

Remembering Paul Wellstone

By David Moberg

Everyone devoted to greater social justice suffered a deep loss when the plane carrying Sen. Paul Wellstone and members of his family and campaign staff crashed in northern Minnesota. Paul—to nearly everyone, he was Paul, not Senator Wellstone—was an energetic, joyful, good-humored crusader whose passions triggered hope and commitment in others. While he showed unwavering dedication to empowering average citizens and using government to improve their lives, he maintained an open-minded, respectful dialogue with both his constituents and the social movements with which he proudly identified. But he was also a doggedly tough fighter against his antagonists, whatever the odds.

It understates his virtue to say that he had a common touch. He had unmistakable empathy for "ordinary people," especially those most in need of the compassion of others, but he also treated them with the dignity they deserved. He was a fundamentally decent, likeable and trustworthy individual with a great talent to communicate persuasively his arguments for justice, equality, democracy and solidarity. His loss is a reminder that individuals, with their distinct personal attributes, make a big difference in the struggle for a better world, despite the importance of movements, organizations, ideas and broader forces of social change.

But Paul would want his legacy to be not just an appreciation of his own contributions or personal merits, but a call to arms. He was above all an organizer. He worked with grassroots movements in Minnesota, while writing about them and encouraging his students at Carleton College to participate (to the consternation of administrators). But his distinctive accomplishment was linking the movements of workers, farmers, environmentalists, feminists and many others with each other and with electoral politics. Paul worked to frame issues and policies that would realize the aims of these movement constituencies and also create a basis for unity among them, forging not just a "blue-green" coalition, but a broader, more unified progressive movement.

At the same time, he transformed electoral politics with his reliance on a modernized version of the vanishing political tradition of person-to-person mobilization by an army of volunteers. While he used TV ads (often cleverly) and could raise

money, his margin of victory—despite theoretical vulnerability for his progressive stands—came from the troops on the ground. By linking electoral and non-electoral politics, he strengthened both.

As an organizer, he was interested in changing people's ideas, not in being a weathervane of public opinion. After his death, Paul was widely praised for his principled politics. He showed that most famously in his solitary vote against a harsh version of welfare reform and in opposition to new war powers for Bush, but he was also a lonely fighter against a draconian, bipartisan bankruptcy bill that he persistently delayed. Equally important, however, he demonstrated to the mass of timid and calculating politicians, whose ambition is mainly getting themselves elected, that it was possible to be principled and win.

People do respect leaders who have the courage of their convictions, but the great majority of people also respected Paul, even if they disagreed with some of his votes, because of what those principles were. Phil Gramm and Dick Armye might also be principled, as the *Wall Street Journal* editorialized in its perverse appreciation of Wellstone, but their devotion to free markets, private property and the rights of the rich doesn't resonate with the great majority of citizens as deeply as Paul's aspirations for fairness, compassion, equality and a peaceful world, where the well-being of both nature and humans, in all their variation, are nurtured and protected. Paul inspired not just because he was principled, but because of the nature of his principles, which appealed to the transcendent dimensions of human nature.

Paul could lash out fervently against corporate greed and political misdeeds, and he was one of the Senate's harshest critics of the way corporate globalization has reshaped our lives. But he always brought a hopeful message, based on the belief that politics could be ennobling, that most people really cared about their neighbors (even those on the other side of the globe) and that a new world could be born out of this flawed but still vital nation. It will be hard to find messengers that will match him. It is imperative to keep his message alive. ■



Paul Wellstone appeared in the pages of *In These Times* on numerous occasions over the past 26 years. The following selections are some of the highlights.

State Auditor Race a Hot One

October 6, 1982

Wellstone has not been afraid to speak out on issues that some feel are far removed from the jurisdiction of the state auditor. He has delivered speeches advocating a citizens' audit of the Pentagon and calling for a farm protest as big as the rural civil disobedience of the '30s. The nuclear freeze is as important to his campaign as any of the local issues. ... "This isn't a radical campaign," he declares. "It's part of a long history of populists holding high the vision of a better world and fighting hard to make that dream come true."

Setting Standards

June 6, 1990

"I don't say it won't be difficult—running a grassroots campaign—but we can't play by Boschwitz's rules and win," explains Wellstone, speaking over a supper of deli meats and tabouli in his Northfield home. "That is what Democrats around the country do too often. You're supposed to raise the same money, hire the same pollsters, run the same ads."

To Wellstone, winning in November depends on winning the voter's trust. "Vaclav Havel told our Congress that the highest order of patriotism is to speak honestly to the people about problems and issues you're confronted with," he says. "They may have listened to him, but I'm not sure they heard him."

