

Last Days and Legacy

Certainly all historical experience confirms the truth—that man would not have attained the possible unless time and again he had reached out for the impossible.

WELLSTONE WAS KILLED just twelve days before Election Day. An investigation by the National Transportation and Safety Board would later conclude that the cause of the crash was pilot error, not bad weather. In the surreal aftermath of Wellstone's death, his campaign advisers had little time to absorb the depth of the loss. Instead, they and Wellstone's surviving sons focused on finding a candidate to replace him on the ballot and quickly came up with their choice: Walter Mondale. At seventy-one, Mondale was Minnesota's elder statesman—a former senator, vice president, and ambassador. On the morning of October 27, campaign manager Jeff Blodgett, David Well-

stone, and friend David Lillehaug visited Mondale at his law office. In an emotional meeting, David Wellstone asked Mondale to step in on his father's behalf. Mondale told the group that he would likely run but would not announce his intentions publicly until after Wellstone's public memorial service, planned for the following Tuesday. As word spread of a possible Mondale candidacy, many observers speculated that Coleman stood little chance of winning. Polls taken at the time showed Mondale holding a lead against Norm Coleman.

The memorial service was held at Williams Arena, home of the University of Minnesota's basketball team. Twenty thousand people attended the service, and thousands more watched it live on television. Also attending the service were dozens of former and current elected officials, including former president Bill Clinton, Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, and Minnesota governor Jesse Ventura.

For four hours, eulogizers paid tribute to their loved ones. The three staff members were remembered first. Will McLaughlin's older brother talked about how Will thought of Wellstone as a surrogate for their deceased father. A friend of Tom Lopic described him as a "wise and comforting presence" and a trustworthy friend. Mary McEvoy was honored by the president of the University of Minnesota, where she was a professor, as one of the university's "brightest lights." Following the eulogies for the staffers, the Wellstones were remembered. Marcia Wellstone Markuson's best friend described her "contagious smile" and effusive charm. Sheila Wellstone was memorialized as an exceptional wife and mother who touched many lives and "made us all bigger than we were."

Wellstone was eulogized last. Four speakers—Wellstone's two sons, his former student and friend Rick Kahn, and his

friend Senator Tom Harkin—spoke of his life and impact. Dave Wellstone talked about his father’s deep commitment to teaching and athletics and his parents’ easy relationship. Mark Wellstone said that his favorite memory of his father was having him as a wrestling coach in junior high school. He went on to talk about what his mother meant to him and to his father: “Everything.” Harkin paid tribute to “my best friend.” His voice cracking, he recalled Wellstone’s sharp wit and commitment to ordinary people, describing him as a leader with “a spine of steel.” Recalling Wellstone’s insistence that people refer to him by his first name, Harkin said, “No one ever wore the title of Senator better and used it less.”

But Rick Kahn delivered a speech that overshadowed the other eulogies. For all of his adult life, Kahn had been one of Wellstone’s closest friends. He met Wellstone as a first-year student at Carleton and quickly became a key part of Wellstone’s organizing efforts. After graduating, Kahn deepened his friendship with Wellstone, assisting in his political activism and later serving as the volunteer treasurer for each of Wellstone’s campaigns. As a quiet and soft-spoken man, Kahn’s personality contrasted sharply with Wellstone’s. But his former professor was also Kahn’s hero, and it was manifest by his fierce loyalty and reluctance to criticize Wellstone’s judgment. “Everyone should be as blessed to have a friend like you,” Wellstone wrote to Kahn in the dedication of his autobiography.

But when Rick Kahn stood up to deliver his eulogy, those who knew him witnessed a stunning transformation. He began by describing Wellstone’s fiery first speech to DFL Party delegates in 1982. Within moments, Kahn himself was on fire. He used the eulogy to exhort Wellstone’s supporters to carry on the campaign. “A week from today, Paul

Wellstone's name will not be on the ballot," Kahn said. "But there will be a choice just the same. . . . either keep his legacy alive, or bring it forever to an end!" In an instant, the memorial service turned into a political rally. Kahn spoke for twenty-five minutes, concluding his remarks with an odd request for Republicans to concede the election out of respect to his legacy. In the devastating wake of Wellstone death, emotions had overcome Wellstone's friend; the eulogy went too far. The speech was heartfelt but utterly self-defeating. In his attempt to honor Wellstone's memory, Kahn inadvertently made the subject of the memorial service not the Wellstones but Kahn himself.

The memorial service was a disaster. Viewers were outraged, Wellstone's supporters were embarrassed, and Governor Jesse Ventura walked out of the ceremony, complaining that Democrats had used the gathered mourners as political props. The tone of the campaign immediately changed. The galvanized Republican opposition, which had suspended its campaign after Wellstone died, resumed its campaign with vigor. Republican operatives were ready and willing to pounce on mistakes in the memorial service and even accused Democrats (falsely, it was later revealed) of scripting the audience to boo when Republicans were shown on the arena's video monitors. Wellstone's supporters had been put on the defensive in an instant.

