know only two words: *I object.*” He used the objection constantly, and although he lost many of the battles, he emerged as one of the leading critics of the Contract With America.

Given Wellstone’s fierce opposition to the contract, it was hardly surprising that a leaked memo from the national Republican Party identified Wellstone as the top target for defeat in 1996. As early as 1993, the Minnesota Republican Party began to wage a vigorous campaign against him, publishing the newsletter “The Wellstone Watch,” which lampooned Wellstone with mocking articles and cartoon drawings depicting him as pot-bellied and disheveled. Immediately after the 1994 elections, the state Republican Party chairman began holding weekly news conferences, attacking him for everything from not paying taxes on his famed green bus to breaking a promise to not accept political action committee (PAC) money. When they ran out of issues, they sent out press releases with memorable headlines like “Paul Wellstone Is a Lying, Hypocritical Whiner.”

While Republican Party officials thrashed Wellstone, his former rival prepared for another campaign.

*The Rematch*

From as early as two days following his 1990 defeat, Rudy Boschwitz made clear his interest in taking his Senate seat back from Paul Wellstone. Passing up a 1994 opportunity to run for the seat left open by retiring Republican senator Dave Durenburger, Boschwitz set out to defeat the man who had humiliated him. Despite his advancing age and frail appearance, Boschwitz plunged into the campaign with single-minded intensity. He immediately focused on Wellstone, ignoring and then easily defeating a state legislator for the Republican Party endorsement.

Boschwitz had a simple campaign message: Wellstone was too liberal for Minnesota. The Boschwitz campaign hired a conservative political consultant named Arthur Finkelstein, an architect of the strategy of labeling an opponent, simply and relentlessly, a liberal. For this campaign, Finkelstein devised a campaign message that Boschwitz would repeat nearly every time he uttered Wellstone's name: "Paul Wellstone is embarrassingly liberal." Boschwitz ran television advertisements implying that Wellstone was a pot-smoking throwback to the 1960s, a coddler of violent criminals, and an opponent of requiring welfare recipients to work.

When the Senate began debating President Clinton's welfare reform bill in August 1996, Boschwitz sought to capitalize on a potential political opening. The bill, which required welfare recipients to seek jobs and ended benefits for legal immigrants and children, was a centerpiece of Clinton's effort to portray himself as a new type of Democrat. With public opinion overwhelmingly supportive of the bill, it became a hot-button political issue, and intense pressure mounted on Wellstone to vote for it. Yet Wellstone had

deep reservations about the bill. He supported the work requirement provision but was adamantly opposed to cutting off children and legal immigrants from public assistance. Despite the political risks, he voted against the legislation, one of only twelve other senators and the only one up for reelection to do so. “Many of Paul’s colleagues came up to him and said, ‘It’s been nice knowing you,’” said former chief of staff Kari Moe. “They called it Paul’s political suicide vote.”<sup>22</sup> Boschwitz was thrilled. In debates and in his campaign materials, he referred to Wellstone as “Senator Welfare” and lambasted the senator for being outside the mainstream of Minnesota voters.

Wellstone responded vigorously to the Boschwitz attacks. His campaign immediately released a television ad in which he explained his reasons for voting against the welfare bill. “I will not vote for a bill that puts more children in poverty,” he said. “My parents taught me to stand up for what I believe in and to do what I think is right.”<sup>23</sup> He ignored Boschwitz’s charges that he was a liberal, since Minnesota voters already knew that anyway. Instead, Wellstone went on a counteroffensive. He knew, from both his personal encounters with voters and from polling data, that while many Minnesotans disagreed with his positions on issues, they respected him for being honest and for making his positions clear to them. In his speeches and advertisements, he sought to drive that point home. He proudly defended his record, including the welfare reform vote. He also relied on a simple message of economic populism: “The pharmaceutical companies, drug companies and oil companies might not like me very much. But they already have great representation. It’s the rest of the people that need it.”

