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Acquiring a Political Vocation

> One can say that three pre-eminent qualities are decisive for the politician: passion, a feeling of responsibility, and a sense of proportion.

Wellstone received tenure in 1974 and spent the following sixteen years as the most unorthodox member of Carleton College's faculty. In addition to meeting his teaching responsibilities, he led raucous and often illegal protests that at times violated even Saul Alinsky's work-within-the-system radical principles. He made no secret of his resentment of many Carleton administrators and protested the school's hiring practices and its ties to corporate interests. He stubbornly refused to submit articles to academic journals and instead published case studies of grassroots organizing in which he admiringly described the use of "guerrilla warfare" tactics in protests. Although the subject of his courses was American politics, he said he believed that running for office was "a waste of time."

Paradoxically, it was during this period of his life that Wellstone became a political activist. He joined the local chapter of the DFL Party and quickly became a prominent and outspoken party leader. In 1982, he was nominated to be the party's candidate for state auditor. In subsequent years, he gained prominence as a talented and ambitious political activist with a capacity for compromise. And by the end of the decade, he would be a candidate for Senate.

Despite the contradictions in Wellstone's accounts, all of this unfolded in a series of steps that in retrospect seemed logical. As a young graduate student, he viewed electoral politics as a tool in winning power struggles. Once he arrived at Carleton, he witnessed the dramatic impact he could have by engaging direct grassroots organizing. He grew disenchanted with the more indirect avenue of electoral politics. But over time, Wellstone came to believe that the reason why running for office is often an ineffective way to contest for power is that the Left had failed to apply the lessons of direct action to political campaigns. It was during his immersion in protest politics—the time of his life when he was least likely to embrace electoral politics—that Wellstone developed the techniques and leadership skills that would eventually help him become a U.S. senator.

Learning to Lead

Nowhere was the emergence of Wellstone's leadership capacity more evident than in his five-year involvement in the late 1970s with a farmer-led revolt against two utility companies in rural Minnesota. Not long after receiving tenure at Carleton, he heard about a group of farmers in the west-central part of the state who were protesting a plan to install a high-voltage power line across 430 miles of farm-

land. The farmers, most of whom owned small, family-run farms, argued that the power companies had chosen to build the potentially unsafe line on their land because the owners of large, irrigated farms convinced the companies that the land on the smaller farms was less productive. In fact, the owners of the irrigated farms simply did not want the line to run through their land.

The small farmers were incensed. The power line would cut through the middle of their farms, making it more difficult to plant and harvest their crops and potentially putting them in danger—the high-voltage lines used technology that had not been widely utilized before, and their safety was questioned. But above all, the farmers objected to the idea of a large power company, backed by powerful agribusiness interests and state government officials, appropriating their land. "[It] seemed like they were going to take our land, that was it, and we had nothing to say about it," said one of the farmers who helped lead the protests.[1]

When surveyors began appearing on the farmers' land in 1976, a full-scale rebellion erupted. It started with farmers chasing surveying and construction crews from their land and gradually escalated to acts of civil disobedience and violence. Angry farmers used manure spreaders to block the path of the construction workers and rammed the surveying vehicles and equipment with tractors. Eventually, the governor brought in over two hundred state troopers, almost half the size of the entire force, to quell the uprising. They were met by farmers who sprayed them with ammonia and threatened them with baseball bats. The protests riveted the state and attracted national media attention.

Wellstone worked at the center of this struggle. Early on, he began participating in protests with the farmers and worked to get to know the families involved. He and a Car-

leton physics professor named Mike Casper, an experienced community organizer and close friend who would forge a long and close partnership with Wellstone, started traveling to the area regularly, lending advice to the protesters. So taken by the protests were Casper and Wellstone that they decided to chronicle the experience in a 1981 book, *Powerline: The First Battle of America's Energy War*. Although the book provides a detailed account of the controversy, what stands out are not the tactical lessons that the authors suggest but rather their treatment of the participants. Wellstone spent countless days with the protesters and their families, interviewing them for the book, joining them in the protests, and borrowing their living room floors for a place to sleep. He admired the protesters, and they clearly trusted him. The book devotes sections of each chapter to sympathetic profiles of the participants, and Wellstone seemed intent to let them tell their own story through his words. "What I think Paul was so good at was listening and getting you to express what you were about," recalls Patti Kakac, who was working on her parents' dairy farm when she joined the protests. "I talked about my feelings for the land, and how I felt the environment needed to be preserved, and what he did—I can't remember specifically his words—was give me assurance that I knew what I was talking about."[2]

