

The Body Politic Registers a Protest

Jesse Ventura's Stunning Victory for Governor of Minnesota in 1998

JESSE VENTURA (REFORM PARTY), NORM COLEMAN (R),
AND SKIP HUMPHREY (D) IN AN OPEN SEAT RACE

David Beiler

Dean Barkley sensed that something was out of order. Then a fairly well-known candidate for the U.S. Senate, he was marching in a July 4 parade when he noticed that his aide-de-camp was attracting the crowd's attention.

"Next time, you'll be the candidate," he told Jesse Ventura. A former pro wrestler who now earned his Harleys as a radio shock jock and action flick bit player, Ventura chuckled at Barkley's outrageous thought.

He would be the first of many—including most of Minnesota's political establishment—to laugh at Ventura the candidate. But they are not laughing anymore. Ventura is their new governor.

That Ventura would be so easily dismissed by some of the best political minds in the country is the real man-bites-dog story here, though it was largely overlooked by the national media horde that trampled the tundra of the Gopher State in November. True, Ventura's Reform Party held no state or federal offices; true, he was being outspent 15-1 by his Democratic and Republican rivals right up until five weeks before the election. But the dynamics of American voter behavior have been changing for years, in ways yet unfathomed by many big-league strategists.

"It could happen anywhere," warns pollster Fred Steeper, who worked the race for Ventura's GOP opponent. State Democratic executive director Kathy Czar agrees: "If you're up against a third-party candidate with name recognition and media skills, you'd better take them seriously, even if they're short of money."

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The Horses, Handlers, Wagers, and Payoffs

	<i>Jesse Ventura (Ref)</i>	<i>Norm Coleman (R)</i>	<i>Skip Humphrey (D)</i>
Manager	Doug Friedline	Chris Georgacas	Amy Finken
Strategist	Dean Barkley	Luntz Research	Eric Johnson
Media	North Woods Adv.	Larry McCarthy	Squier Knapp Ochs
Pollster	None	Market Strategies	Fairbank, Maslin
Budget	\$625,000 (est.)	\$2,750,000 (est.)	\$2,100,000 (est.)
Votes	768,000 (37 percent)	713,410 (34 percent)	581,497 (28 percent)

The warp-speed rise of Ventura offers more than just a wake-up call; it can provide a crash course in the cartography of a new electoral order.

Heavy to Hero

A notorious bad guy in the repertory theater known as the World Wrestling Federation, Ventura continued to nurture his notoriety after retiring from the canvas in 1986. Stints in such movies as "Predator" and as a ringside commentator for TBS eventually gave way to a steady gig as a radio talk show host in his hometown of Minneapolis. Ventura's public tough-guy image notwithstanding, environmental issues propelled him to his first political involvement.

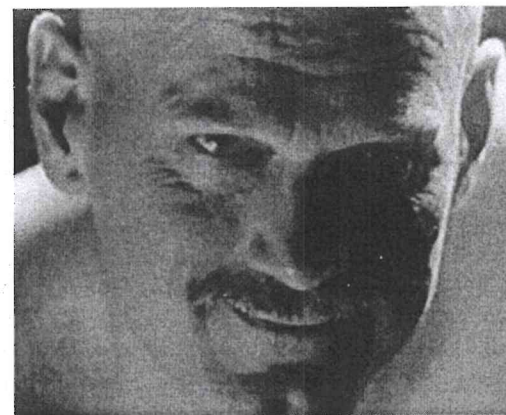
Concerned that stormwater runoff was being dumped into wetlands near his neighborhood, Ventura complained to the City Council of Brooklyn Park, home to 60,000 suburbanites. Dissatisfied with the official response, the riled 250-pound grappler successfully ran for town mayor in 1990, quintupling voter turnout in the process.

The job was, in essence, to chair a part-time legislative body. At its meetings, Ventura chewed tobacco. He occasionally skipped them altogether as he made movies and personal appearances around the country. But his forceful leadership made its mark, and he left office after one term with his popularity intact.

Meanwhile, Barkley had been paving the way for an outsider's takeover of state government.

Inspired by Ross Perot's example, Barkley launched an independent run for Congress in 1992. The lawyer/marketer spent only \$64,000, but he received endorsements from the two major Twin Cities newspapers and ultimately won an impressive 16 percent of the four-way general election vote.

Setting his sights higher in 1994, Barkley ran for the U.S. Senate and won official status for the Independence Party with his 5 percent showing. After the IP affiliated with the Reform Party in 1996, Barkley launched a second Senate run and improved to 7 percent.



