



≡ POLITICAL HISTORY

Rudy Boschwitz (left), Al Quie (middle), Dave Durenberger (right) share a celebratory moment in 1978.

FROM John Phelan MIRACLE TO MASSACRE

How Minnesota returned to a two-party state.

Miracle

The outlook was bleak for the Republicans arriving at St. Cloud State University in November 1975 for their state party convention.

The DFL governor, Wendell Anderson, had been elected five years earlier and pushed through massive hikes in income, sales, and excise taxes designed to shift the burden of education funding from local property taxes. Dubbed the “Minnesota Miracle,” this proved popular with Minnesotans. In November 1972, as the state backed a Republican presidential candidate for the last time, it also, for the first time, handed the DFL a “trifecta” of the

governor's mansion and both state houses. The Democrats took this as a mandate to pass what one journalist called "a torrent of environmental, labor and consumer legislation that had been bottled up for years." In 1974, just three months after Pres. Richard Nixon's resignation, Anderson won every county in Minnesota and the DFL picked up 26 House seats for a majority of 103 to 31. The *St. Paul Dispatch* wrote, "Never have Republicans been thrown out in such numbers in Minnesota." "I think the Republicans have had it," William Sumner wrote in the *Dispatch*, "What [they] have developed through these thumps is not learning but brain damage."

The Republican Party had "lost everything but our underwear," 3rd District Rep. Bill Frenzel noted. He had hard words at the convention:

I did not come here to point the accusing finger at anybody except all of us. Everybody is in it. We are all guilty of the failures. I came again to say, "We have got to change, or we will keep on losing." After a while groups develop a sort of loser's syndrome. They don't really like losing, but they don't like winning enough to change their ways. It happens in corporations, partnerships, neighborhood groups, sewing circles, trade associations, and political parties. Let's not let our state party accept the role of loser willingly.

Most attendees would have agreed. But *what* was causing it to lose? And into what did the Republicans need to change in order to win? That is where the two wings of Minnesota's Republican Party disagreed.

Progressives, conservatives, and Independent-Republicans

When the Republican Party in Minnesota was founded in 1855, its platform called for, among other things, the abolition of slavery and the "enactment and enforcement of a Prohibitory Liquor Law." The party intended to use the power of government to effect social change, while it was the Democrats who sought to "conserve" the existing order — slavery and all. In a real sense, the Republicans were Minnesota's first progressives.

Towards the end of the 19th century, Republicans and Democrats battled for the progressive political ground. Franklin Roosevelt seized it decisively for the Democrats in the 1930s, but many Republicans, including some in Minnesota, were unwilling to concede. Gov. Harold Stassen hated communism, but so did Hubert Humphrey, and he was a little less willing, progressive Republican Dave Durenberger wrote decades later, "to employ government at all levels to tackle problems."

While government was limited there was little need for a "small government" movement. But as progressives grew government through the first two-thirds of the 20th century, such a movement emerged: "conservative," because it sought to return government to what, it claimed, was its proper constitutional domain.

In 1964, Barry Goldwater, who had blasted Eisenhower's Republican administration as "a dime store New Deal," won the Republican nomination promising "a choice, not an echo." He lost in a landslide but energized the conservative movement. A growing number of Republicans were no longer interested in accommodating the New Deal, Fair Deal, or Great Society; they wanted to roll them back. "The great challenge [today] is to keep alive the strength and spirit of the individual human being," a young Minnesota conservative, Vin Weber, explained. "People want to be heard... They want to be guaranteed that higher authorities won't mess up their lives."

The Supreme Court's 1973 decision in *Roe v. Wade* threw another ingredient into this volatile political brew. Abortion became a political issue, but it cut across party lines. In 1971, a Republican state senator, George Pillsbury, led an effort to ease abortion restrictions and many suburban Republican women agreed. When the state party adopted a platform in 1974 opposing the Equal Rights Amendment and abortion, many progressive candidates disavowed it and one of the founders of the GOP Women for Political Effectiveness, Emily Anne Tuttle, joined the DFL. Conservative Democrats, on the other

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hand, came the other way.

Progressives, like Frenzel, warned the party's central committee of the "survival of the most enthusiastic," and predicted that the party would keep losing if it continued to be led by its "hard core." "We are going to have to do something that we talk about a lot but don't do very often," defeated Secretary of State Arlen Erdahl said. "That is to include people in the party who we don't agree with." But when new people did enter the tent, they were not always welcome. Decades later, Durenberger complained that "Democrats who were uncomfortable with their party's deepening commitment to civil rights and to a woman's right to an abortion drifted into the Republican fold."