The power line struggle marks an important period in Wellstone's development as a politician. While he had already demonstrated a gift for inspiring his students at Carleton, it was not until he arrived in the harsh environment of western Minnesota that his leadership capacity stood out. Wellstone was working in a deeply conservative area of the state, where strangers are viewed suspiciously. He was a short, Jewish college professor with an Afro haircut and no background in farming or agriculture. Yet the local farmers

accepted and even embraced him. "Having people like Paul there . . . was a very empowering thing for the communities," said one of the leaders of the protest.[3] If Wellstone's participation was empowering to the protesters, it was equally beneficial to him. As one of his old friends described it, Wellstone was learning to speak to a new constituency. "Paul was always interested in speaking to people where they were," David Morris recalled. "His background was in civil rights in North Carolina, so he spoke to people of a different color, and in this case he was speaking to farmers and to rural communities. . . . this was part of his learning to listen and learning to lead."[4]

He was also learning to speak eloquently. Always articulate and personable, Wellstone was developing a persuasive speaking style that recalled the great progressive orators of the early twentieth century. Like former presidential candidate Eugene V. Debs, whom his mother went to see as a small child in New York City, Wellstone had a particular talent for using cadences to build a speech to a crescendo. He rarely spoke from prepared remarks or even used notes, preferring instead to memorize speeches or to speak off the cuff. This was a practice that he would continue for the rest of his career, with the exception of when he delivered policy speeches on the floor of the Senate. With this spontaneous delivery and impassioned style, Wellstone had an unusual ability to connect with audiences and to move them to action. "You've heard Paul speak, you know how Paul can talk," said a participant in the power line protests. "You know how he can go to the heart of a matter and help people understand not only what's wrong but what's right and where there's hope."[5] He moved audiences with a preacher-in-the-pulpit style that Minnesotans had not seen since Hubert H. Humphrey.

Flourishing

By the end of the 1970s, Wellstone was not only an accomplished organizer and speaker; he was also flourishing at Carleton. He was well liked by students and was regularly voted "Best Professor" in the school's annual student survey. He also demonstrated that, when motivated by the right subject matter, he could publish scholarly material. In early 1981, he and Casper completed *Powerline*, a 314-page narrative of the controversy. While lacking in theoretical grounding, the book is an engaging description of citizen activism and a more cogent narrative than Wellstone's previous book. Although it was not a groundbreaking study, the book was well received. "If Minnesota farmers fought the first battle in America's energy war, *Powerline* is its manifesto," wrote one reviewer.[6]

Meanwhile, Wellstone had become a prolific writer and commentator on current events in the Minnesota press. He was a frequent guest columnist for Twin Cities' newspapers and public radio, displaying a mastery of policy issues as wide-ranging as farming, nuclear freeze, and poverty. He read voraciously, collecting piles of newspaper clippings with handwritten notes in the columns. Like his father, Wellstone had an almost obsessive preoccupation with current affairs and was determined to make his opinions relevant to people in positions of power. He spoke frequently to social justice groups, human rights advocates, peace activists, and farming groups, frequently running himself into a state of exhaustion. By the end of the 1970s, he had developed a reputation as one of Minnesota's leading liberals.

At the same time, Wellstone had settled into domestic bliss in his personal life. With the birth of their youngest son, Mark, in 1972, Paul and Sheila had become the proud

parents of three children. While not particularly interested in politics, David and Mark would quickly follow in their father's footsteps as wrestlers. David was sidelined by injury and was forced to quit the sport in high school, but Mark achieved a goal that had eluded his father by becoming a state champion wrestler, winning the high school championship despite having a badly torn knee ligament (he went on to wrestle at the University of Wisconsin but was forced to quit because of the knee injury). Paul and Sheila were fanatical wrestling fans—Sheila never missed a single match that her kids took part in, and Paul was known for energetically rooting for his kids. "You should see him at my wrestling matches," Mark told a reporter in 1990. "I don't ever see it, but everyone tells me it's not safe to sit within 10 feet of him."[7] Their daughter, Marcia, was an energetic and thoughtful girl who wrote adoring cards to her parents and had an especially close relationship with her father. Like her brothers, she excelled in sports and was popular in school. To her parents' great satisfaction, she would go on to pursue a career in teaching.