Jesse Ventura

Campaigning for the Senate often landed Barkley a guest slot on Ventura's radio show, where the host was fond of comparing the major parties to Los Angeles street gangs, dubbing them the ReBLOODicans and DemoCRYPTS. Ventura chaired Barkley's 1996 campaign but resisted Reformers' suggestions that he run for governor.

The fledgling party had been gaining ground on other fronts, however: Reformer Steve Minn won a nonpartisan seat on the Minneapolis City Council in 1993; two years later, radio talk jock Barbara Carlson—the earthy ex-wife of former Gov. Arne Carlson (R)—ran a strong race for mayor of Minneapolis as the Reform endorsee.

By the fall of 1997, Ventura had grudgingly agreed to be a gubernatorial candidate, and Barkley—now operating a car wash business—had drafted a campaign plan with designated manager Doug Friedline, proprietor of a pull-tab gambling operation housed in a Minneapolis bar.

Barkley's scenario anticipated that the Democrats and Republicans would nominate pro-life candidates, leaving Ventura the only pro-choice alternative in a pro-choice state. That did not happen, but everything else in his plan did play out as expected: Get Ventura into the debates and excel there; raise half a million dollars for a last-minute media blitz; hit the 1992 Perot mark of 24 percent in mid-October polling; energize the youth vote.

But months would pass before the campaign got off the ground. A New Year's fundraiser went poorly, and the candidate seemed to be dragging his feet. On January 17 of election year, the staff delivered Ventura an ultimatum: Kick in \$10,000 of seed money or make an official announcement. Otherwise, they would toss in the towel.

Ventura soon announced, but the treasury remained bare for months.

Back in the Real World

Despite its potential for crowd appeal, the Ventura campaign drew scant attention in the early days of 1998. Governor Carlson was stepping down, and the Republicans had a wide-open, three-way race to succeed him. But a trio of historic marquee names had kept tongues wagging about the Democratic primary for more than a year.

It was the battle between "My Three Sons"—chips off three of the most venerated blocks of political timber ever produced by Minnesota's Democratic Farmer-Labor Party. One was Mike Freeman, son of former governor and Kennedy cabinet member Orville Freeman; the two others (former state senator Ted Mondale and Attorney General Hubert H. "Skip" Humphrey III) were sons of former U.S. senators who later became vice presidents and presidential nominees. The pedigreed trio were joined by pro-life state senator Doug Johnson and state auditor Mark Dayton, heir to a department store chain.

Backed by the party's more liberal elements, such as the AFL-CIO and U.S. Sen. Paul Wellstone, Freeman edged Humphrey for the party endorsement in June but trailed him in polls for the September primary. A suburban candidate with a suburban running mate, Mondale sounded moderate New Democrat themes that fell flat with traditional Democratic constituencies. Dayton, who lost a 1982 Senate race, had feminist backing and imaginative, plentiful advertising. Johnson ran a clever campaign, contrasting himself against the "silver-spoon" candidates, though he seemed out-of-tune with the party's social liberalism.

Humphrey, who had made a disappointing run for his father's old Senate seat, won a \$6 billion tobacco settlement for the state in May, which many pundits felt would propel him into the governorship. But his flip on the abortion issue (to the choice position) bothered some voters.

The Republican intramural initially had four players. Moderate state senator Roy Terwilliger started early and visited all eighty-seven counties and logged 45,000 miles on the campaign trail. But when a March poll had him at 4 percent, he folded his tent.

That left the GOP field to three pro-life conservatives, the most extreme being Allen Quist, who had won the party's gubernatorial endorsement in 1994 but went on to lose the primary.

Lieutenant Governor Joanne Benson was also running to succeed Carlson—the man who put her there—plainly without his blessings, but backed instead by U.S. Sen. Rod Grams.

The presumed Carlson candidate was St. Paul mayor Norm Coleman, who had switched from the DFL in 1996. A pragmatic conservative, Coleman won support from such luminaries as U.S. Rep. Jim Ramstad, House Minority Leader Steve Sviggum, and national GOP guru Vin Weber.