Working in Opposition

January 23, 1995

Wellstone has vowed to make sure the Democrats will not repeat the mistake they made in 1981, when they capitulated to the Republican agenda.

... "This is the time for very strong opposition politics," Wellstone says. "When you really look at the Republican agenda, it represents the biggest change in American politics in my adult life. It isn't an attempt to overthrow the '60s; it is an attempt to undo the '60s."

Q&A: Our Man in the Senate

January 6, 1997

Many progressive Democrats who live outside of Minnesota view you as their senator and themselves as part of your constituency. How do you see yourself fulfilling this national role?

"I don't know if I have an answer yet. I am going to think about the way I can make the biggest contribution on the national level to building a progressive politics. We have to do it. Many of us have to do it. That's crystal clear. I am determined to have a good strong national presence as a senator. ... I don't want to make too large a claim, or sound conceited, but I am determined to be a United States senator who can contribute to the organizing that builds a much stronger progressive politics in this country. It won't happen in Washington."

Wellstone in His Own Words

June 14, 1998

You don't like a special-interest politics? You think when it comes to concerns for yourself, your loved ones, your family, your community, that those concerns aren't of concern in Washington? Well, you shouldn't be surprised because, the truth of the matter is, the greatest ally of special-interest politics is not the parties and not Congress—it's when people don't register, don't vote, don't organize and when people don't get involved in public affairs.

You can't check out when it comes to your citizenship. You have to be part of this. You have to speak up. We're going to need you to move our country forward on an agenda of reform, opportunities, education,

good jobs, decent wages, health care and building communities—making the United States of America all it can be going into the next century. That's our politics, and we can win on it.

The Great Debate

November 3, 2000

Sen. Paul Wellstone, the Minnesota Democrat who backs Gore but eschews criticism of Nader, knows better than perhaps anyone else on the American left the challenge and the potential of a more engaged and tactically savvy left politics. ... "I really do believe it's important that Gore beat Bush," Wellstone said. "But I want to tell you something. It's just as important that we capture the energy of this dialogue that we've got going on the left and turn it into something."

November 7 is important because it's Election Day, but November 8 may be even more important for progressives. On November 8, no matter what happens, we've got to take all these questions and arguments, all this energy that's being poured into beating Bush with Gore and into building an alternative with Nader, and turn it into something.

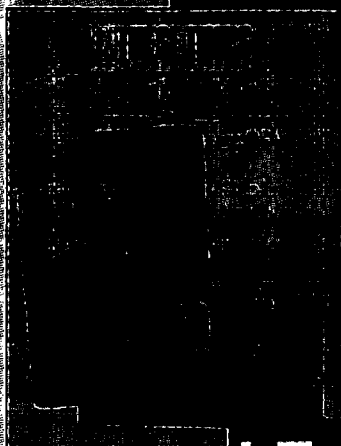
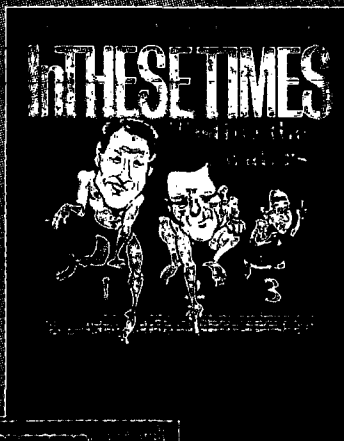
Third Time's the Challenge

August 19, 2002

Wellstone is respectful of the fractious movements that supply many of the troops for his grassroots politicking, but he is frustrated with the way many progressives evaluate political strategy.

"I always remember that [historian] Barrington Moore talked about the historically viable options," he says. "Don't do some analysis that says welfare mothers in the '60s should have made a coalition with the building trades. Well, they would have liked to, but the building trades weren't interested. You judge people by what are historically viable options. I'm very proud of what I've done in the Senate."

At the same time, he says that progressives need to better understand and tolerate differences among themselves. "It always makes me angry when people assume—and it happens on the left—that if someone takes a different position, it's only because he doesn't have courage, not because he doesn't have a different position." ■



In These Times Candidate Wellstone

Can a Wellstone presidential campaign lead to a Democratic alternative?