By the time Walter Mondale entered the race the following day, anger about the memorial service had become the central issue in the campaign. Mondale was unable to regain the momentum that had been lost. The results of the election were announced in the early morning hours of November 6, thirteen days after Wellstone died. Mondale lost to Coleman by two percentage points, a difference of less than fifty thousand votes out of 2.2 million cast.

Coda

Donald Mathews, the North Carolina political science professor whose book had played such an instructive role in Wellstone's life, was recently asked if he remembered Wellstone as a student. Mathews, who is in poor health and has difficulty speaking, replied simply, "Who could forget Paul?"¹

Indeed, few Minnesotans have. For more than a year after his death, green Wellstone lawn signs still sat in front yards across Minnesota. Schools, buildings, and parks have been renamed for Wellstone. Biographies, a documentary film, and scores of articles about Wellstone's life and legacy have been written or are currently in production. A nonprofit organization, Wellstone Action, was established to carry on Wellstone's work by training progressive activists nationwide—in less than two years, the organization added ninety thousand members and trained nearly ten thousand activists. Liberal activists are engaged in a lively discussion of ways to continue pushing Wellstone's work forward without him, and some of his supporters even sport bumper stickers and buttons posing the evangelizing question, "What Would Wellstone Do?" At the same time, some of Wellstone's more unforgiving critics have responded to the outpouring with a bumper sticker of their own: "He's dead. Get over it."

It is hardly surprising that Wellstone stirred up such passion in both his supporters and his opponents. His willingness to stand up for his beliefs evoked both admiration and disdain. Wellstone accepted that many people would disagree with him—after all, he spent a career teaching his students the importance of using conflict as a tool for achieving social progress. But it wasn't just his liberalism that earned

him such deep admiration. He was successful—he spoke his mind, but he also won elections and was an accomplished legislator. Wellstone understood that conflict alone was not enough. As an organizer and as a politician, he learned to use compromise and a sense of humor to get results. In the end, he stood out from other liberal politicians because he was too effective for his critics to dismiss.

From the earliest days of his career, Wellstone began his speeches by saying, “I view this gathering with a sense of history,” and he would place his struggle—whatever it was at the time—against the backdrop of a larger historical context. Wellstone undoubtedly wanted to be a part of history when it was written, and although time will judge his legacy and its impact on progressive politics, he will likely be remembered alongside some of the great Midwestern progressives. “I have always thought of Paul Wellstone in relation to the 1920s,” said columnist E. J. Dionne. “In the 1920s you had these extraordinary progressives, people like George Norris, Fiorello LaGuardia, and Robert La Follette, who were fighting very hard, knowing as they were doing it that they were going to lose a lot of fights. Almost all of the ideas that those people fought for in the ’20s came to fruition when Roosevelt became president; their ideas became the ideas of the New Deal. I think Wellstone was a figure like those 1920s progressives, who understood that you can hold up a torch and know that someday people would come along and join your torch with a lot of other torches.”²

One of Wellstone’s favorite movies was a little-known 1979 film called *Northern Lights*, the story of a group of Scandinavian farmers in North Dakota in 1915 who organize a revolt to get higher grain prices and protect their way of life from powerful business and government interests.

“Paul loved that movie,” said Jeff Blodgett. “I think in some ways he wished he lived in that era.”³ It is not surprising that Wellstone was often compared to the great prairie populists. For nearly two decades, he led protests and direct actions across the Minnesota plains, galvanizing farmers, getting arrested, and becoming a rousing political orator. When he ran for Senate in 1990, he began his stump speech by promising to run “a campaign that will restore people’s faith in politics, a campaign that will light a prairie fire that will sweep Rudy Boschwitz and all his money and wealthy benefactors out of Washington like a pack of grasshoppers!”⁴ He campaigned from a green bus with a speaker’s platform on the back because he wanted to campaign “like Harry Truman.”

Wellstone had much in common with the great Midwestern progressive populists. These were leaders with strong convictions and feisty temperaments who wanted to give workers, immigrants, and other disenfranchised citizens a voice in politics. Known as powerful orators, they cared about social and economic justice, higher wages, fair-trade policies, health care, and providing a social safety net for society’s most vulnerable. Like these progressive leaders, Wellstone spoke eloquently, stuck to his principles, and fought relentlessly for an ambitious agenda. His foes considered him intransigent and sometimes annoying, but he was deeply admired for his ability to stand up for what he believed in. He also had ambitions for himself, and like many of his predecessors, he ran for president (if only briefly) as part of a broad effort to push forward progressive politics. And like the other great Midwestern progressive populists, Wellstone was an idealist to the core. “Paul did not come out of wealth,” Mondale said. “He was not the establishment. He was not running in order to make the

comfortable more comfortable. He was running—serving—in order to make life better for people on the edges and that hadn't gotten a break.”⁵

