

Liberal in a conservative age: In memory of Paul Wellstone

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Though his opponents tagged him as “embarrassingly liberal” and outside mainstream politics, Paul Wellstone won two terms as a U.S. senator, and he had a strong chance of winning a third term when he was killed in a plane crash while campaigning in Minnesota on October 24.

Wellstone was an unembarrassed, unapologetic liberal in an era when the term has been used as if it were an epithet. His attitude was: if trying to raise the minimum wage, increase government support for child care and education, provide medical care and health care insurance to those without it and require insurance companies to cover mental illness on a par with physical illness—if those efforts made him a liberal, then so be it. He often noted that businesses, banks, insurance firms, pharmaceutical companies and tobacco producers were already well represented in Washington; he was there to represent the laid-off worker, the single mother who needed child care, and the person who couldn’t afford medical insurance.

He probably won’t be remembered for his legislative accomplishments. He would quickly admit that he was mostly forced to play defense in the Senate—trying to block cuts in programs rather than expand or implement them.

He might well be remembered for his courage, his willingness to be on the losing end of a 99-1 vote. He was the only senator up for reelection this year who voted against the bill authorizing military force against Iraq. Voting with President Bush was the politically shrewd thing to do, but he voted his conscience.

He should be remembered for his love of debating public policy, for believing that his so-called liberal causes made sense—and that others could be persuaded to recognize that. In his memoir *The Conscience of a Liberal* he recalls a meeting he had early in his career in the Senate, soon after President Clinton had called for a national health care program. Wellstone was eager to argue for a “single-payer” insurance plan. This plan made the most sense, he thought, since it would provide

comprehensive coverage to all and save money by eliminating the middleman role of the insurance industry. He was dismayed when Ted Kennedy, the Senate's expert on health care reform, told him: "I agree this plan is the best proposal. But it does not have a chance. The insurance industry hates it, and it will go nowhere."

Wellstone never got used to the fact that the terms of political debate are defined by the well-funded lobbyists. He remained eager to argue the merits of his causes, and his political opponents had to respect his commitment and integrity. When columnist Fred Barnes, no fan of Wellstone's politics, went to Minnesota to write about the senator, he was surprised to find that Wellstone was not defensive but welcomed the chance to discuss issues with him. "My impression," Barnes wrote (*Wall Street Journal*, October 28), "was he regarded conservatives not as enemies but as potential converts."

There's a political style to be remembered, and emulated.