

The death of US Senator Paul Wellstone: accident or murder?

The Editorial Board
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There is a serious question about the sudden death of Democratic Senator Paul Wellstone that has no doubt occurred to many people: was Wellstone the victim of a political assassination?

It is possible that there will emerge a credible explanation of the October 25 plane crash that killed Wellstone, his wife Sheila, daughter Marcia, and five others near Eveleth, Minnesota. Initial reports, however, are disturbing. None of the typical causes of a small plane accident—engine failure, icing, pilot error—appear to be involved.

The plane, a twin-engine Beechcraft King Air A100, was apparently in good condition when it hit the ground and exploded into flames about two miles from the Eveleth-Virginia airport in the Minnesota iron range. The Beechcraft model has an excellent safety record, with only two fatal crashes—both in December 1997—in the past six years. Debris recovered from the crash site includes both the plane's engines, which suffered blade damage, suggesting that the engines were running when the plane crashed.

While weather conditions were less than ideal, with some ice and freezing rain, two smaller Beech Queen Air planes had landed at Eveleth without incident two hours before the crash, when temperatures were colder. Wellstone's plane was reportedly equipped with two separate de-icing mechanisms.

Visibility was limited but well above the minimum required—between two and two and a half miles. Although the approach to the airport was being made using instruments, the airport would have been in clear view of the pilot once he descended below the lowest cloud layer at about 700 feet.

The plane's two pilots were both experienced, with the senior man, Capt. Richard Conry, 55, having airline transport pilot certification, the top industry

qualification. Co-pilot Michael Guess, 30, was a certified commercial pilot. Wellstone was by all accounts a cautious flier, and there is no suggestion that the decision to fly that day was a reckless one.

The acting chairwoman of the National Transportation Safety Board, Carol Carmody, said there was a slight irregularity in the Eveleth airport's radio beacon, but it was not yet possible to say whether this contributed to the accident.

The plane's altimeter and “possibly one other gauge” have been recovered and sent to the NTSB lab in Washington for analysis, Carmody said. The plane was not required to have a cockpit voice recorder and was not equipped with one.

According to air traffic control records, the flight had proceeded without incident until its last moments. Wellstone's plane took off at 9:37 a.m. from Minneapolis-St. Paul, received permission to climb to 13,000 feet at 9:48 a.m., and received clearance to descend towards Eveleth at 10:01 a.m., at which time the pilot was told there was icing at the 9,000-11,000 foot level. The plane began its descent at 10:10 a.m., passed through the icing altitude without apparent difficulty, and at 10:18 a.m. was cleared for approach to the airport. A minute later, at 3,500 feet, the plane began to drift away from the runway. It was last sighted at 10:21 a.m., flying at 1,800 feet.

Carmody said that the impact area was 300 feet by 190 feet, with evidence of “extreme post-crash fire.” The plane apparently was headed south, away from the Eveleth runway, when it hit the ground. “The angle was steeper than would be expected in a normal stabilized standardized approach,” she said. Some press reports cited eyewitness accounts of a near-vertical plunge.

Under different political circumstances it might be possible to dismiss the Eveleth crash as a tragic

accident whose causes, even if they cannot be precisely determined, lie in the sphere of aircraft engineering and weather phenomena. But the death of Paul Wellstone takes place under conditions in which far too many strange things are happening in America.

Wellstone's death comes almost two years to the day after a similar plane crash killed another Democratic Senate hopeful locked in a tight election contest, Missouri Governor Mel Carnahan, on October 16, 2000. The American media duly noted the "eerie coincidence," as though it was a statistical oddity, rather than suggesting a pattern.

One might say, paraphrasing Oscar Wilde, that to lose one senator is a misfortune, but to lose two senators, the same way, is positively suspicious.

Last year two leading Senate Democrats, Majority Leader Tom Daschle and Judiciary Committee Chairman Patrick Leahy, were targeted for assassination with letters laced with anthrax. The federal Justice Department—headed by John Ashcroft, who lost to the deceased Mel Carnahan in the Missouri contest—has failed to apprehend the anthrax mailer.

Wellstone was in a hotly contested reelection campaign, but polls showed he was beginning to pull ahead of Republican nominee Norm Coleman, the former mayor of St. Paul, in the wake of the vote in the Senate to authorize President Bush to wage war against Iraq. The liberal Democrat was a well-publicized opponent of the war resolution, the only Senator in a tight race to vote against it.

More broadly, with the Senate controlled by the Democrats by a margin of 50-49, the loss of even a single seat could shift control to the Republicans. The immediate effect of Wellstone's death is to deprive the Democrats of a majority in the lame-duck session scheduled for late November.

Without exaggerating Wellstone's personal significance—he was a conventional bourgeois politician and no threat to the profit system—there are enormous financial stakes involved in control of the Senate. Republican control of the Senate would make it possible to push through new tax cuts for the wealthy and other perks for corporate America worth billions of dollars—more than enough of an incentive to commit murder.

The neo-fascist elements within and around the Republican Party have already demonstrated their

contempt for democracy, first in the protracted campaign of political destabilization against the Clinton administration, then with the theft of the 2000 presidential election. They are now preparing to slaughter tens of thousands of Iraqis in order to grab control of the second largest oil reserves in the world. To imagine that they would suffer moral qualms over a conveniently timed plane crash would be naïve in the extreme.

There is another curious and suggestive factor. Virtually every day the Bush administration issues warnings of terrorist attacks on trains, nuclear reactors, airports or government buildings, to keep the American people off balance and stampede the public into supporting the impending war against Iraq. Government officials are prepared to attribute virtually any act of violence—such as the Washington sniper shootings—to Al Qaeda. Yet there has been no suggestion that the destruction of Wellstone's plane was the result of terrorism. Perhaps in this case they prefer not to inquire too closely into the causes.

In the current climate of war, repression and right-wing provocation, it is perfectly reasonable to ask whether Wellstone was the victim of a political killing. No investigation deserving of the name can exclude sabotage as a possible cause of the plane crash. And yet, given the cowardice of the Democratic Party and the advanced putrefaction of American democracy, the official investigation will in all probability conclude that Wellstone's death was the result of an unfortunate but unexplainable mechanical malfunction.



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