Despite Paul and Sheila's traditional marriage, life in the Wellstone house was hardly conventional. Paul's students were constantly calling the house or stopping by to meet with him, and he was frequently traveling to organizing meetings throughout the state. As parents, the Wellstones were not strict disciplinarians—the children were given significant freedom to pursue their interests and goals—but they trusted their kids and provided them with a strong, loving family structure. In an unpublished autobiography, Paul writes about his regret at not being enough of a presence in his children's lives when they were younger, but by all accounts he was an attentive father who loved his children ferociously. At home, he tried to instill in his children the

values he spent a lifetime upholding. "He wasn't wishy-washy," David recalled. "He always stood up for things that were important. He really tried to teach us social justice, social consciousness."[8]

By the end of the 1970s, Wellstone was thriving. He had a great family and successful marriage, and he had matured not only as a professor but also as a leader. The resurrection of Wellstone's career represents a pattern that repeated itself throughout his life. He was doing well as a professor and still managed to engage in the same organizing activities that had imperiled his career. Just as he had done as a teenager, he was harnessing his anger into constructive activity; as a result, Wellstone had used his experience as a radical community organizer to publish a serious academic book. He was a man of passion who was prone both to go off the rails and to bounce back, learning from experience and moving on. But he began the 1980s by overreaching again, making an ill-advised and premature foray into elective politics.

The First Campaign

Emboldened by his experience with the power line protests, Wellstone possessed a growing self-confidence that appeared brash in light of his next decision: to seek statewide elective office. In the spring of 1982, he puzzled his family and friends by announcing his candidacy for state auditor, a position that would have put him in charge of overseeing the state of Minnesota's accounting and auditing activities. It was an office that he was singularly unqualified to hold. He had little interest in budgetary matters and a limited understanding of the job. The learning disability that had made it difficult for him to take standardized tests

also affected his ability to read charts and graphs. He was unfit for the job and woefully underfunded, but Wellstone was confident that he could win the support of a majority of delegates by presenting a bold agenda that had little to do with the job of state auditor.

He was right. Throughout the spring, Wellstone traveled to DFL Party candidate forums and local nominating conventions and made personal appeals to delegates to the state convention. With a campaign budget of less than two thousand dollars, he could barely afford the cost of long-distance calls to delegates, yet he proved to be a highly effective campaigner. Wearing a borrowed tie (he owned none) and his only sport coat, he went to DFL gatherings across the state, taking his campaign to the delegates. By the time the state convention began in early June, he had become the frontrunner in a three-way race that featured two candidates with years of experience in accounting and government finance.

On June 5, Wellstone addressed the twelve hundred exhausted delegates to the state DFL convention. It was the convention's last day, and delegates had just finished an arduous nomination process for the party's candidates for U.S. Senate. When Wellstone took the stage, the crowd barely noticed. "I seek your endorsement to run as the DFL candidate for state auditor," he began. "I am running because I love my country and I love my state, and I am worried about our survival—our economic survival in the face of the threat of nuclear war." For the next fifteen minutes, he ignited the crowd with a speech that addressed few issues related to the job of managing the state's budgetary affairs. Instead, he called for a nuclear freeze, antipoverty programs, environmental action, and economic justice. "As state auditor, I will speak out to provide leadership on critical

national issues," he continued. "Some say that a state official has no business talking about the nuclear arms race, that it is a national issue. I say the survival of Minnesotans is a Minnesota issue!"[9] It was exactly what the delegates wanted to hear. Unconcerned about Wellstone's lack of qualifications for the job, they endorsed him by acclamation.

Wellstone went on to face incumbent Arne Carlson, a popular moderate Republican with a background in business. The campaign was over soon after it began. At a debate, Carlson attacked Wellstone for not having the analytical skills to fulfill the job of auditor. Carlson cited testimony that Wellstone had given at a utility rate hearing case three years earlier, in which Wellstone said he "couldn't read graphs and charts and figures" and that he was unable to "put together an eight-piece puzzle" for his kids.[10] Wellstone had no effective response to his own words, and the attack was widely covered in the press. He lost by ten percentage points.

Wellstone's decision to run for auditor exemplified his capacity to get carried away with his passions. It is not just that he overreached by running for statewide office as a little known political novice; he also had no credibility when it came to the substance of the job he sought. The episode suggests a lack of seriousness on Wellstone's part—could he really have believed that the people of Minnesota would want him in charge of the state's top fiscal agency? While Wellstone's campaign platform provided for an entertaining election, his clear lack of interest in the substance of the job of auditor bordered on irresponsible. He seemed to view his candidacy for auditor as simply an extension of his organizing efforts. Voters expect more from their candidates, and Wellstone learned that, if he wanted to be taken seriously as

a general election candidate, he would have to give Minnesotans a credible rationale for voting for him.

