

A HERO'S LEGACY: REMEMBERING PAUL WELLSTONE

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The Conscience of a Liberal: Reclaiming the Compassionate Agenda.
By Senator Paul Wellstone. Random House Press, 2001. 216 Pages.
\$23.95.

On October 25, 2002, the nation lost a unique, energetic, fearless and impassioned leader when Paul Wellstone died in a plane crash. People from all walks of life mourned his passing; from the most powerful politicians to the country's newest immigrants.¹ Known as the "soul of the Senate," Paul Wellstone was the mirror in which his Senate colleagues looked at themselves, searched their own hearts, and questioned whether their actions were just.² Paul Wellstone was an extraordinary human being and an extraordinary Senator.

Paul Wellstone was an unconventional politician. With wild, curly hair, slightly ruffled clothing and standing at a daunting five-feet, five-and-a-half inches tall, this college professor took the Senate by storm when he arrived in 1990. His road to Washington was starkly different from that of his colleagues. In a Senate filled with multi-millionaires and lackeys of special interests, Wellstone was beholden to a different constituency — welfare mothers, disabled veterans, the mentally ill, and victims of domestic violence.

Paul Wellstone was courageous. He was often a lone voice on the floor of the Senate; making unpopular choices that resulted in lopsided votes. He followed his conscience, even when the vote ran counter to Democratic Party leadership. He refused to vote for

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1. Rachel E. Stassen-Berger, *The Powerful Praise Senator's Passion: Republicans, Democrats, Bitter Rivals Pause to Commend Paul Wellstone's Dedication*, ST. PAUL PIONEER PRESS, Oct. 26, 2002, at A21.

2. Richard Simon & Ronald Brownstein, *A Memorial for Wellstone Draws 20,000: Political Colleagues and ordinary citizens mourn the death of the Minnesota Senator and remember his fight for social justice*, L.A. TIMES, Oct. 30, 2002, at A9.

legislation that he felt might plunge women, children, veterans or the infirm into poverty.

Paul Wellstone was indefatigable in his pursuit of justice. In his final session of Congress, which began in January 2001, he authored 108 bills and amendments, more than the work of Senator Edward Kennedy (D-Mass), and Senator Trent Lott (R-Miss.) combined.³ His diligence in the Senate was matched only by his diligence at home in Minnesota. Known to many simply as “Paul,” he served as Minnesota’s most accessible senator, with a commitment to grassroots, face-to-face politics. Paul often spoke with constituents for hours on issues of healthcare, unemployment, and education.

Clearly, there will never be another leader like Paul Wellstone. He was a liberal’s liberal, an activist’s activist, and a populist’s populist. In the face of the enormous loss of Senator Paul Wellstone, those who admired him—and those who didn’t—may find some solace in reading his anecdotally powerful, richly profound work, *The Conscience of a Liberal: Reclaiming the Compassionate Agenda*.

Throughout *The Conscience of a Liberal*, Wellstone’s prose is clear and straightforward. He used a refreshingly simple formula to lay out his visions for a better world. The book is divided into nine chapters, each with challenging, radicalizing titles like, “If We Are Not for Our Children, Who Are We For?” and “Democracy for the Few.”

The book begins with the story of Wellstone’s unlikely journey from Carleton College professor to U.S. Senator, and is replete with political war stories and the trademark Wellstone humor. Wellstone wrote of a woman who exclaimed to him at the victory party in 1990, “[y]ou’re the first person I voted for in years who actually won!” to which Wellstone responded, “I’m the first person I’ve voted for in years who actually won!”⁴

Perhaps the most moving portions of *The Conscience of a Liberal* are the sections in which Wellstone discusses how his family and his upbringing shaped his political philosophy. Wellstone’s mother, Minnie, was a cafeteria worker in his junior high in Arlington, Virginia. Paul acknowledged that as a young child, he was

3. Tom Webb, *Wellstone is Still “The Little Guy” After 12 Years in Senate*, ST. PAUL PIONEER PRESS, July 28, 2002, at A1.

4. SENATOR PAUL WELLSTONE, *THE CONSCIENCE OF A LIBERAL: RECLAIMING THE COMPASSIONATE AGENDA* 28 (2001) (hereinafter WELLSTONE).

embarrassed by his mother, and did not want his friends to know that his mother was serving school lunches. By the time Paul got to high school, however, he was proud of his mother, and came to cherish her hard work and efforts to take care of Paul and his brother. Until his death, Paul insisted on meeting food service workers at every school he visited. He was able to honor Minnie in that small, but important way.⁵

Wellstone's father, Leon was a Russian immigrant, who Paul admitted, "just didn't fit in" to their community. As Paul grew, he treasured his father and absorbed Leon's wisdom and knowledge. Paul credited his father with imbuing him with a sense of the importance of personal independence, human rights, the First Amendment and a love of country.⁶

Paul used the stories of his parents to illustrate the very painful lessons that he and his family learned about the failure of the U.S. health care system to provide and deliver affordable and humane treatment to American citizens.⁷ When both of his parents were diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, Paul moved them to Northfield, Minnesota, so he and his wife Sheila could take care of them without placing them in a nursing home.

The heartbreaking story of struggling to care for Leon and Minnie in their old age is a powerful backdrop for Paul's discussion of the need for health care reform. Speaking from his own painful experience, Paul advocated for a wide range of support services at the community level, including regular nurse visits and skilled home health care. He advocated for better wages and decent benefits for nursing home workers. He advocated for better treatment of our most vulnerable citizens: the elderly who are infirm and struggling with illness, as well as the children who are in the dawn of life.⁸

Paul also recounted meetings with constituents who shared his struggle with securing health care for their loved ones. One constituent tearfully told Wellstone that she had to fight with the insurance company every day to get proper treatment for her cancer-ridden husband. Paul knew that as a nation we must do better:

No American who is struggling with an illness or has a

5. *Id.* at 30.