Wellstone also vigorously attacked Boschwitz as being out of touch and too conservative. By then, Newt Gingrich

had gone too far with his conservative agenda and provided a perfect foil for Wellstone and other Democrats. He blasted Boschwitz as a Gingrich extremist, using the former senator's twelve-year voting record as evidence. He also used Boschwitz's negative campaign and his own designation as the Republicans' top target to portray himself again as an underdog. Wellstone ended his stump speech with the following words: "When they make me the number one target, they make working families and children their number one target. I'm the top target, but that's not the price I pay, it's the privilege I've earned!"

### *Angering the Base*

But Wellstone would pay a price with some of his staunchest supporters in the summer of 1996. Despite his unapologetically liberal positions on issues and his relentless opposition to the Gingrich agenda, he was confronted with an election-year conundrum. In June, he unexpectedly announced plans to vote for a Republican-sponsored bill called "The Defense of Marriage Act." The legislation, known by its acronym DOMA, was a creative ploy by Republicans to drive a wedge into the Democratic base—if Democrats voted against the legislation, they would be accused of being out of the mainstream, but if they voted for it, they would anger their gay and lesbian supporters. The bill defined marriage strictly as the union of a man and a woman, effectively criminalizing gay marriage at the federal level. Supported by the Clinton White House and a vast majority of senators of both parties, the legislation put Wellstone in a particularly difficult position. Under withering attack for being too liberal, he risked alienating voters in Minnesota—a clear majority of whom supported the ban—by voting against the

bill. But voting for the bill would put him at odds with his liberal base and would alienate members of the gay and lesbian community, many of whom considered Wellstone a hero.

For Wellstone, the decision was further complicated by his own beliefs. As a longtime advocate for human rights and as a staunch supporter of gays and lesbians (until then he had been considered the Senate's leading gay rights advocate), he understood why opponents of the legislation viewed the bill as an assault on their civil liberties. But as a decidedly conventional man in his personal life, whose notion of marriage was defined by his own traditional marriage and lifestyle, he was uncomfortable with the idea of same-sex marriage. Once it was thrust onto the political agenda, Wellstone felt that he had no choice but to make what would become the one vote he later said he regretted. After announcing his support of the legislation on a talk radio show—without having informed his aides or alerted gay and lesbian leaders—he was roundly criticized by his liberal supporters. At a fund-raiser for the gay and lesbian community planned coincidentally for the day after he announced his decision, he was met with angry, tearful supporters who felt profoundly betrayed.

The decision to vote for DOMA was widely viewed as a politically expedient way for Wellstone to get out of a tough vote. But the reality was more complicated. The truth was that Wellstone had deep reservations about allowing same-sex marriage. He had never felt comfortable with homosexuality, having grown up in a socially conservative environment. While the decision was personally devastating—he was upset with himself for mishandling the announcement and regretted the pain he had caused—it reflected Wellstone's beliefs at the time. He told his disappointed support-

ers that he needed to “be educated about the issue,” and over time, he was. In his autobiography, Wellstone admitted that he had doubts about his decision. “What troubles me is that as a U.S. senator, I may not have cast the right vote on DOMA,” he wrote. “I am proud of my reputation for always voting for what I believe in, regardless of the political consequences, but what if I rationalized my vote by making myself believe this was my honest position?”<sup>24</sup> But many of Wellstone’s confidantes believe that, in reality, it was, in fact, his honest position.

To some of his liberal supporters, Wellstone’s vote on DOMA reflected what they saw as his gradual selling out to Washington. He was no longer the fire-breathing liberal out to poke Washington in the eye. He had changed, and some of his core supporters from the first campaign felt let down. This was in some measure Wellstone’s own doing—by setting himself up as a damn-the-torpedoes progressive, any toning down of his style would be bound to anger some elements of his base. He had set high expectations for himself—that he would be an effective senator who could also lead a national renewal of progressive politics. Then reality intervened, and Wellstone found that he had more than his hands full with his work as a senator—both as a legislator in Washington and as a provider of constituent services back home—and he had been forced to moderate his goals.