But if the campaign for auditor taught Wellstone about the difficulty of appealing to mainstream voters, it also taught him some valuable lessons. In a journal he kept throughout the campaign, he wrote of his frustrations and successes. He recognized early on that he often overreacted to criticism. "I've got to get thick-skinned," he wrote. The journal also shows Wellstone learning how to campaign. "At parades, I can work the crowds, and I need to keep saying my name instead of saying 'DFL,'" he wrote. "People want a Hubert H. Humphrey—someone who will fight."[11] Indeed, Wellstone was demonstrating an unusual capacity to inspire thousands of rank-and-file DFL Party activists. That he came from relative obscurity to win the DFL endorsement demonstrated that he had a rare talent for moving an audience. Under the right conditions, with a more appropriate elective office and more time to put together a campaign, Wellstone sensed that he could use a future DFL endorsement to propel him to the forefront of Minnesota politics.

Gaining Credibility

After his failed bid for auditor in 1982, Wellstone remained active in DFL politics, hoping to build a network of friends within the party. Like other potential office seekers, he wanted to maintain a reservoir of support for a potential run for office by becoming a constant presence at party functions and being seen as a champion of the party's interests. He was very well known and vocal in DFL circles and understood the importance of maintaining close personal relationships and of building trust with the party activists.

But Wellstone took an unconventional approach to such networking. In 1984, he used the support he had garnered from the auditor's race to win appointment as a member of Minnesota's four-person delegation to the Democratic National Committee. It was a logical decision that would have been unremarkable but for the fact that he was an outspoken supporter of presidential candidate Jesse Jackson, who was running against an icon of Minnesota liberalism, Walter Mondale. Instead of working for Minnesota's favorite son, he chose to work for a candidate who stood almost no chance of getting elected and whose ties to Minnesota were weak. It was an odd way to build a network of potential supporters, but Wellstone was determined to do things his way. He understood the potential negative consequences of alienating Mondale's supporters but placed a higher value on speaking his mind and supporting the candidate of his choosing. It did not seem to concern him that his support of Jackson might undermine his future chances at running for office.

Nor did Wellstone hesitate in calling for dramatic changes in the Democratic Party. He wrote long memos to party leaders and delegates in Minnesota, describing the party as "dominated by big money and rarely challenging the prerogatives of corporate capitalism." Wellstone bemoaned the Democratic Party's obsession with fielding centrist political candidates and focusing on "the politics of strategy and tactical planning." Instead, he wrote that Democrats could only win if they presented a bold agenda that clearly differentiated their policies from those of the Republicans. "This is no time for timidity," he wrote in a typical missive to party activists. "It is time to organize and fight back. Our party has always been at its best when it has been a part of the social justice struggles of the time."[12]

As Wellstone was chastising the Democratic Party for failing to organize the electorate, he continued his own community organizing efforts. In the mid-1980s, he got involved in two divisive incidents that a traditional politician would have avoided: a series of farming-related protests and a violent strike by factory workers in southern Minnesota.

The farm protests began when farmers were hit by a devastating combination of plummeting land prices, higher interest rates, and reduced federal payments to agriculture. Many small farmers held heavy debt loads as a result of low interest rates in the 1970s, and they were left without the means to repay their loans. Banks foreclosed on the loans, seizing land and auctioning farm equipment. Many farmers resisted and often threatened violence against bank officials and auctioneers who entered their land.

As he had done during the power line struggle, Wellstone helped lead protests on behalf of the farmers, staging sit-ins at banks and organizing rallies at the state capitol. In 1982, he was arrested for trespassing at a bank in the central Minnesota town of Paynesville after leading a protest.

Along the way, he listened and learned. Not only did his organizing efforts help establish him as a leading liberal activist in Minnesota, but they also gave him an extraordinary opportunity to learn the intricacies of agriculture policy. For someone interested in running for office in Minnesota, where agriculture is one of the most important issues, understanding the experience of farmers and the policies affecting them is critical. Having spent so much time in rural Minnesota, Wellstone had become fluent in the language of family farmers. He knew the prices of commodities, understood the causes of the farm crisis, and could communicate the concerns and demands of the farmers who

were affected by the foreclosures. His familiarity with rural Minnesota would pay a huge dividend when he needed to assemble a statewide grassroots political campaign.

But first Wellstone became a key participant in a strike at the Hormel meatpacking plant that divided the town of Austin, Minnesota, and left almost seven hundred union workers out of work. After a protracted contract dispute, members of Meatpacker Local P-9 walked off their jobs and stayed on strike for over five months before Hormel reopened the plant and threatened to hire permanent replacement workers. The union leadership stood firm in the face of the threat, but some members returned to work. Some of the strikers reacted to the defections and the hiring of scab workers by smashing windows, preventing workers from getting to work, and threatening them with violence. When Governor Rudy Perpich—the same Democrat with whom Wellstone had clashed during the power line struggle—called in the National Guard to preserve order and keep the plant operating, Wellstone pressured him to use his influence to force a settlement. At the same time, he urged the union leadership to find a face-saving way out of the controversy.

