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Surely, politics is made with the head,
but it is certainly not made with the
head alone.

WELLSTONE'S LAST CAMPAIGN would be his most difficult. Although he enjoyed the highest approval ratings of his career, polls showed that a clear majority was opposed to his decision to seek a third term. "He said he'd run for two terms and then out," one poll respondent told a reporter. "He should stay by that. That's pretty plain and simple."¹ A promise was a promise; Wellstone's integrity, which in the past had served as a buffer to charges of being too liberal, was suddenly in question. Republicans leaped at the chance to portray him as an out-of-touch career politician. "[He] went to Washington as Professor Wellstone and he's now morphed into Potomac Paul," said one.² He was vulnerable: in addition to breaking his promise, Wellstone would once again be the target of an intensive and costly

Republican campaign. But this time, instead of facing a weak candidate like Rudy Boschwitz, he would run against the hand-picked candidate of the White House.

In the months following Wellstone's announcement, the Republicans' search for his opponent unfolded like a dramatic soap opera. Initially, a group of influential Minnesota Republicans urged a state representative named Tim Pawlenty to seek the party's nomination. But the White House had other ideas. During the 2000 presidential campaign, St. Paul mayor Norm Coleman had caught the attention of George W. Bush's chief political strategist, Karl Rove. As one of Bush's earliest supporters in Minnesota, Coleman had visited regularly with Bush and Rove during the campaign and had impressed Rove as a capable and loyal political centrist—the kind of ally the White House needed in Washington.

In early April 2001, while in Washington for a conference of mayors, Coleman had the opportunity to meet privately with Bush. At that meeting, and during a subsequent trip to the White House a week later, Bush, Rove, and other senior administration officials urged Coleman to drop his intended bid for governor and run for Senate instead. In the spring of 2001, he surprised state Republican leaders by announcing that he intended to take on Wellstone.

The announcement complicated Pawlenty's plans. The majority leader of the House, he had spent the previous year deciding between running for governor or for senator. At first, he wanted to run for governor, but the group of influential party insiders scuttled those plans by publicly urging him to forgo a governor's race. Pawlenty was persuaded, and by the time Norm Coleman made clear his interest in running against Wellstone, he had already made up his mind.

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He scheduled a news conference for April 18 to announce his intention to run for Senate. The night before, he received a call at home from Karl Rove, who urged him not to challenge Coleman for the Senate nomination but to run for governor instead. Pawlenty listened to Rove but told him he was sticking to his plans.

The following day, the White House increased the pressure. That morning, Pawlenty was driving his kids to school when his cellular phone rang. It was Vice President Dick Cheney on the other line. Cheney told Pawlenty that he was calling on behalf of the White House to ask him to “stand down” and forgo a run for the Senate. The call came ninety minutes before Pawlenty’s news conference, and it worked. Pawlenty agreed to Cheney’s request and in a dramatic appearance before a packed room of reporters announced that he would not run for Senate. “On behalf of the president and the vice president of the United States, [Cheney] asked that I not go forward. . . . For the good of the party, for the good of the effort [against Wellstone] I agreed not to pursue an exploratory campaign,” he said.³

It was an extraordinary intervention by the White House into state politics. The episode stunned political observers in Minnesota and propelled Norm Coleman to the status of presumed Republican nominee. From Washington, Wellstone watched the drama unfold with a sense of bemusement. “What in the world have I done to attract all of this attention and be such a big target? . . . I have a big twinkle in my eye about all this,” he said when asked about Cheney’s intervention.⁴ Although he knew Coleman would be a strong candidate, Wellstone looked forward to the opportunity to turn the Senate election into a referendum on Bush. The campaign was on.

A New Opponent

Norm Coleman was a onetime Democrat whom one journalist described as “a clean-cut pin-striped cigar-smoking law-and-order prosecutor who liked schmoozing with business leaders a whole lot better than with welfare rights activists.”⁵ His career was defined by a love of deal making and a willingness to reinvent himself according to political expediency. Although he endorsed Wellstone for Senate in 1996, the following year Coleman switched parties and ran for governor as a Republican. He easily secured his party’s nomination before losing to Jesse Ventura in the general election.

