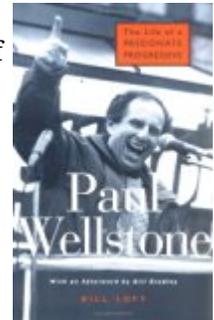


Bill Lofy. *Paul Wellstone: The Life of a Passionate Progressive.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005. xiii + 167 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-472-03119-1.



Reviewed by Jason Stahl

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How does a reviewer evaluate a hagiography that he or she is in agreement with entirely? Such is the question which plagues this reviewer as I set out to evaluate Bill Lofy's *Paul Wellstone: The Life of a Passionate Progressive*. I use the word "hagiography" only to make a point about my particular predicament, not to detract from what is a fine book and an excellent primer for those interested in learning about the life and politics of the late Senator from Minnesota. While Lofy's take on Wellstone is certainly that of an admirer (hardly surprising for a former Wellstone staffer and current communications director for the activist organization "Wellstone Action") this bias does not overwhelm the author's ability to evaluate his subject's life and politics objectively.

Towards this end, let me state all my biases up front. As I said in the previous paragraph, I started reading this book knowing I would largely agree with its basic premises. I knew this would be the case not only because of my own personal political orientation, but also because of my own personal attachments to Paul Wellstone (through whom, I should say, I never once met or spoke

with Lofy). Like the author, I too felt "a deep compulsion to work for Wellstone" (p. 8). This compulsion led me to take a position as an unpaid intern on Wellstone's final 2002 Senate campaign. This compulsion continued after Wellstone's death as I became involved in other political projects and attended one of the first "Camp Wellstones"--the activist training program now put on by Wellstone Action. The connection I felt--and still feel--to Paul is deep and hard to put into words. I hope all of this does not overwhelm my ability to evaluate Lofy's book with a clear eye, but that will be for my readers to decide.

Despite its short length, Lofy's *Paul Wellstone* is really two books in one. It is, first and foremost, a fairly conventional biography of a very unconventional U.S. Senator. Secondly, embedded within Lofy's biography is a superb understanding and articulation of "The Wellstone Way"--that is, Paul Wellstone's successful formula for liberal/left political success in the United States. This second part is by far the book's most important contribution and, as such, will be the primary focus of this review. Lofy's understanding of Wellstone's politi-

cal success is sharp and incisive, and is a superb addition to the now growing body of literature regarding the future of the Democratic Party.

Before moving on to Lofy's articulation of "The Wellstone Way," a few words are necessary regarding the strictly biographical portions of the book. For those familiar with Wellstone's life both before and during his time as a Senator, Lofy's volume adds only a small amount of new information to a familiar narrative. Wellstone's developing relationship with his father, his rise from juvenile delinquency to sports stardom and academic success, the turbulent years his family went through as Wellstone's brother was diagnosed with mental illness, his years as an activist professor at Carleton College, the ups and downs of his years as a Senator from Minnesota, and his tragic death, will all be well known to those familiar with Wellstone's life.[1]

There are, however, places where Lofy is able to add a bit more texture to the narrative of Wellstone's life in large measure because of his access to heretofore inaccessible sources. Lofy's access to Wellstone's personal papers—including the writings of Wellstone's father and an unpublished version of Wellstone's autobiography—are combined with some unpublished interviews, internal campaign documents, media accounts, and published interviews to add new detail to Wellstone's life story. Lofy's close relationship with Wellstone's family, as well as his five years of working for Wellstone in various capacities, were an obvious asset for the book and give the biographical narrative an interesting personal depth, while also revealing details which even those most familiar with Wellstone might not be aware of. Thus, this is an excellent place to start a primer into the life of the man.