In the end, the strike failed. In addition to losing their jobs, the striking workers received little sympathy from a public that opposed their violent methods. Wellstone was depressed, feeling that he had let the workers down. But he was also praised for his role as an intermediary between the striking workers and the governor. "As in his earlier involvement in the farm protest," write the journalists Dane Smith and Dennis McGrath, "Wellstone's true role in the Hormel strike was that of a realist who worked behind the scenes to bring about a resolution."[13] Although his association with the unpopular strike would become a political lia-

bility when he ran for the Senate, the incident demonstrated Wellstone's strong pragmatic streak.

By 1988, Wellstone had cultivated a vast network of friends and political allies across Minnesota and was proficient in political organizing and advocacy. When Jesse Jackson ran again that year for president, Wellstone was a logical choice to cochair his campaign in Minnesota. Despite his reservations about Jackson's perceived insensitivity to Jews (Jackson had referred to New York City as "Hymietown"), Wellstone agreed to take the job, and he managed the campaign adeptly. Although Jackson lost the Minnesota caucus to Michael Dukakis, he performed remarkably well, winning 20 percent of the delegates in a field of seven candidates. Political observers were stunned by Jackson's showing and credited Wellstone with galvanizing an impressive base of Jackson supporters in a nearly all-white state.

Wellstone was also cementing his reputation as one of the best orators in the DFL Party. Scott Adams, a Jackson organizer who became one of the architects of the 1990 Senate campaign, said that when Wellstone spoke on Jackson's behalf at party events he energized the room. "One time in western Minnesota there were two little old ladies sitting in the back row, and Paul spoke and brought the crowd to their feet," Adams recalled. "These two ladies were not supporting Jackson, but they were on their feet, they were clapping, and they were saying, 'I just wish he'd run for something!'"[14] After Wellstone gave another fiery speech at the 1988 state DFL convention, Adams, along with a small group of Jackson campaign activists, began suggesting to Wellstone that he run for Senate in 1990. "We were sitting around a campfire after the first day of the convention, and we said, 'Let's get him to run for Senate, he can win,'" Adams said.

"So we decided we were going to get everyone we knew on the convention floor to address Paul as 'Senator.' So people did that, and Paul said, 'Aw, come on you guys, cut it out,' but we kept peppering him, and we planted the seeds in his head."[15]

If Wellstone's speaking ability caught the attention of delegates, DFL Party insiders were equally impressed with his willingness to work with the victorious Dukakis campaign. He was gracious in defeat. He formed an immediate alliance with Dukakis's Minnesota director, Pat Forceia, and set out to turn Jackson supporters into active Dukakis supporters and volunteers. Shortly after the February caucuses, Wellstone was named a cochair of the Dukakis campaign. Despite Dukakis's sound defeat in the general election, Wellstone had demonstrated both before and after the DFL caucuses that he had learned how to compromise and to forge political alliances.

By the end of 1988, Wellstone found himself in an unlikely position. He was still an outspoken and radical community organizer and had gained prominence for his support of a presidential candidate who was in the race to make a statement and did not have a chance for victory. Yet he was clearly moving toward becoming an effective electoral politician. He demonstrated considerable leadership potential and an ability to move people with his oratory. He was a gifted organizer, having led Jackson's symbolic campaign to a surprisingly good showing. And he showed that he was not merely interested in making a point—despite having reservations about Dukakis, Wellstone was unquestionably committed to helping him win the presidency.

Encouraged by his friends, Wellstone began exploring the possibility of running for statewide office again. "Because of what I'd seen in '88, I thought there was a lot of

enthusiasm in the state for a different kind of politics," he said. "Jackson's appeal was rather astounding in Minnesota. I thought it had a lot to do with the message. I could see that a populist type of campaign could maybe catch fire."[16] But Wellstone knew that, just as important as his message, he possessed oratorical and organizing skills that would first inspire people and then turn them into an army of volunteers. Early in 1989, *Mpls.St.Paul Magazine* named him "Best Speaker of the Twin Cities," reporting that "audiences across Minnesota grow quiet when Paul Wellstone speaks."[17] Rumors began circulating that he was considering a run for Senate. In a January 1989 article in the Carleton student newspaper, Wellstone did little to dampen the speculation. "I would love doing this," he said. "It would be a truly unorthodox campaign . . . that would capture the imagination of people."[18]