Around the Track: Following the Race with Media Tracking Polls (figures are percentages of total vote)

	Late August ¹	Six Weeks Out ²	Three Weeks Out ³	Two Weeks Out ⁴	Ten Days Out ⁵	November 3 Results
Ventura (Ref)	13	10	15	21	23	37
Coleman (R)	29	29	31	34	33	34
Humphrey (D)	43	49	44	35	34	28
Other/Undecided	15	12	10	10	10	—

1. Mason-Dixon/PMR.

2. Market Solutions Group for Minneapolis Star-Tribune/KSPM.

3. Mason-Dixon/PMR.

4. Market Solutions Group for Minneapolis Star-Tribune/KSPM.

5. Mason-Dixon/PMR.

Coleman was backed by an organization skippered by former party chair Chris Georgacas. He proved to be an appealing candidate and led the caucuses virtually everywhere in the state. The June convention endorsed him on the fourth ballot.

Bodily Charm

The reputation Barkley had established as the state's leading nonpartisan moderate paid big dividends in January.

Former U.S. Rep. Tim Penny, a fiscally conservative Democrat, had recently organized the Minnesota Compact, a good-government group devoted to making campaigns more substantive. Highly regarded by both parties, Penny succeeded in making the compact a key part of the upcoming gubernatorial debates. At Penny's request, Barkley became codirector, boosting Ventura's chances for inclusion in upcoming debates.

Minnesota's primaries are not held until September, and the long nomination season also played into Ventura's hand. He was invited to many debates and forums, throughout the spring and summer, sponsored by local civic groups across the state. Barkley's strategy called for his candidate to accept as many such opportunities as possible. The forums were so numerous and the election so far away, little attention was being paid to these events by the press or the public. But they afforded a raw, novice candidate the opportunity to prep for prime time.

"Jesse's style never changed," explains Barkley, "but those early forums let him get comfortable with the format and learn about the issues... before the pressure was really on."

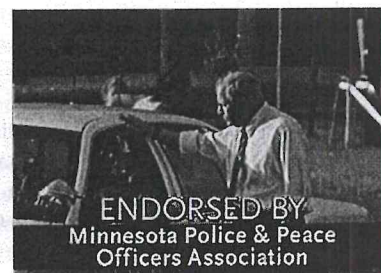
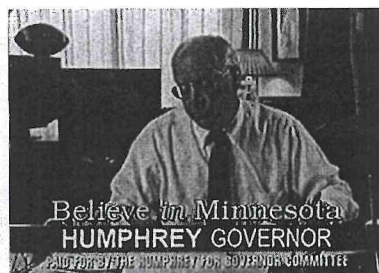
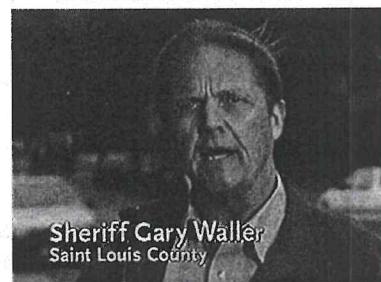
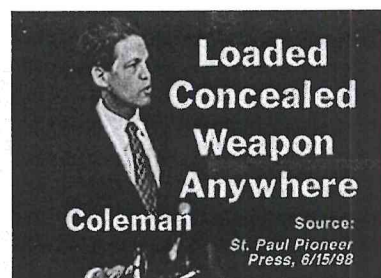
Thirty-Second TV Spot "Endorsed"

Skip Humphrey for Governor

Produced by: Squier Knapp Ochs Dunn

SHERIFF GARY WALLER: You can't tell if someone is carrying a loaded concealed weapon. That's why it's so dangerous. Norm Coleman wants to change state law and let just about anyone carry a loaded concealed weapon anywhere. It's a bad idea. Skip Humphrey has crime fighting experience. He got mandatory prison terms for felons who use guns. As governor he is someone we can trust.

ANNOUNCER: Our police believe in him. So can we. Humphrey for governor. Believe in Minnesota.



Meanwhile, Ventura began building a base among his wrestling fans. They were not hard to find.

As their candidate marched in a seven-block parade down the streets of Minneapolis on St. Patrick's Day, Reformers found eager takers for ten thousand pieces of literature. At a major wrestling event in April, pandemonium broke loose as Ventura made a grand entrance, unannounced, yet well-advanced. A few days later, he energized thousands of protesters on the capitol steps with a blast against the legislature for its vote to return only half of a \$4 billion budget surplus to the taxpayers.

A celebrity in Minnesota's popular culture, Ventura started the campaign with widespread name recognition (64 percent), surpassed by only three other candidates: Democrats Humphrey and Mondale and GOP frontrunner Coleman. Comprising mostly young, disaffected, middle-class males, Ventura's initial audience hardly fit a high-turnout profile or a dowager's idea of decorum, but he did not hesitate to round it up and put it in a political harness.

