

Wellstone cover-up: the beat goes on

Jim Fetzer (READER WEEKLY 13 March 2003, pp. 16-18)

In the case of the death of Paul Wellstone, the obvious possible hypotheses that have to be considered include bad weather conditions, pilot incompetence, or problems with the aircraft. As earlier columns in the *Reader* (28 November 2002, 2 January 2003, 9 January 2003, 16 January 2003, and 20 February 2003) explain, none of these more benign alternatives can stand up to critical examination. They provide "reasons" but not "good reasons", forcing consideration of other, more sinister possible explanations, such as the use of a small bomb, a gas canister, or an electromagnetic pulse weapon. In my opinion, this man was killed for political reasons using a EMP weapon. If I am right, it would be unsurprising if attempts were made--repeatedly and with fanfare--to resurrect explanations that have no more merit now than they had then and still cannot withstand scrutiny. Which is precisely what has been happening in this case.

A striking example appeared in the *Duluth News Tribune* (22 February 2003), when it ran a story entitled, "Pilot almost called off Wellstone's fatal flight". According to *St. Paul Pioneer Press* reporters Charles Laszewski, Rich Linsk, and Tom Webb, who wrote the story, Senator Wellstone was uneasy about the weather, and his pilot, Richard Conry, "had expressed grave doubts about the weather on that October morning--so much so that, when he got his first weather briefing from the Federal Aviation Administration at 7:15 AM, he wanted to cancel the flight." They quote him as saying, "You know what, I don't think I am going to take this flight." The weather, it appears, was troubling him.

Their story, based upon the first major report from the National Transportation Safety Board since the 25 October 2002 crash, is reinforced by Congressman Jim Oberstar (D-

MN), who said that he was more concerned than ever about icing and the flight crew's performance. "I'm always hesitant to be critical of a pilot on a fatal crash because he's not here to defend himself", Oberstar, the senior Democrat on the House Transportation Committee, remarked. "But you look at these pieces of information and it begins to raise questions about competence in flight management", thereby supporting that impression.

You would have to read 15 paragraphs to learn that, as the time for their scheduled 9:30 AM departure grew nearer, the weather had improved. In the 17th paragraph, we learn that, when Conry obtained an updated weather briefing around 8:30 AM, he received a new report that the wind at Eveleth was calm, visibility was three miles, light snow was falling, and the cloud ceiling was at 900 feet. "OK, that's what I need", Conry said. "At least, it's above my minimums." Also buried in the story is a report that other planes flying in the area earlier that morning had taken on some ice, "but nothing severe". So when you read the story carefully, you discover that weather wasn't a factor, after all.

Think about this, because it displays the power of newspaper reporters and editors to spin stories creating one impression or another. The headline, "Pilot almost called off Wellstone's fatal flight" implies (a) that the weather was bad, (b) that the weather was probably responsible for the crash, and (c) that if Conry had only been more prudent, the crash would not have occurred. But when you actually read the story, it becomes obvious (a) that the weather was not bad, (b) that it could not have been responsible for the crash, and (c) that the pilot was very prudent, only proceeding when he had been reassured that the weather was fine. The impression created was the opposite of what the facts revealed! Read the story if you think I am making any of this up.

The subtitle, which maintains, "Pilots who had flown with the senator's pilot raise

questions about incompetence", is nearly if not quite as bad, implying that there were serious questions about Conry's competence. No doubt, every pilot has had incidents that, if taken out of context, might create an impression of incompetence. In one instance, Conry allegedly turned to converse with a passenger and, when he turned back, the plane was inclined down 45° and dropping at 1,000 feet a minute. That may sound serious, but anyone who has ever flown in a small plane knows that changes in attitude are common and that the rate of descent only matters if it persists for a period of time. 1,000 feet a minute is only 16 feet per second, no big deal if it only lasted for a few seconds, as appears to have been the case here.