Tilting a Seeming Windmill

Rudy Boschwitz was in 1988 a highly popular Republican senator with two years remaining on his second term. A self-made millionaire, Boschwitz fit in easily among Washington power brokers, but he also conveyed a down-home, plaid-shirt appeal to Minnesota voters. With approval ratings hovering above 70 percent, Boschwitz seemed virtually unbeatable. DFL Party activists were dismayed. Their 1988 nominee for Minnesota's other U.S. Senate seat, Hubert H. Humphrey III, had just lost badly to the Republican incumbent, David Durenberger. Worse, Boschwitz had been amassing a huge campaign war chest. Unlike most politicians, Boschwitz enjoyed raising money, and he had a seemingly endless supply of fund-raising sources.

Yet Boschwitz's perceived invincibility presented Well-

stone with an opportunity. By his calculation, he had nothing to lose by running for Boschwitz's seat. While more established candidates, such as former vice president Walter Mondale, passed on taking on such a strong incumbent, Wellstone began planning a campaign. After a series of meetings with friends and supporters, he headed to northern Minnesota's Iron Range to seek the advice of his friends in that legendarily Democratic region of the state. In conversations with union leaders and local activists—people Wellstone had known for years from his organizing days—he heard palpable frustration about the DFL Party's inability to field inspiring candidates. The meetings confirmed his belief that the only person who could defeat Boschwitz would be someone who could galvanize a loyal, active following and, as Wellstone liked to say, "raise hell."

In the spring of 1989, Wellstone gathered a group of his advisers for a final discussion about the advantages and disadvantages of running for Senate. Some of the members of the group, including his friend from the Dukakis campaign, Pat Forceia, urged him to consider a run for chair of the state DFL Party. "Pat tried to tell Paul that if he ran for Senate and lost, his political career will be over," recalled Scott Adams. Forceia urged him to use a run for party chair as a launching pad for a later Senate race. "But Sheila said, 'I'm not losing my husband for a year and a half for him to become party chair. Paul wants to be senator, he wants to run for Senate, and that's what he should do.'"[19] That settled it. In April 1989, he announced that he would run for Senate.

Wellstone decided that his only chance for winning the party endorsement was to present himself to delegates with a simple appeal: "This time, vote for what you believe in." Like he had done as a young wrestler, Wellstone wanted to

turn his perceived weakness—in this case, his liberalism—into his greatest strength. "We knew what we needed to do," said Scott Adams. "Organize the caucuses. Bring all the Jackson people in and keep them there. Work the progressive, peace and justice, activist community. And secure the Iron Range—the steelworkers and the unions."[20] Wellstone threw himself into the campaign with all his energy. He became a fixture on the Iron Range, sleeping on the couch of his friends and supporters Gabe and Mary Ann Brisbois, speaking at union gatherings and house parties, and standing outside plant gates to shake hands with workers. When he was back home in Northfield, he spent every evening on the phone, calling potential delegates to the DFL state convention, trying to convince them to support his fledgling candidacy.

The DFL Party endorsement was critical to Wellstone's success. Without it, a candidate can run in the party's autumn primary but lacks the name recognition, voter lists, and financial resources that come with the party's endorsement. To get the endorsement, a candidate needs the support of a majority of party delegates, starting at the precinct caucuses (where party members begin the process of choosing delegates for the state convention) and ending with the convention itself. The endorsement process played to Wellstone's strength. With a relatively small universe of caucus attendees, he needed to speak directly to as many potential delegates as possible.

Wellstone implemented a four-part strategy to win the endorsement. First, he traveled throughout the state to meet the rank-and-file delegates whose support was essential for an endorsement. Second, he began forging a coalition of supporters from disparate parts of the DFL's constituency—union members, environmentalists, peace activists, and oth-

ers. Third, he organized these supporters into a network of volunteers who made phone calls and knocked on the doors of potential delegates. Fourth, he flooded the precinct caucuses with his supporters, surprising observers by securing a clear plurality of support.