Conservatives, on the other hand, thought the progressives were holding the party back. In 1977, Pat Pariseau, formerly one of those conservative DFLers, stunned the party's establishment by winning the 1st District chair, a position traditionally held by a progressive. "We had to change things in the party," she said, "and the only way to do that was to get some leadership positions."

The only issue resolved in St. Cloud was a party name change to

Independent-Republicans (IRs). This would, new chair Chuck Slocum said, “not only build the two-party system in Minnesota, but more accurately reflect the voter base of the present Republican Party.” The *Star Tribune* dismissed this attempt “to fuzz up [the] party’s name.” Indeed, its adoption brought no immediate electoral dividend. In 1976, the DFL extended its Senate majority to 49-18. “Let’s face it. We got clobbered,” Slocum admitted. “There are no two ways about it. Minnesota is a DFL state.”

Democratic divisions

The same month that Republicans gathered in St. Cloud, the *Star Tribune*’s Steve Alnes wrote, “I have complete faith in the fallibility of human institutions and am therefore certain that someplace along the road the DFL will blow it or at least mess it up badly enough to give the

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Republicans new breath.” They did.

Sen. Walter Mondale’s election as vice president in 1976 left his senate seat open. Anderson, eager to graduate to the national stage, promptly resigned from the governorship with the understanding that Lt. Gov. Rudy Perpich, now governor, would appoint him to fill the vacancy — which he did. The unpopularity of this move was



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Gov. Rudy Perpich signs autographs in the Lowry Hill East neighborhood of Minneapolis, 1977.

compounded when, following Sen. Hubert Humphrey’s death in January 1978, Perpich appointed Humphrey’s widow to complete his term. This was common practice, as was Muriel Humphrey’s decision not to run for re-election. But with both Senate seats, the governorship, and the lieutenant governorship held by unelected appointees, Minnesotans approached 1978’s elections with a bitter taste in their mouths.

Now there were electoral dividends to be had. In a special election to the Congressional 7th District in February 1977, Arlan Stangeland won for the IRs. In seven special elections necessitated by the DFL’s ongoing musical chairs in 1977 and 1978, five IRs — Gaylin Den Ouden, Tony Onnen, Dee Knaak, Elton Redalen, and David Rued — won. Looking ahead to the midterms, Slocum wrote, “The party is coming back to life.” This view was not universal. One House DFL veteran said: “Well, yeah, we lost a couple of elections, but we have so many seats now that the loss of a few won’t matter.”

Then came another ingredient into

the DFL’s own increasingly volatile political brew. Its labor and liberal elements were increasingly at odds. In 1977 and 1978, two DFL state representatives, Al Wieser (La Crescent) and Glen Sherwood (Pine River), switched to the IRs. “Both men stated publicly that they philosophically belonged in the more conservative caucus,” Rod Searle, a House IR, wrote. “They also felt that the IR Party more

accurately reflected the goals of their constituents.” Don Fraser, a leading Congressional liberal representing Minnesota’s 5th District, was the favorite to take Humphrey’s old seat, but he reckoned without Humphrey’s old friend, businessman Bob Short. Fraser had supported legislation banning motorboats and snowmobiles from the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, enraging residents in that DFL stronghold. Short primaried Fraser and won — barely — thanks to votes from the Iron Range. Short would run to the right of everybody in the general election, pledging to cut federal spending by \$100 billion and amend the Constitution to prohibit abortion.

Massacre

The mood at the IR’s 1978 convention in Minneapolis was very different from that in St. Cloud three years earlier. “We really have a chance this year,” said delegate Marsie Leier. “Let’s not blow it.”

As an exercise in not blowing it, the convention succeeded. With little fuss, Al Quie, a 20-year veteran of the House, was nominated to take on Perpich; Rudy Boschwitz, a prominent businessman and Republican National Committeeman, would run against

Anderson; and Durenberger would challenge Short. This “moderate” slate was well advised in a state where, even now, the DFL held a 20 percentage point advantage in preference over the IRs. Even the *Minneapolis Tribune* was impressed: “Minnesota’s Independent-



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Republicans clearly have produced their strongest team in years for top state political offices.”

As the economy sputtered through the 1970s and inflation pushed people into higher tax brackets, support for high taxes and government spending waned. Nationally, Goldwater’s heir, Ronald Reagan, was in the ascendant, and Jack Kemp and William Roth had a bill to cut federal income taxes by one-third. Quie’s polling indicated that “nothing was overwhelmingly important to voters except one thing: They thought taxes were too high,” and he declared his race “a referendum on the tax issue.”

The *Tribune* wrote, “The party has a new spirit, a new-found unity, a new sense of confidence. And all that is to the good for a vigorous two-party system needs a healthy Republican Party.” Two things accounted for this unity and confidence.