A typical Ventura event found the candidate regaling college students within easy driving distance of his suburban Minneapolis home, quoting philosophers such as Jim Morrison and Jerry Garcia. His schedule was spotty before he was compelled to leave his radio program in July (having finally filed as a candidate), and sparse even thereafter. Though he began to venture beyond the Twin Cities media market in August, he was soon sticking to the homefront again. The results were telling on election day: He lost only one county within a hundred miles of his base but lagged elsewhere.

"That was by design," explains Ventura's free-spirited media man, Bill Hillsman of North Woods Advertising. "We had to make efficient use of the candidate's time, and the Twin Cities media cover 80 percent of the state."

The candidate impishly claims his close-to-home schedule was dictated by his determination to not miss a practice of the high school football team for which he serves as a volunteer coach. But in truth, this populist revolution was a front-porch campaign, driven by Twin Cities journalists looking for colorful copy. The media mountain came to the Minnesota Mohammed, and it was rarely disappointed.

"The press doesn't go out and make their own story," says Barkley. "You've got to give it to them. They'll take it if you can make it meaningful and interesting. And it helps to be colorful and controversial."

Before a student rally at St. Cloud State, Ventura, a community college drop-out, rejected the idea of further state subsidies for tuition. "If you're smart enough to get here," he bellowed, "you're smart enough to figure out how to pay for it." On the flip side, Ventura was fond of decrying the proliferation of laws designed to "save stupid people from themselves," suggesting to do so was interfering with the evolutionary process.

When a debate moderator tried to preface a question by asserting, "To be governor of Minnesota, you have to be an expert in agriculture," Ventura quickly admonished, "No, you don't." His capacity for political sacrilege seemed boundless.

But the refreshing Reformer was not all swagger and shock; he often took substantive positions that resonated with those who felt Minnesota's paternalistic government needed a tug on the reins: Return the surplus, forget subsidies for sports moguls, let people carry a gun so they can protect themselves. And while you are at it, cut the student/teacher ratio.

Faced with a horrendous 4 to 1 gender gap, Ventura named elementary school teacher Mae Schunk his running mate for lieutenant governor. He explained that, if elected, he would leave education policy to the sixty-four-year-old schoolmarm.

"Ventura won all the debates," opines Wy Spano, "because he always gave a straight answer, even if it was 'I don't know the answer.'"

Editor of the newsletter *Politics in Minnesota*, Spano was amazed at how directly Ventura's approach ran contrary to standard professional advice: "Unlike the practiced politicians he was up against, he never stayed on message, deflecting the tough questions. That really set him apart. Voters figured the politicians were just telling them what they wanted to hear, and only Jesse was telling them the truth. . . . They'll vote for someone they disagree with, if he's the only one they can believe."

No More Play Time

Ventura's quest hit a watershed on July 21, when he was finally compelled to formally file his candidacy and was immediately relieved of his radio show. Play time was over.

After six months in the field, the campaign had raised a pitiful \$12,000. To qualify for the \$326,000 in public matching funds, the campaign would have to raise another \$35,000 by the end of August, in contributions of \$50 or less.

A Ventura T-shirt—bearing the snarling slogan "Retaliate in '98"—had been introduced at Fourth of July parades and was beginning to sell briskly at \$20. Hundreds flew out of the Reform Party booth at the state fair in August, and \$62,000 had been collected by the end of the month.

Even though the threshold for the state subsidy had been met, the \$326,000 taxpayer subsidy could not be collected until a month after the election, and then only if Ventura topped 5 percent on election day. That level of performance seemed assured, as Jesse was posting between 11 percent and 13 percent in the polls. But bankers are not conditioned to take polls as collateral.

A program soliciting small personal loans from supporters was heralded on Ventura's Internet Web site and produced about \$1,500 a day. The candidate spoke at the Reform Party convention in Atlanta but failed to raise much money from the national party cohorts.

On September 15, the Democratic primary had predictably been swept by Humphrey, who piled up 37 percent against 19 percent for Freeman. Enthusiasm was palpably low: Turnout failed to crack 20 percent, the lowest in the fifty years that records had been kept.

The 18 percent third place posted by Johnson proved the biggest surprise. Much of the credit for this obscure pro-lifer's impressive showing

went to his quirky TV spots, which engagingly appealed to Minnesota's populist tradition. They had been crafted by Hillsman, the same media iconoclast whose ads had helped win Wellstone a Senate seat in 1990 despite being outspent nearly 5 to 1.

Five days after the DFL primary, Barkley received a letter from Hillsman offering his services to the Ventura campaign.