For over a year, Wellstone worked the party activists at the grass roots, and his efforts paid off. In June 1990, the DFL Party held its endorsement convention, where signs of Wellstone's organizational superiority were immediately obvious. His staff, most of whom were in their early twenties, had come to the convention well prepared, and they dispatched teams of supporters—and Wellstone himself—to speak to the delegates. Wellstone's organization, combined with his electrifying speeches, overwhelmed his opponents. Despite reservations about his electability, the delegates endorsed him after a long night of balloting. Wellstone was ecstatic. "I promise you a campaign that will light a prairie fire that will sweep Rudy Boschwitz and all his money out of office," he shouted to the delegates.[21]

But first he would need to win the DFL primary in September. Wellstone's primary opponent was Jim Nichols, the state agriculture commissioner. The pro-life Nichols drew most of his support from farmers in rural Minnesota and from the state's most powerful antiabortion organizations. Nichols was well known and highly respected, and polls showed him leading Wellstone up to the day before the September primary. For his part, Wellstone had been replicating his DFL endorsement strategy, dispatching hundreds of volunteers across the state to call and knock on the doors of potential DFL voters. He focused on bringing new voters into his base; once committed, his supporters promised to go to the polls and vote. They carried through on their promise and gave Wellstone a decisive victory. Despite polls that

showed Nichols in the lead, Wellstone cruised to victory with 60 percent of the vote to Nichols's 35 percent.

Wellstone had little time to celebrate. Boschwitz was awaiting Wellstone with full campaign coffers, high approval ratings, and the confidence of a two-term incumbent. Worse for DFLers, Paul Wellstone held positions far to the left of mainstream Minnesotans and had a campaign account balance of almost zero. A poll released after the September primary showed him trailing by eighteen points, an encouraging sign for Wellstone, whose own polling showed him trailing by thirty-three points a few months earlier, but a huge gap nonetheless. Boschwitz himself predicted that he would win reelection by twenty points. "Paul is certainly not as strong a candidate as might have been fielded," he told reporters.[22]

Wellstone ran against Boschwitz's wealth, portraying him as an agent of the elite. He attacked Boschwitz relentlessly, using the senator's twelve-year voting record as evidence of his neglect of working-class Minnesotans. "Boschwitz says we don't have the money to deal with education, child-care, health care, the environment," Wellstone said in his stump speeches. "He is willing to spend $500 billion to bail out the savings and loan industry, and $300 billion dollars a year for the Pentagon. I say we will have no real national security unless we invest in our people, our communities, our economy." Wellstone laced his fiery speeches with disarming humor, arguing that, unlike Boschwitz, he would be a senator for the "little fellers, not the Rockefellers." He argued, "Rudy Boschwitz is the senator from Exxon. I'll be the senator from now on."[23]

It was a tough sell. Despite his popularity among DFL Party members, Wellstone had a reputation as a rabble-rousing liberal. He had virtually no name recognition, no pro-

fessional staff, and no money. His views were more liberal than those of mainstream Minnesotans, and with his disheveled appearance and frantic mannerisms, Wellstone looked decidedly unsenatorial. He proudly admitted that he had not had a professional haircut since high school (Sheila was his barber), that he owned only one suit, and that he had never worn a tuxedo in his life. In fact, Wellstone barely looked the part of a college professor, since he regularly taught classes in jeans, a T-shirt, and running shoes. Even his closest advisers were skeptical about his chances. "It was," said Jeff Blodgett, his three-time campaign manager, "a suicide mission."[24]

Wellstone had so little money that he could hardly afford to run any television advertisements, a potentially fatal weakness in light of Boschwitz's ability to purchase a seemingly endless number of ad spots. Desperate to break through to a wide audience, Wellstone relied on a risky television advertising strategy that injected into the campaign what would be one of his greatest weapons: humor. His advertising consultant, a former Carleton student named Bill Hillsman, produced an ad that begins with Wellstone saying, "I'm Paul Wellstone and I'm running for United States Senate. Unlike my opponent, I don't have $6 million, so I'm going to have to talk fast." Wellstone then races frantically past the screen, past hospitals and farm fields and senior citizen centers, promising to lead the fight for national health care, to protect the environment, and to advocate for senior citizens. Another ad, which the campaign could afford to run only once, showed Wellstone trying to track down Rudy Boschwitz for a debate. Based on Michael Moore's documentary "Roger and Me," the two-minute ad had Wellstone searching for Boschwitz at his campaign office and Senate office. It ends with Wellstone

on the telephone, calling information to locate Boschwitz's home telephone number to no avail.

The commercials themselves became a campaign story and provided Wellstone with much-needed attention. Television stations ran news stories on the ads, replaying them on the nightly news. Within days of their release, the entire state seemed to be talking about Wellstone's campaign commercials. On his campaign stops, Wellstone was overwhelmed by people asking him, "Did you find Rudy yet?" Suddenly, people were paying attention to this unknown and quirky candidate for U.S. Senate.