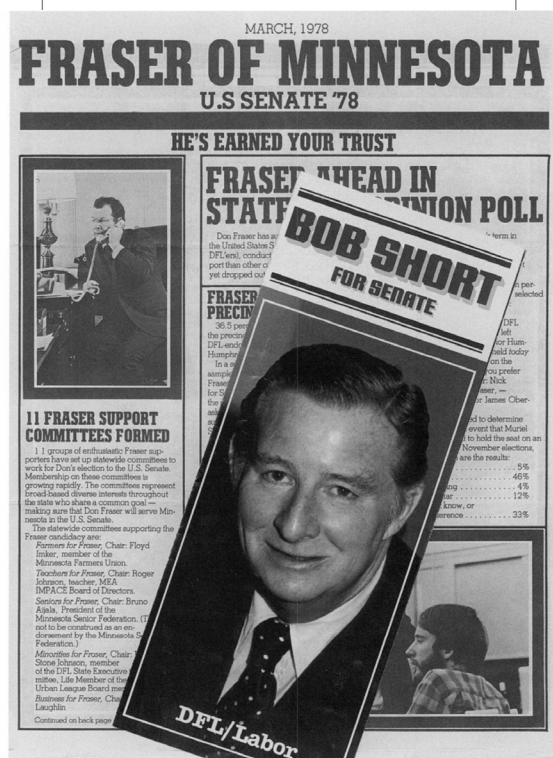
The first was the weariness of losing and the related prospect of success; these were great political solvents.

The second was the fact that, in the 1970s, Minnesota’s government grew so rapidly that even a progressive Republican could, in good conscience, campaign for smaller government. Durenberger, sounding a conservative note, said that Minnesotans “don’t trust government to spend their money the way they would spend it themselves,” and again, “[Fraser] believes government can do more for you than you can do for yourself.” Indeed, many DFLers felt the same way. “Their issue, which historically has been taxes, is kind of a national issue at this time,” DFL chairman Ulrich Scott noted. “There’s a conservative mood and it hurts.” “During the election campaign,” one IR ad proclaimed:

...DFL legislators always promise to cut taxes. But what happens when they get into office? They vote for new tax increases and raise state spending. Here are a few examples. In the last five years they increased state spending from

\$3.6 billion to \$6.5 billion. In the last four years, they have added 138 people to the legislative staff, and just last year they voted to double their own salaries. If that isn’t bad enough, while the DFL was feathering its own nest they hit senior citizens with a tax on pensions and increased overall taxes 40 percent faster than income.

...The only way to stop runaway spending and taxation is to elect an Independent-Republican legislature.



Competing campaign material from Fraser and Short in the 1978 DFL primary for the U.S. Senate.

They also hit the DFL for the round of appointments, erecting billboards at Halloween that read: “The DFL is going to face something scary — an election.”

Ample scope for blowing it remained. An October 1 poll showed Perpich leading Quie by 51 percent to 42 and Short up 46 to 39 on Durenberger. Only Boschwitz led his race, 48 to 44 percent. But the IRs held steady. Quie struck voters as “just an honest, stoic Norwegian dairy farmer,” Betty Wilson wrote in the *Minneapolis*

Star, with a campaign “about as exciting as watching an automobile rust.” Perpich’s lead had shrunk to within four points the weekend before the election, Boschwitz and Anderson were tied, and Durenberger had surged to a 14-point lead over Short. The *Minneapolis Tribune*’s “Minnesota Poll,” published on the eve of the election, still had Perpich up by four points.

On the night of November 7, 1978, the most optimistic IR, Jerry Knickerbocker, thought they might pick up 25 House seats. When it was all over, they picked up 32 for a 67-67 tie. “[W]e couldn’t believe the actual numbers when they started to come in,” IR House Minority Leader Henry Savelkoul said, adding, “We won seats that I didn’t think we had a chance to win.” Furthermore, Quie, Boschwitz, and Durenberger all won. It was the first time the party had held all three offices since 1948.

“Minnesota is [a] two-party state again,” the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* wrote. “The IR seemed all but dead. Now it has been revived dramatically.” Another commentator wrote that a year earlier, “some observers wondered whether Minnesota was approaching the status of a modified one-party state. After all, the DFL held all state elective offices and a majority in both state houses. The 1978 election dramatically changed that picture.”

In November 1978, the IRs had, no doubt, been greatly helped by external factors; general weariness with DFL rule, divisions, a series of gross political errors in that party, and a generally conservative mood in the country. But Marsie Leier was right to worry about the party blowing it. The progressive and conservative wings of Minnesota’s Republican Party realized they couldn’t win without each other and presented a unified, competent front. And, when the campaign came, they played their hand well. Political tides can turn quickly: It was just seven years from the Minnesota DFL’s “miracle” to its “massacre.” ★

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