In another instance, a past copilot alleged that Conry had flipped the wrong switch and caused an attitude change while the plane was only 300 feet from the ground. He was uncertain what had happened and the copilot corrected the problem. Again, out of context, this sounds serious, but it was a minor incident that did not lead to a crash. Other pilots described him as careful and meticulous. He had some 5,200 hours of experience and the highest possible pilot's certification. Why would Paul Wellstone, who had displayed great concern about safety during airplane trips in the past and had frequently flown with Conry, have asked for him as his pilot? Another pilot has called Conry the most careful pilot with whom he has ever flown.

When you take these factors into account, these incidents, assuming that they are true, surely do not constitute a bill of particulars that indict his abilities as a pilot. Every one of us, as a driver of an automobile, for example, has had some incident or other where the passenger riding beside us became alarmed because we swerved too sharply, rolled through a stop sign, or didn't stop in time to avoid extending out

into an intersection. We would regard it as ridiculous if our driving competence were judged on the basis of a few isolated incidents. I can imagine my wife observing that, if I had allowed the car to continue to drift to the right, "Why, we might have run off the highway, into a ditch, and both been killed!" Yeah, right. But it didn't happen.

Violations of the requirement of total evidence by citing only evidence favorable to one side are fallacies of special pleading, which are often committed by used-car salesmen, defense attorneys, and politicians. They are not supposed to be employed by the NTSB or the government in reaching conclusions or in arriving at decisions affecting life and death or the well-being of this nation. The headline in this instance was a spectacular case of special pleading, creating a lop-sided impression of incompetence and weather as the probable causes of this crash. You have to read very carefully to discover that the weather was not a problem and that, contrary to its emphasis, the story actually tends to vindicate Conry as a careful pilot who would not fly if the weather was bad.

So the *Duluth News Tribune* (22 February 2003) followed the lead of the St. Paul paper by publishing an un rebutted case of special pleading citing some--no doubt, isolated--incidents reported by another pilot whose motives are unclear to be used to impugn the character and competence of a pilot who is dead and cannot defend himself, when the rest of the story, when it is read carefully, tends to vindicate him as *a prudent pilot who would not even fly if there were questions about the weather!*

He almost called off the flight because of concerns about the weather and only went ahead with the flight after those concerns had been allayed! A better headline might instead have read, "Wellstone pilot exercised prudent judgment evaluating weather"!

As though this gratuitous smear of a dead pilot were not enough, Obsertar told the

Minneapolis *Star Tribune* (22 February 2003) that, "It's going to take some time to read and digest this report", said the aviation expert, "but it may well turn out to be . . . a mixture of pilot error and weather conditions" that caused the crash. But, as a point of logic, it cannot be a combination of pilot error and weather conditions when the weather was just fine. Photographs taken within 10 miles and 20 minutes of the crash were published in the *Reader* (2 January 2003), pp. 16-18 and on its cover. The very report on which Oberstar was commenting indicates that Conry was only willing to take the flight after he had been assured that the weather was fine! These photos by Steve Filipovich, who happens to be a pilot himself, show lakes in the area clearly, where there is no simply no evidence even of rain, much less freezing rain or snow.

Moreover, other reports have come to me further substantiating that there were no problems with the weather. Another resident of the area wrote me to say that the weather was rainy and icy, which I knew to be untrue. But just to be sure, I called Gary Ulman, the assistant manager of the Eveleth- Virginia airport, who confirmed my impression that other flights had flown in and out of the airport earlier that day with no problems. He told me two UPS flights had landed and departed that morning, one at 8:30 AM, one earlier--planes with fuselage similar to the King Air A100 in which Wellstone was flying. These were both turbine airplanes known as "Queen Air"s and also made by Beechcraft. They had encountered no special problems with weather nor had Ulman himself when he took to the air to search for the site of the crash.