### *Fighting Back and Winning*

While some viewed Wellstone’s transformation as evidence of a sellout, others saw it as a reflection of his maturation as a politician. No longer an unknown candidate with no money, he was a sitting U.S. senator with a national base of supporters and an impressive ability to raise large sums of

money in small donations. Although he still inspired passion in his supporters (despite the DOMA controversy, Wellstone's campaign galvanized an enormous and highly energized base), he wanted his second Senate campaign to reflect his accomplishments and hit back hard against his Republican opponents. He had no interest in presenting himself to voters using the same formula as his first Senate race, when he was depicted as a quirky college professor with no money.

Wellstone and his advisers clashed with Bill Hillsman, the creator of his unorthodox 1990 ads who was rehired to do the 1996 ads. Hillsman wanted to create groundbreaking and light-hearted spots, including one in which Wellstone was to be portrayed as Godzilla, taking fire from all sides. Instead of responding to the attacks directly, Hillsman wanted to make fun of the opposition. Since the 1990 victory, Hillsman had gone on to build a national reputation for his creative ads, but he also developed a reputation among campaign strategists as being politically tone-deaf and stubbornly arrogant. Hillsman was often viewed as being less interested in electing candidates than in raising his profile and growing his advertising business.

By the end of the summer in 1996, Wellstone's relationship with Hillsman had deteriorated. Refusing to produce ads consistent with Wellstone's wishes, Hillsman was fired and replaced by Mandy Grunwald, a seasoned political consultant who had worked on Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign. "When I was hired in 1996, the campaign was not prepared to deal with the attacks that it was under," Grunwald said. "He felt that he wasn't fighting back in the way he needed to. And when he hired me he said, 'I think I need something different.'"<sup>25</sup> Grunwald produced ads that showed Wellstone speaking directly into the camera and talking about

his record and that depicted him as a hard-working senator who delivered results for the people of the state. While hardly groundbreaking, the ads were highly effective. After the election was over, a Republican campaign operative told a former Wellstone staffer, “We knew the campaign was over when you fired Hillsman and hired Grunwald.”

The ads, combined with Wellstone’s aggressive grassroots campaign strategy, succeeded in convincing Minnesotans that Wellstone was still an outsider but that he had become effective working on the inside. Polls taken in the fall of 1996 showed that Wellstone’s lead was widening and that the Republican attack ads had gone too far. Although Wellstone ran hard-hitting ads contrasting his record with Boschwitz’s, voters overwhelmingly blamed the Republicans for the campaign’s nasty tone and seemed underwhelmed by the assertion that Wellstone was a liberal. If Minnesotans knew one thing about Wellstone—and they had known it for as long as he had been in the public eye—it was that he was a liberal. They accepted the fact that he was a liberal, because they knew that he was straightforward and honest. “So the Republicans are saying I’m a liberal,” Wellstone said during the campaign. “Yeah, well what else is new?”

As the campaign entered the homestretch, Rudy Boschwitz grew increasingly desperate. Facing another humiliating loss to his nemesis, he resorted to a familiar tactic. On the Friday before Election Day, six years to the day after he had sent the infamous “Jewish letter” accusing Wellstone of being a bad Jew, Boschwitz held a press conference at the state capitol. Surrounded by a group of veterans, he accused Wellstone of having burned an American flag during a protest at UNC. The charge was a complete fabrication: Boschwitz had no evidence, no witnesses, and

no other information about the alleged flag-burning incident. The attack backfired. The media pounced on Boschwitz's failure to produce any evidence, and the Wellstone campaign countered with its own press conference featuring dozens of decorated war veterans, including leaders of several veterans' groups, demanding an apology. The campaign was over.

In the end, Wellstone won decisively, by nine percentage points. After hitting the ground stumbling, he had regrouped, found his stride as a senator, and coasted to reelection.