The much more important element of this book, however, is the way in which Lofy uses Wellstone's life experiences to show how the Senator arrived at his particular brand of successful liberal politics—often known as "The Wellstone

Way." Because of this second element, Lofy's *Paul Wellstone* is an important addition to the ever-growing literature regarding the problems of the Democratic Party. This lively conversation is emanating from a myriad of sources—popular books like Lofy's, liberal bloggers, liberal pundits, and even some academics.[2] Even though Lofy himself does not directly engage this literature in his book, he nevertheless makes a passionate case for Wellstone's prescription for what ails the Democratic Party with which these writers will be forced to engage.

The Wellstone Way, as the senator himself often said, contains "three critical ingredients" which seek to bring about "democratic renewal and progressive change in America: good public policy, grassroots organizing and electoral politics" (pp. 99-100). Lofy correctly notes that this is hardly a radical idea. Nevertheless, it was "a significant departure from the conventional wisdom of political strategists and community organizers. Political strategists often eschew grassroots organizing and focus instead on message and media tactics, while community activists frequently dismiss electoral and legislative politics as an ineffective way to build a broad-based social movement" (p. 99). Even Wellstone himself, in his early years as a grassroots organizer and college professor, agreed with the latter, arguing "that running for office was 'a waste of time'" (p. 39). This changed as Wellstone became more and more involved in Democratic electoral politics and used his experience as a community organizer to win his senatorial campaigns in 1990 and 1996.

Beyond the trinity of the Wellstone Way, however, Lofy correctly identifies a fourth, more personal, component necessary for a winning progressive politics. Drawing from the well-known Max Weber essay, "Politics as a Vocation" (1918), Lofy argues that a principled "vocational politician" is necessary if progressives are to be successful in national electoral politics. A vocational politician (as opposed to a career politician) is a

leader "driven by high ideals but [who] does not merely stand on the mountaintop proclaiming this vision. Those who have a true political calling also demand results" (p. 9). Lofy makes a convincing case that Wellstone was such a politician. The author argues that Wellstone was able to achieve this balance of principles and results because he personalized the issues, he was relentless in pushing them, he looked for unlikely allies, and he was an advocate for those who had none (pp. 98-99).

It is this last element that is repeatedly identified by Lofy as Wellstone's key political principle. Wellstone was a relentless proponent of a strident populist platform which championed the underdogs of American life against those who could wield power over them--a sharp departure from the centrist politics advocated by other national Democrats at the same time. Ultimately, Wellstone believed that if he adhered to these populist principles, he could win elections--even garnering the votes of those who disagreed with him, but who liked that he stood for what he believed. Two winning elections prove that this strategy worked.

In some sense this was the "happy warrior" populism of another Minnesota Senator--Hubert H. Humphrey. Wellstone did, of course, possess an infectious jubilancy. But, as Lofy correctly notes, Wellstone's populism was one which was also filled with indignation at those forces and institutions in American society which oppressed vast segments of the population. Through his work as a grassroots organizer, Wellstone knew that the downtrodden--be they welfare mothers, outsourced workers, or family farmers--felt this indignation as well. Thus, Wellstone's populism was never afraid to define the enemy, to create conflict with those enemies and their political advocates, and to situate societal relationships within imbalanced dynamics of power.[3]

Wellstone conveyed this populism through infectious oratory--a point often raised by Lofy throughout the text. But, this sort of oratory brings up questions which could have been more

fully addressed. Namely, to what extent was Wellstone's effectiveness personal? In other words, could Wellstone make his strident liberal/populist/progressive message work simply because of his charismatic oratory and charisma? Additionally, throughout the text, Lofy alludes to Wellstone's own conservatism in his personal life. We learn that Wellstone married at nineteen and started a large family soon after, that he never tried marijuana, that he gave up drinking after a bad experience with alcohol in high school, and that he learned from his parents that his Jewish "faith was necessarily connected to a struggle for justice" (p. 15). In short, Wellstone's politics were the sixties without the counterculture. So, the question which also needs to be asked is to what extent did this conservatism in his own life allow him to sell a strident liberal populism to the public at large? One cannot fault Lofy for not fully addressing these questions, as they are inherently subjective. However, these questions need to be grappled with by those looking to use the Wellstone model to reinvigorate the liberal/left in the United States.