Boschwitz played into Wellstone's strategy perfectly. Confident of victory, he ignored Wellstone for months, refusing to give the unknown liberal a platform. The plan backfired. By the middle of October, Wellstone started showing signs of movement and the Boschwitz campaign was getting nervous. In a sign of desperation, Boschwitz struck back by attacking Wellstone as an "Abbie Hoffman-type character," a "leftist hustler," and a "self-promoting little fake."[25] The attack served only to solidify Boschwitz's image as humorless and defensive, and Wellstone's camp seized on the misstep, suggesting that Boschwitz's campaign staff invest in "looser underwear." In debates, Wellstone replied to Boschwitz's lectures about supply-side economics with a stinging one-liner: "What you just heard is a bunch of Boschwitz."

An Upset Victory

When Wellstone began his campaign, he seemed like the longest of long shots, but by Election Day he was a senator-elect. Here is how it all unfolded.

On the Sunday before the election, Boschwitz, one of the

most prominent Jews in Congress and a steadfast supporter of Israel, sent out a letter to the Twin Cities' Jewish community criticizing the Jewish Wellstone for not raising his children as Jews. The letter, which was signed by over fifty Boschwitz supporters, most of whom did not know its content, pointed out that both candidates in the race were Jewish. "But from there on the difference between them is profound," the letter said. "One, Paul Wellstone, has no connection with the Jewish community or our communal way of life. His children were brought up as non-Jews. . . . Everyone who knows Rudy knows that he is very family oriented and justly proud of his family." The implication was clear—Boschwitz was a better Jew than Wellstone.

Boschwitz badly misjudged the impact of the letter. Recipients of the letter were overwhelmingly opposed to what they perceived as an attack on Wellstone's Jewishness. "For one Jew to question the Jewishness of another Jew is something that is totally inappropriate," said one recipient. "It is something the worst anti-Semite wouldn't do."[26] A prominent rabbi called the letter "shameful," and another said it "ran contrary to everything we as a [Jewish] community have stood for."[27] The fallout had to have devastated Boschwitz. He was one of Congress's most steadfast supporters of Israel and was a major promoter of Jewish causes. Yet he came under withering criticism from within the Jewish community—including many of his Republican friends. Worse, the attack reinforced a theme of Wellstone's campaign that must have been especially irksome to Boschwitz: that the race was a David versus Goliath battle, with Wellstone filling the role of David—an enduring symbol of Jewish identity.

It wasn't just in the Jewish community that the letter backfired. Minnesotans had a history of rejecting negative

campaigning, and Boschwitz's move violated the state's tradition of "Minnesota Nice." Not incidentally, the state is overwhelmingly Christian, and Wellstone's response reminded voters that the senator was launching an attack on Wellstone's decision about whom to marry. "I guess the senator is criticizing me for marrying a Christian," Wellstone said. The media also turned decisively against Boschwitz, depicting him as a bully who panicked as his campaign began sinking. "The warm and cuddly Boschwitz of the opening months of the campaign has disappeared," wrote a Twin Cities columnist. "That friend of Minnesota' has been replaced by a mean-spirited man who is proving that he's willing to do anything to win his Senate race against Paul Wellstone."[28]

With three days remaining before the election, the letter gave Wellstone the type of momentum that most political campaigns can only dream of. On the evening it was made public, a poll was released that showed Boschwitz holding a nine-point lead. But the Jewish letter quickly eclipsed all other issues in the campaign, and his lead evaporated. Boschwitz's press secretary later said, "We got about fifty calls from people who said they would switch their votes. They weren't crackpots either. They left their names. All of a sudden we could feel it slipping away."[29]

In the final three days of the campaign, Wellstone's superior grass-roots organization kicked in. Thousands of committed volunteers filled get-out-the-vote phone banks, distributed campaign literature, and stood in the biting cold, waving green Wellstone signs on traffic intersections. Wellstone himself campaigned at a frenzied pace, flying across the state for a final push that ended with him shaking hands in downtown Minneapolis until the polls closed. For his part, Boschwitz had stopped campaigning the night before

and spent Election Day with two Senate colleagues, dining at an exclusive restaurant and preparing to savor another victory.

It was not to be. Hours later, the election results were in. Wellstone defeated Boschwitz 50.5 percent to 47.9 percent. He was the only challenger in the country to beat an incumbent senator in 1990. When told by a reporter that he had won, he looked dazed. "I did?" he asked.

Wellstone's evolution from community organizer to elected official was complete. With a controversial past, virtually no money, and a decidedly unsenatorial style, he had defeated an entrenched incumbent by employing the organizational techniques that he first learned from Saul Alinsky. By any measure, it was an extraordinary victory and represented a personal triumph for Wellstone. But as he celebrated his victory long into the night, a daunting realization also occurred to him: suddenly, he was a U.S. senator.