So there were no problems with the weather. And we now know that there were no problems with the aircraft itself. According to *The Washington Post* ("NTSB Report: Nothing Wrong with Wellstone Plane", 5 March 2003), the King Air A100 in which the Senator had been riding "had a clean maintenance history and underwent a detailed,

scheduled inspection two months before it crashed", federal documents showed. The plane had undergone minor repairs in late August 2002 for its deicing system and its flight controls, wiring, engines, and propellers and fuel system were also checked out. The report about deicing is especially interesting, of course, given the claims of icing, since it suggests that, even if the weather had included icing conditions, this plane should have been able to cope with it. Indeed, as Bill Wilkerson, who has been hiring pilots and leasing small planes for more than 30 years previously observed, this is not a plane that goes down in freezing rain (*Reader Weekly* 28 November 2002, pp. 18-19).

Even the *Duluth News Tribune* ("Wellstone plane had clean record", 6 March 2003, p. 4B) had this story right, which meant that neither the plane nor the weather could properly be blamed for the crash. Under these conditions, I speculated, anyone who wanted to continue a cover-up would probably want to return to the qualifications of the pilots. So I was not surprised when, the following day, the *Duluth News Tribune* ran another story ("Wellstone pilot made other errors", 7 March 2003, p. 3B) implying Conry had problems with controlling his aircraft. This news allegedly prompted Jeff Blodgett, the Senator's campaign manager, to react with alarm and to criticize Aviation Charter, the Eden Prairie, MN, company in charge of the flight. "Had Wellstone and his supporters known about the pilots flaws, 'huge alarm bells' would have gone off", Blodgett said.

But there was nothing new here that had not been reported already on 22 February.

Tim Roufs, a colleague of mine at UMD, noticed this redundancy "ISN'T IT VERY (!) CURIOUS", he wrote, "that one of the lead features on the Ch. 10 Denny Anderson news reports on the 6 and 10 PM news programs (the next major regularly-scheduled news broadcasts after this article appeared) that 'they' ran were bad-mouthing features on

past mistakes of the pilot, WHICH WERE 100% A REHASH OF STUFF ALREADY A MATTER OF PUBLIC RECORD AS 'NEWS' ITEMS THAT CONTAINED ABSOLUTELY NOTHING NEW?"

Indeed, he explained, they not only raised icing again (after that hypothesis had long been discounted) but failed to report the new news about the virtually perfect record of maintenance on the Wellstone plane. Roufs has (once again) hit the nail on the head.

Something strange is going on and there are other examples. The version of the story that appeared in the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* ("Wellstone's pilot balked at flying on morning of crash", 22 February 2003) perpetrates the same deception as the St. Paul *Pioneer Press* ("Pilot wanted to cancel Wellstone's fatal flight", 22 February 2003), falsely implying that the weather was a problem or the pilot showed poor judgment, but went further in its reporting on Oberstar. "I think the fund of information here should put aside the idea that there was a deliberate takedown of this aircraft", he said. "There were enough people who voiced those thoughts and expressed them to the NTSB staff up at Eveleth at the time to warrant saying, 'Look this over first'", he added. "The conspiratorialists will have to be put aside for a while we digest this very substantial information."

But remarks like these do not bolster confidence in the Congressman, in spite of his expertise with respect to aviation. Many people raised questions about a possible assassination, by his own acknowledgment. The NTSB has yet to determine a cause for the crash. *How can we possibly know that this was not a conspiracy if we don't know what caused the crash?* Oberstar's remarks are reminiscent of those of Carol Carmody in saying that, "She had consulted with the FBI and there was no intelligence information and no evidence in the wreckage to suggest any possibility of terrorism" (*Reader Weekly* 9 January 2003, pp. 12-13). Not to insult the intelligence of a US

Congressman or the head of the NTSB, but what are *the indications of terrorism?* A small bomb, perhaps, or a gas canister, or the use of EMP? How could these causes have possibly been ruled out when the cause of the crash has yet to be determined?