Despite the 1998 loss, Coleman was viewed as one of the Republican Party’s brightest lights in Minnesota. As mayor of St. Paul, he led an impressive revitalization of the city’s downtown and brokered a string of high-profile business deals, including a deal that brought professional hockey back to Minnesota. His success, he said, resulted from his determination to put aside political differences to get things done. “I will reach across party lines, cast aside the partisan bickering and posturing and will work with the president to get things done,” he said when announcing his candidacy. “I am a prophet of hope.”⁶

For the next year and a half, Wellstone and Coleman engaged in a campaign that was largely defined by the issue of corporate accountability. When news broke in late 2001 that the corporate giant Enron was collapsing due to mismanagement, press accounts described President Bush’s close association with Enron’s top executives. The scandal presented Wellstone with an opportunity to put Coleman on the defensive. He criticized Coleman’s close association with the White House and his ties to corporate interests. By the summer of 2002, Democrats had gained traction on the

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issue: several national polls showed that Americans were increasingly skeptical of Republicans' ability to effectively handle the accounting scandals. The issue clearly concerned Coleman, who was, in the words of one reporter, "confronted by an incumbent who is fast making corporate accountability a front-and-center issue."⁷ In late August, Coleman announced his support for tougher sanctions against "corporate evildoers" and filmed a campaign ad addressing the corporate scandals.⁸ Going into the month of September, the Wellstone campaign sensed that momentum was on its side. That would change almost overnight.

A Turning Point

As the campaign entered the month of September, Republicans took the offensive, both domestically and internationally. The Bush administration intensified its calls for regime change in Iraq after being criticized for failing to engage the public and international leaders in a discussion of Saddam Hussein's threat. With the first anniversary of the September 11 terrorist attacks approaching, the White House hoped to transform the political debate into a discussion about the potential for war. By the middle of September, they had succeeded: the war in Iraq had eclipsed other issues in the campaign. Buoyed by a resurgence of Bush's popularity in the wake of the September 11 anniversary, Norm Coleman ripped Wellstone for opposing the president's Iraq policy and for being soft on the war on terror. Having already said during the summer that the United States in Afghanistan "would have lost more lives on the ground if we followed [Wellstone's] judgment," his campaign now charged that Wellstone was "among the worst enemies of America's defense."⁹

The attacks began taking a toll. In September, for the first time in the campaign, Wellstone's internal polls showed him trailing Coleman. And he would soon have to take a politically risky vote in the Senate. Congress was scheduled to consider in early October a resolution authorizing military action in Iraq. Wellstone would be forced to go on record on an increasingly popular White House policy. For weeks, he had argued that he would only support such a resolution if the United States received United Nations' authorization and had criticized as "too open-ended" a draft resolution that gave Bush authority to attack Iraq without the support of the international community. As the vote on the resolution approached, every Democratic candidate in the half dozen closest races for Senate announced his support for the measure, and political observers speculated that Wellstone's career was in peril. One top Democratic strategist was so convinced that the vote would cost Wellstone the election that he wrote Wellstone's campaign manager an angry e-mail: "It makes me almost physically ill to even contemplate spending [money] on a candidate who decides to commit suicide—however principled and otherwise defensible."¹⁰

Despite the political pressure, Wellstone never seriously considered voting for a resolution that gave the United States authorization to take unilateral military action against Iraq. In early October, he acknowledged that the resolution was widely popular in the Senate and that opposing it could cost him the campaign, but he said he would vote against it. "Acting on our own might be a sign of our power," he said. "[But] acting sensibly, in concert with our allies and with bipartisan congressional support, would be a sign of our strength."¹¹ In the end, he said, the issue was about whether he felt justified in putting Ameri-

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can lives at risk in Iraq. “We’re talking about a lot of sons and daughters, a lot of Minnesota sons and daughters that could be in harm’s way. And I think it’s extremely important for the United States to do this the right way, and not the wrong way.”¹²

Wellstone knew the potential consequences of his decision and acknowledged that he would have preferred to be dealing with other issues. “With five weeks to go, at the end of 12 [years] in the Senate, of course I wonder what the effect will be,” he told a reporter. “To me, this is the personally and intellectually honest decision, and that’s the one I should make. And I don’t really think I have any other choice but to make it, because how could you do otherwise? It’s a life-and-death question. . . . I’m not making any decision that I don’t believe in.”¹³ When asked how he felt after making his announcement, he said simply, “My soul is resting.”¹⁴