6. *Id.* at 31.

7. *Id.*

8. *Id.* at 34.

loved one who is ill should have to go through this, to worry about whether or not they can afford health care. There should be affordable, dignified, and humane health care for every American citizen.⁹

Similarly, Paul used his own family's struggles with mental illness as a vehicle for highlighting the need for better treatment, better facilities, and the end of discrimination against those who suffer from mental illness. In the chapter entitled "A Radicalizing Experience," Paul told of his older brother's struggle with mental illness since the age of eighteen. He told of his brother's institutionalization at the Virginia State Mental Institution, which he referred to as a "snake pit." He told of patients in institutional uniforms, decrepit buildings, and a depressing environment. Paul knew, even at age eleven, that this was an injustice.¹⁰

It was with the knowledge of his only brother's struggle that Wellstone forged an unlikely partnership with conservative Republican Senator Pete Domenici. Domenici's daughter struggles with mental illness. Thus, the liberal Democrat and conservative Republican chose to work together to end discrimination in health care coverage. Through this partnership, Domenici and Wellstone were able to prohibit insurance companies and managed care plans from arbitrarily restricting health care coverage for the mentally ill.¹¹

As a father and grandfather, Paul also used his experience with his children and grandchildren as the setting to call for more investment in the lives of the nation's children. He called for a continued funding for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), a fully funded Head Start program, increased funding to child care programs, and better wages and training for those who work in child care development.¹² But mostly, he called for a world of possibilities to be open to every child, like his first granddaughter:

"When my first grandchild, Cari Hannah, was born nine years ago, I grasped at age forty-six the core value that informs my liberal politics. I held her in my hands, and I knew what I hoped: that every infant I hold or you hold will have the same chance to reach his or her full

9. WELLSTONE, *supra* note 4, at 35.

10. *Id.* at 56.

11. *Id.* at 63-64.

12. *Id.* at 74-75.

potential.”¹³

The Conscience of a Liberal also includes candid discussions about mistakes that Senator Wellstone believed that he made during his career. Among what he called several “rookie mistakes” was Paul’s decision to go to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial to speak out against the Persian Gulf War.¹⁴ In an effort to dramatize the dangers of military action, Paul admitted that he “deeply hurt . . . all of the veterans’ community.”¹⁵

Paul also expressed some regret about his vote for the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA). Under DOMA, no state is required to recognize same-sex marriages, even if the marriage occurred in another state that permitted such unions. At the time, Wellstone felt that the implications of the legislation were too far-reaching. Later however, Wellstone harbored lingering doubts about his decision:

When Sheila and I attended a Minnesota memorial service for Mathew Shepard, I thought to myself, “Have I taken a position that contributed to a climate of hatred?” Of course, I never believed this when I voted for DOMA. But if you deny people who are in a stable, loving relationship the right to marry, do you deny them their humanity? I still wonder if I did the right thing.¹⁶

In a world of polished politicians and glossy gladhanders, Paul’s frankness is refreshing. He was not afraid to let the world see his faults, and imperfections. A typical professor-turned-Senator-turned-author could retreat into a world of ivy-towered esoterica, but not Senator Wellstone. His prose was always real, and his wit undeniably human.

But the humor, the humanity and the persistence of *The Conscience of a Liberal* cannot dissuade the congenital lump in one’s throat that lingers while reading Wellstone’s words. Paul Wellstone was a tireless fighter, but he was also an optimistic visionary. He dared to dream of a world of social and economic equality; of people inspired by their dreams and actively committed to achieving equal opportunity for all Americans. At times, one feels something almost akin to physical pain when reading this book. It is devastating to consider all of the work Senator Wellstone had left

13. *Id.* at x-xi.

14. WELLSTONE, *supra* note 4, at 159.

15. *Id.* at 160.

16. *Id.* at 134.

to do, and how much he could have accomplished on behalf of Minnesota, and the nation.

The Conscience of a Liberal is a beautiful legacy left for Paul Wellstone's admirers. Wellstone accomplished great things during his all-too-brief lifetime, but he left much work unfinished. Now his constituency must do the finishing.

In *The Conscience of a Liberal*, Paul Wellstone left behind great challenges to be attained and great tasks to be completed. He challenged his readers to develop inspirational public policy: "[a] winning politics is a politics of values that appeals to the best in people, that enables citizens to dream again to make a better America."¹⁷ He challenged his readers to develop empowering, efficient and effective grassroots organizing, and to build "local victories into strong national and international presence that can crucially define the quality of life."¹⁸ He challenged his readers to revitalize electoral politics, and "introduce fresh perspectives into the political dialogue of our country"¹⁹

Most importantly however, Paul Wellstone challenged his readers to imagine a better world, and he challenged them to use politics to achieve that goal—not as a part of an intellectual elite, but as a part of a face-to-face, nationwide dialogue about social change. He advocated for creative, inspired and impassioned change, rooted in progressive activism, and he asked his constituency to do the same when he wrote: "Politics is what we create by what we do, what we hope for, and what we dare to imagine."²⁰

17. *Id.* at 208.

18. *Id.* at 213.

19. *Id.* at 215.

20. WELLSTONE, *supra* note 4, at *xiii*.