Yet in many ways Wellstone was a new type of progressive leader. Instead of relying solely on an agrarian, trade union base of supporters, he forged impressive coalitions with environmentalists, laborers, immigrants, gays and lesbians, and people of color. He brought these groups together, often literally under one roof, and they all were able to say, “He’s one of us.” From the perspective of political campaigning, Wellstone was a trailblazer. He was a community organizer in every sense and was able to apply the lessons of grassroots organizing to electoral politics in a way that had not been done before. Wellstone was also unique in that he was a prairie populist who came out of the civil rights movement in the American South. The historian Eric Fure-Slocum, a Wellstone friend, said, “Paul managed to soak up and place himself squarely in the Midwestern farmer-labor tradition, while also bringing to it the inspiration of the Southern Civil Rights movement and the pragmatism of the community organizing tradition.”⁶

Wellstone drew from both the populist and progressive traditions, and he updated and reinvigorated both. He was a fiery speaker and an organizer, just as the old-time Midwestern populists had been. That populist fire gave new life to the traditional liberal agenda. At the same time, as a progressive legislator he was able to broaden the traditional populist economic message to include concerns for issues like social justice, civil rights, and the environment. Unlike traditional populists, Wellstone was an internationalist; where his predecessors focused narrowly on a farmer-labor agenda and were often considered protectionists and even nativists, Wellstone was conversant with and intensely

interested in international affairs. He gave populism a broader appeal and greater relevance to the contemporary world. In other words, Wellstone updated for today the old-fashioned, Depression-era populism that he had loved so much and that had been almost forgotten. It is hardly surprising that a Minnesotan would be the person to combine and electrify both traditions. After all, this is the state where the liberal Democratic Party and the populist Farmer-Labor Party had joined forces to create an unbeatable political force sixty years earlier.

As much as Wellstone fit into these traditions, he was clearly his own man, and much of his power came from the force of his personality. "People respond to causes but people also respond to people," said E. J. Dionne. "And there was an irresistible effervescence about Wellstone that I think made people believe in possibilities that they might not have believed in if he hadn't shown up in their living room and said 'yeah, you can do this thing.'"⁷ But his success lay not only in his ability to move his constituents; he was also an effective U.S. senator. "Some people would look at Paul and say he was an ideological person, and maybe he was," said Ohio Republican senator Mike DeWine. "But he was also a very practical person and very results oriented. Paul wanted to make a difference in people's lives. . . . To do this in the Senate you have to reach across party lines and get things done. Paul could convert rhetoric into something that was legislative: action that would actually change people's lives."⁸

Although he had an undeniably impressive record of legislative accomplishments for someone who served most of his two terms in the minority, Wellstone's legacy will not be as a legislator. He will, however, be remembered in the U.S. Senate. "There wasn't anybody like Paul," said Senator

Hillary Rodham Clinton. "He was a very important part of the whole Senate atmosphere; he often reminded people what was too easy to forget around here . . . [that] there are millions and millions of people out there who might never even know our names but if we don't stand up for them nobody else will." Clinton's colleague Senator Tim Johnson agreed. "Clearly Paul changed the Senate," Johnson said. "You got what you saw in his case, he didn't bend a bit, he became a real conscience for the Senate. I think that's why he had such a high level of respect even from people on the other side of the aisle who didn't necessarily agree with his views. Paul's personal style was so inclusive that even people who were on the opposite side politically had enormous personal respect and appreciation for him."⁹

In the aftermath of Wellstone's death, many of his supporters have found it difficult to move on. Democrats across the country were roundly defeated in the 2002 congressional elections, and some of the losses were blamed on the controversial memorial service. The service likely cost Walter Mondale the election, and as a result Norm Coleman is a U.S. senator. Despite an impressive performance by Democrats in Minnesota in 2004, George W. Bush's reelection as president was equally disappointing to Wellstone's supporters. If ever there was a time when they wanted to hear one of Wellstone's rowdy speeches, it is now.

But the primary lesson that Wellstone's life held for others is the imperative of finding joy in politics. Wellstone refused to crumble in the face of adversity, and he never drifted in his political views. He simply loved politics. Rare was the occasion when Wellstone was conflicted by indecision, and he delighted in that freedom. As E. J. Dionne recalled, he brimmed with exuberance. "There was always a little kid in Wellstone," Dionne said. "There was this almost

naïve energy and you knew it from the way he walked. He didn't just walk. He bounded in. He bounced around."¹⁰ Like his hero Hubert Humphrey, Wellstone embodied the prototypical happy warrior originally described by Wordsworth—someone who is consumed by battles but finds comfort in his own resolve. Armed with a singleness of purpose, Wellstone was, as Wordsworth wrote, as “happy as a lover, and attired with sudden brightness.”¹¹

Paul Wellstone lived an extraordinary life. As a boy, he went from juvenile delinquent to accomplished athlete and star student. He gained admission to graduate school only after staging a sit-in at the dean's office. At Carleton, he was awarded tenure after his students organized and protested the college's decision to fire him. He came from nowhere to run for Senate and to defeat a popular incumbent. And as a senator, he went from unbending purist to master of the institution. In a life cut short, Wellstone left behind a legacy of persistence, integrity, passion, and, not least, hope. “We must believe that it is the darkness before the dawn of a beautiful new world,” wrote Wellstone's favorite writer, Saul Alinsky. “We will see it when we believe it.”¹²