In the end, however, I am not sure any of what I have just written gets at the importance of Paul Wellstone. Set aside the Wellstone Way, the populist messaging, and Wellstone's character and charisma. At base, Wellstone had an uncanny ability to recognize essential truths about the American electorate which so often go unnoticed among many on the American liberal/left. Wellstone understood that the primary barrier to progressive change in the United States is the American conception of "the political." So often, as Wellstone knew all too well, Americans are conditioned to see problems--poverty, unemployment, lack of health care--as ones which are not political in nature. Or, if they do see these problems as political, they doubt that politicians have the will to address them. This is hardly surprising after four decades of New Right conservatism and Clintonian neoliberalism.

The beauty of Paul Wellstone was that he knew that this view of "the political" truly needed to be addressed and corrected. Wellstone believed that he had to rehabilitate the very idea of the political—especially at the national level. I think Lofy recognizes this, which is why he ends his book arguing that "the primary lesson that Wellstone's life held for others is the imperative of finding joy in politics. Wellstone refused to crumble in the face of adversity, and he never drifted in his political views. He simply loved politics" (p. 132). And, I would add, he sought to make this love infectious.

Notes

[1]. Works on Wellstone's life include Pamela Colby's film *Wellstone!* (St. Paul: Carry It Forward Productions, 2004). Also see Dennis J. McGrath and Dane Smith, *Professor Wellstone Goes to Washington: The Inside Story of a Grassroots U.S. Senate Campaign* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); Wellstone Action, *Politics the Wellstone Way: How to Elect Progressive Candidates and Win on Issues* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Paul Wellstone, *How the Rural Poor Got Power: Narrative of a Grass Roots Organizer* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1978); and Paul Wellstone, *The Conscience of a Liberal: Reclaiming the Compassionate Agenda* (New York: Random House, 2001).

[2]. Given the number of left-of-center journals, blogs and books on this topic, it is impossible to be exhaustive. A few gaining the most traction follow. Jerome Armstrong and Markos Moulitsas Zuniga, *Crashing the Gate: Netroots, Grassroots, and the Rise of People-Powered Politics* (White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 2006); John B. Judis and Ruy Teixeira, *The Emerging Democratic Majority* (New York: Scribner, 2002); Rick Perlstein, *The Stock Ticker and the Superjumbo: How the Democrats Can Once Again Become America's Dominant Political Party* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2005); David Sirota, *Hostile Takeover: How Big*

Money and Corruption Conquered Our Government--And How We Take It Back (New York: Random House, 2006); and Michael Tomasky, "Party in Search of a Notion," *American Prospect*, May 3, 2006.

[3]. Increasingly, various forms of populist messaging have become ascendant among many left-of-center writers and Democratic politicians. However, much of the populism which is being advocated is not the confrontational, definitional populism which Wellstone practiced. Representative of the non-Wellstone populism is Michael Tomasky's much-discussed essay, "Party in Search of a Notion," in which Tomasky advocates that Democrats embrace the "Common Good" as their central message. However, as Nathan Newman and others have pointed out, such a message does no good if there is no "naming of who is undermining that common good"—a point not addressed by Tomasky. As Newman suggests, if Democratic populists do not name the enemy, Republican populists certainly will—"lazy welfare moms, illegal aliens, liberal media elites," etc. Newman ends by arguing that most Democrats are too afraid to name the enemy because they get too much money from the corporate monied interests which need to be named as the enemy of the common good. This problem was not an issue for Wellstone as he relied on small dollar donations from his grassroots network and liked to joke that the "Enrons of the world never even tried to offer him money." Michael Tomasky, "Party in Search of a Notion," *American Prospect*, May 3, 2006; Nathan Newman, "Who is the Enemy?," *TPM Cafe*, May 3, 2006, <<http://www.tpmcafe.com/node/29483>> (Accessed August 23, 2006).

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