

*Commentary*

Senator Paul Wellstone: In Memorium  
1944-2002

by  
Stephen Eric Bronner  
&  
Frances Fox Piven

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Politicians and pundits were quick to offer their obituary rituals for Paul Wellstone. It is somehow jarring to hear so much warm praise for the independence and principle of someone they often ignored and usually scorned. Paul was always a man of the left. But he was also able to reach beyond the left. Especially in Minnesota, but all over the country, his admirers are more numerous than his political supporters, and they are stunned and grieved. Marchers carry his name aloft on banners, people gather in candle light vigils, they construct memorials to the man that are reminiscent of the memorials to the victims of 9/11. We are still shocked by the tragedy of his death, that of his wife, his daughter, three of his aides, and the pilots of that small airplane. We think of him and, suddenly, we recognize Paul's qualities, and realize the magnitude of our loss.

Paul Wellstone was spirited and energetic and lived for his politics. But he also lived for people: for his wife, his family, his friends, his supporters, and his constituents. He took risks that few politicians would dare, usually confident that he would somehow persuade enough people to make it worthwhile. But Paul also knew how to pick his battles: he was willing to compromise. More than that: he understood that the politician—not the academic and not the advocate—but the politician cannot help but compromise. What made him unique was not his purity, for that is the quality of saints not politicians, but his ability to make clear that his retreats were tactical and that he was committed to a broader vision. He lived his politics as if it were a moral calling, rather than as a job or a series of photo-opportunities, and he embodied a term that is often used derisively. He was pragmatic, a pragmatic idealist.

For many of us, politics follows or seems to follow from some master theory, a theory about capitalism or class conflict or neo-liberalism or empire, perhaps. Paul Wellstone knew all our theories, he had indeed taught them when he was a political science professor at Carleton College in Northfield, Minnesota. But those theories only loosely informed his political efforts. Rather, he viewed politics as a moral enterprise, grounded in elemental convictions about equality, democracy, community and a mutuality of respect. He took for granted that those convictions were actually widely shared and that if only he could discuss them with people, if only he could reach out, common cause could be made for the common good. Or, putting it another way, he genuinely believed that by sharing with people something of their lives, he and they together might make our world more egalitarian, more democratic, and more intelligent.

So it was for his entire adult life: as a professor at Carleton where the students flocked to his classes; as an organizer of welfare recipients in Rice County; as an activist in the P 9 meatpacking workers doomed strike against Hormel; with farmers fighting a war with the utility companies over high voltage power lines; and countless other struggles. Everywhere he went, and in every battle he joined, Paul reached out, ready to smile and joke and talk, about politics as he saw it, politics as a moral enterprise of the community. Even in the Senate, he was invariably cordial and warm and gregarious, probably convinced that even the members of what is increasingly becoming an all-white country club could, in time, be won over. It is these human and ethical qualities that we think—we hope—are being appreciated as we all grieve over his death.

Again, however, it should not only be these qualities. There have been many fine men and women of warmth and charm with similar convictions and ideals. Paul was, after all, elected to the Senate three times with slim margins in a state with strong conservative forces. Ideals aren't enough to achieve that: he did not stay in the Senate, and he did not wield a measure of clout in the Senate, simply by turning up and voting for what was right. He wore his flag in his lapel; he voted for the Patriot Act; he voted for the Defense of Marriage Act, something he later regretted, and there were other times he cast his vote with those or different convictions or those with no convictions at all.

Accepting the existence of many injustices is perhaps the prerequisite for changing any of them. Success in politics, especially in electoral politics, requires flexibility and pragmatism

Paul could not help but consider the degree of political opposition to his causes while trying to make the most of political opportunities for furthering them. He suffered those calculations intensely. Which issues should he endorse? How far could he go? What was the price? Who might serve as an ally on a mental health bill or in opposing welfare retrenchment or the looming war on Iraq? And on top of it, as he made these gut-wrenching decisions, he had to wonder just how much we on the Left—his friends and his comrades—would pummel him for one compromise or another.

Sometimes the criticisms of Paul were legitimate, other times not. This is not the place for a litany of the issues and how he voted. But it is the place to consider that he showed us on the outside, because we are on the outside, what we too often tend to ignore: the difference between intelligent pragmatism and rank opportunism. That difference is not set in stone: it becomes apparent only insofar as we are provided with a plausible way of justifying compromises and maintaining the connection between ends and means. Few politicians can do either. Paul Wellstone could do both. This gave us reason to trust him. That is why he is a politician whom we will remember not merely with affection, but with respect and reverence.