Moreover, surely it is the function of the NTSB to be investigating the cause of this crash, including any possible signs of terrorism. The NTSB should be reporting to the FBI about the causes of this crash, not the other way around. And for Oberstar to be dismissing alternatives that have not yet been ruled out even at the same time the simpler, more benign hypotheses--such as pilot error, mechanical malfunction, and problems with the weather--are being undermined by more and more evidence as it becomes available displays a remarkable lack of mental agility that is simply astounding in the case of a man known for his expertise with regard to aviation. If the weather was as acceptable as it appears to have been, how good did Conry need to be? I find Oberstar's conduct to be unjustifiable and virtually incomprehensible.

My opinion regarding this man is not only rooted in the published record but in my personal experience with his staff. When I first learned that the FBI could only have been on the scene of the crash by noon (as St. Louis Country Sheriff Rick Wahlberg reported) if it had departed from St. Paul at approximately the same time that Paul Wellstone's plane departed, that Carmody was reversing the roles of the NTSB and the FBI, and that John Ongaro had experienced an unusual cell-phone phenomenon that appeared to be a manifestation of the use of an EMP weapon, I made efforts to contact the Congressman. I called his Duluth and Washington offices on 15 January 2003, after I learned that he would be in Duluth on the following day. I explained the reasons I wanted to confer with him, but his staff would not allow us to meet.

So I conveyed this information in writing to a member of his staff that night right here in Duluth at the Federal Building. She assured me that the Congressman was familiar with my views, because they kept copies of my columns from the *Reader*. I told her, as I had told his Washington staff, that John Ongaro and he knew each other, which I thought ought to enhance his credibility with the Congressman. But apparently to no avail. My confidence in Oberstar has been badly shaken, especially because his latest remarks indicate that he had not scrutinized or even closely read the NTSB report on which he was commenting or else he would have realized that, rather than impugn his decision, Conry's conduct displayed very prudent judgment.

After having been stonewalled by Oberstar, I have not been surprised to have run into other dead ends in my investigations. I have traveled to the Eveleth Sheriff's Office to review the official logs of persons coming into and departing from the crash scene, only to discover they are grossly incomplete. The records I was given as the "original" logs were on assorted legal pads. The "computer log" created from them not only included no entries prior to 3 PM (apart from setting up "North Command" at 12:20 PM) but excluded a whole sheet of names of FBI agents. If there were as many as 100 agents on the scene, as another source has told me, there is nothing in the logs to substantiate it nor the presence of anyone else on the scene before 3 PM.

That in itself is disturbing, but the situation is even worse. In my research on the time of arrival of the FBI, I submitted a Freedom of Information Act request to the FAA on 8 January 2003 for information about private and charter flights into the Duluth International Airport on the morning of 25 October 2002. I heard back by a letter dated 30 January 2003 that my request was being forwarded to the same

office sending the letter. By a letter dated 10 February 2003, I heard from the same office that I should not expect a response until around 1 August 2003 and that there would be a charge of .10 per page. By a letter dated 28 February 2003, however, I was informed that "the requested data has been purged". Why am I not surprised?

Most telling of all, in an obscure article that appeared on page A8 of the *Star Tribune* ("Safety Board to Report on Wellstone Crash", 20 February 2003), Tony Kennedy and Greg Gordon stated that a new report (which we have been discussing) will cover the areas of operations and human performance and that future reports (one of which we have also discussed) will consider airworthiness and airplane maintenance. In closing paragraphs, they also observe, "In some of its crash investigations, the NTSB conducts an investigative public hearing when it first releases factual reports from its working groups. That won't be the case Friday. The board felt that [a hearing] was not needed to move the investigation forward", according to NTSB spokesman Paul Schoamm. No doubt! When you already know your conclusion, you don't have to worry about the evidence. Why am I not surprised?

Jim Fetzer, a professor of philosophy at UMD, has become even more convinced that the death of Paul Wellstone was a political assassination. His published columns on this and many other topics are now archived at <http://www.assassinationscience.com>.