Building a citizen politics



Breaking the Bank

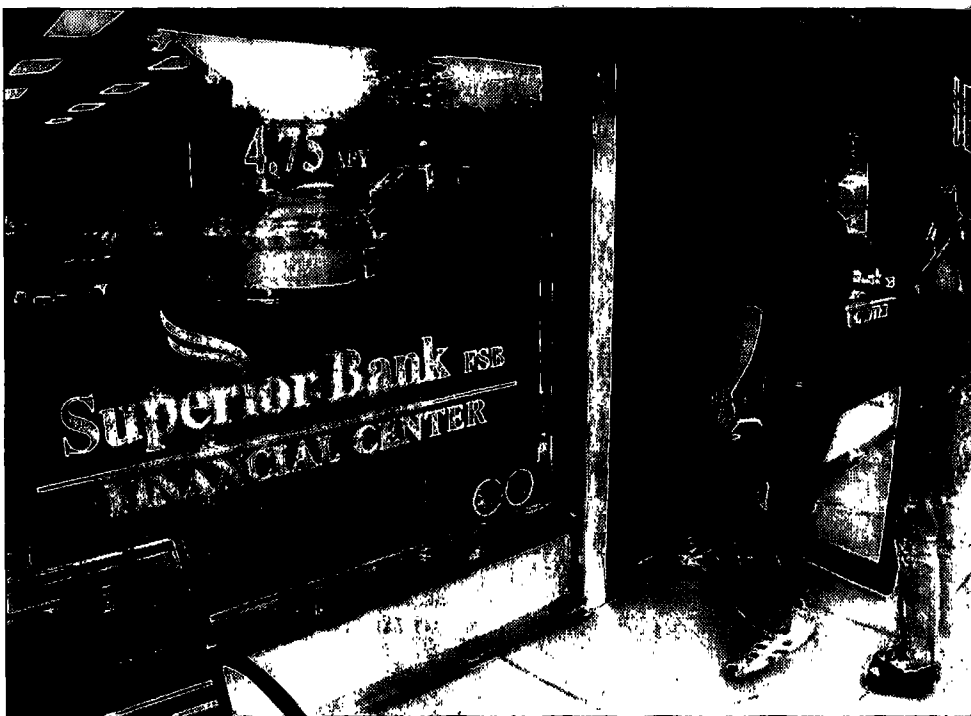
By David Moberg

After federal regulators closed the \$2.3 billion Superior Bank in July 2001, investigations revealed that the suburban Chicago thrift was tainted with the hallmarks of a mini-Enron scandal. New legal developments are adding additional twists, including racketeering charges. And yet the bank's owners, members of one of America's wealthiest families, ultimately could end up profiting from the bank's collapse, while many of Superior's borrowers and depositors suffer financial losses.

The Superior story has a familiar ring. Using a variety of shell companies and complex financial gimmicks, Superior's managers and owners exaggerated the profits and financial soundness of the bank. While the company actually lost money throughout most of the '90s, publicly it appeared to be growing remarkably fast and making unusually large profits. Under that cover, the floundering enterprise paid its owners huge dividends and provided them favorable loans and other financial deals deemed illegal by federal investigators.

Superior's outside auditor, which doubled as a financial consultant, engaged in dubious accounting practices that kept feckless regulators at bay. Many individuals—disproportionately low-income and minority borrowers with spotty credit records—had apparently been exploited through predatory-lending techniques, including exorbitant fees, inadequate disclosure and high interest rates. In the end, more than 1,000 uninsured depositors lost millions of dollars in savings in one of the biggest bank failures of the past decade.

Yet unlike Enron, the people behind Superior's collapse were not *nouveaux-riche* corporate hustlers, but members of Chicago's Pritzker family. The Pritzkers, whose two current patriarchs—Robert and his nephew Thomas—tie for 22nd



Hopefully, they were on their way in to close their accounts.

place on *Forbes'* list of the richest Americans, own an empire valued at more than \$15 billion, including the Hyatt hotel chain, casinos, manufacturers and real estate, and they are major contributors to both political parties. They were equal partners in the private ownership of Superior with New York real estate developer Alvin Dworman, a longtime associate of Thomas' father, Jay Pritzker, who died in 1999.

And Superior's accounting and consulting was not provided by the disgraced Arthur Andersen, but by Ernst & Young. When regulators shuttered the bank, the publicity-shy Pritzkers, who take pride in their philanthropy (such as the prestigious international architecture award in the family name) quickly negotiated what appeared to be a generous settlement to stay out of the newspapers and the courtrooms.

But now both the Pritzkers and Ernst & Young may face the legal and public relations uproar they were trying to avoid. On November 1, the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (FDIC) sued Ernst & Young for more than \$2 billion. The FDIC alleges that the firm concealed its improper accounting practices at Superior to facilitate the sale of its consulting unit for \$11 billion, leading to Superior's insolvency and ultimately costing the FDIC \$750 million. Ernst & Young denies responsibility, blaming the bank's managers and board, failed regulation and changing economic conditions. Investigators from the FDIC, Treasury Department and the General Accounting Office (GAO) had cited all those causes for Superior's failure, but also had criticized Ernst & Young's flawed work and conflicts of interest.