But if Wellstone was taking a political risk, he was also convinced that support among Minnesotans for unilateral action in Iraq was soft. He was optimistic that even those who disagreed with his position would respect him for standing up for what he felt was right. “I know the conventional wisdom among Republicans is that this is the issue that will do him in,” Wellstone said, speaking of himself. “But I think people want you to do what you think is right. I think people want to support the president, but they’re very worried about doing it alone. . . . I think people in Minnesota have the same concerns that I have.”¹⁵

Wellstone’s internal campaign polling suggested that he was right. Braced for the possibility that his support was continuing to erode, his campaign polled Minnesotans immediately following his announcement. The results were remarkable. Though Wellstone had been trailing Coleman

in late September, the data showed that Wellstone's approval rating was going *up* and that he had surged ahead of Coleman by five points. In a three-week period—a time when many observers thought he had effectively lost the election—Wellstone went from a four-point deficit to a five-point lead. Other polls confirmed these results: five separate polls taken in late October, including those of the state's two major newspapers, showed Wellstone holding a lead of between three and eight percentage points. One of those polls, taken by the *Star Tribune*, showed that Minnesotans were evenly divided on the question of who would best handle the Iraq situation and that Wellstone was the strong choice of people identifying the economy or the looming war as the most important problem facing the country.

Wellstone's handling of the war in Iraq stood in stark contrast to his handling of the first Gulf War. Although he voted in both cases against using military force against Saddam Hussein, Wellstone was marginalized in 1991 by his own insolence and indignation. In addition to taking an unpopular vote, he also offended key constituent groups as well as his colleagues and the president. His approval ratings plummeted to below 30 percent. Nearly twelve years later, he voted against a popular war in the midst of a bruising reelection campaign, and he moved into the lead against his opponent. By then, Wellstone had demonstrated to his colleagues and his constituents that he belonged in the U.S. Senate, regardless of whether he took unpopular votes. In 1991, veterans' groups protested angrily when he staged a press conference at the Vietnam Wall; by 2002, veterans rushed to his defense after his vote against the war, and he received a political lift instead of a setback.

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The Final Week

By the end of October, Wellstone was confident of victory but running like an underdog. He insisted on maintaining a grueling schedule, crossing the state in his green bus or by prop plane. As the campaign entered the final stages, the intensity increased. President Bush made his third campaign trip in support of Coleman, and media attention focused on a series of debates between the candidates. As the stress of the campaign mounted, Wellstone relied on Sheila's reassuring presence to stay focused. He asked her to join him for all campaign events, even though his usual practice was to avoid having her travel with him by plane, out of fear that they would both go down in an accident. When his daughter, Marcia, who had taken a leave from her job as a high school teacher to work on the campaign for the fall, asked to join them for the final days, he acceded.

Wellstone began the last weekend of October at a frenetic pace. A debate with Coleman was planned for the night of Sunday, October 26, in Duluth, giving Wellstone an opportunity to spend the previous day campaigning on the Iron Range, firing up supporters at "get out the vote" rallies. The trip coincided with another event in the region that Wellstone wanted to attend: the funeral of the father of one of Wellstone's most faithful supporters, a state representative named Tom Rukavina. The plan was for Wellstone to fly up to the Iron Range town of Eveleth to attend the funeral in nearby Virginia, Minnesota, and then to spend the rest of the day campaigning on the Iron Range. He would be joined by Sheila, Marcia, and three staff members.

The morning of October 25 was cold and rainy. Wellstone's pilot, nervous about the conditions, made repeated

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inquiries into the weather in Eveleth. After initially deciding to cancel the trip due to the potential for freezing rain and poor visibility, the pilot changed his mind when reports came in that the conditions were improving. The Wellstones were picked up at their condominium in St. Paul and driven to Holman Field, the downtown St. Paul airport, where they got an update on the weather from the pilot. Wellstone, who was a nervous flier, sat impatiently in the lobby and asked the pilot to double-check the weather. Moments later, a charter plane, which had come in from Duluth, landed at the airport. The pilot of that plane, upon hearing of Wellstone's nervousness, assured him that he had run into no problems. The weather, he said, was not ideal but certainly acceptable for flying. At approximately 9:30 a.m., the plane took off from Holman Field. It made it to within two miles of the Eveleth airport before crashing in a boggy forest.