"Bill was a perfect fit," the Reform strategist admits, "but he had always been close to Democrats. I hadn't thought he'd do it."

"I liked Dean and respected his positions for years," explains Hillsman, "and I had watched Jesse at all those candidate forums over the summer. . . . I was impressed."

Coming aboard with less than six weeks left to the campaign, Hillsman immediately returned the Ventura effort to a fixation on Twin Cities free media. His first act was to stop the candidate from taking a three-hour road trip to Mankato for an interview on a public access cable station.

While the scramble continued to get a loan to cover expenses pending payment of the public subsidy, Hillsman began crafting radio ads designed to attract immediate media attention. Drawing on Ventura's tough-guy image and background as a Navy SEAL in Vietnam, he composed an attitude-laden jingle to the strains of the theme song from "Shaft": "When the other guys were cashing their government checks / He was in the Navy, gettin' dirty and wet / Well, they try to tell you he can't win / But we'll vote our conscience and we'll vote him in."

Right on.

Debunking the Debates

What the major-party candidates had in terms of monetary advantage, they gave away by their lack of inspiration. In an early debate, Coleman had gaffed that "we're going to have to redefine the family farm," suggesting that small operations simply were not viable anymore. He had spent months on the cowpaths ever since, desperately catering to farmers and trying to shed his image as a city kid from Brooklyn. He went even further than Humphrey in advocating farm subsidies and in forgiving property taxes on cropland.

"It was an absurd spectacle of someone trying to be something he wasn't," assays Spano. But it finally began to pay dividends in early October. Two state senators recognized as leaders on farm issues—one a Democrat, one an independent—unexpectedly backed the Republican.

Coleman, looking more like a liberal panderer, failed to tie down the swing-vote suburbs, a constituency he felt was safe against big-spender Humphrey. But there was another wolf at this door, one whose pro-choice position might eventually resonate with suburban Republican women.

The idea that Ventura could siphon off Coleman votes had occurred to Humphrey's strategists. Buying the conventional wisdom that the wrestler's macho, libertarian appeal synched better with Republicans than Democrats, Humphrey refused to debate Coleman unless Ventura was also included.

Fresh from his primary triumph, and shortly after the death of his mother, Humphrey opened up a huge twenty-point lead in mid-September polling and appeared ready to coast to victory with a prevent defense. Trapped in third place and being outspent massively, Ventura looked less like a threat than a way to pull some votes off of Coleman.

Attention was now focused on the three debates sponsored by the League of Women Voters, all due to be carried on statewide television.

At the first such event, in Brainerd on October 1, Coleman again pitched for rural votes, while Humphrey tried to shoot down charges he would raise taxes as governor. While concentrating on Humphrey, Ventura attacked both major party entries for their partisan posturing and lack of leadership, but he drew only condescending smiles from his rivals.

The following day's headline in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* declared: "Leaders battle, Ventura charms." The entry in Barkley's log reads: "Jesse hits a home run." Media interest in the Reformer began to perk up; money or no money, he was plainly on the move. And at Humphrey's expense.

"The biggest mistake of the campaign was Humphrey's insistence that Ventura be in the debates," declares Coleman pollster Fred Steeper. "Like Perot in '92, Ventura connected instantly with that middle-class swing vote that had been parked with Humphrey, largely from recognition. . . . He became the champion of the little guy against the established powers. . . . Humphrey performed poorly in the debates and couldn't hold them."

Spano agrees, reporting the AFL-CIO phone bank nearly shut down two weeks out, after it was found to be reaching as many voters for Ventura as Humphrey.

By October 10, with his lead cut by a third and Ventura rising into the mid-teens, Humphrey began skipping the lesser, late debates. He was markedly more aggressive in the second televised event on October 11, charging Coleman with running up an astronomical debt in St. Paul. Humphrey's media campaign became so pointed, Coleman filed suit in all eighty-seven counties, charging that Democratic ads had violated the state Fair Campaign Practices Act by lying about his record. Humphrey was such a spendthrift, Coleman charged, "he doesn't know what a budget is."

Rising above the bickering, Ventura continued to endear himself to the public and press with expressions of candor most major party candidates would have considered fatal. Running counter to his macho image—but straight after Humphrey's crumbling support—he endorsed gay rights, declaring "love is bigger than government."

"Ventura could have been stopped by bringing the public's attention to the import of his libertarian, outrageous positions," insists Steeper. "It wouldn't have been difficult. He had left such statements in the public record all year long."

Naked and the Dead

But the big boys were not biting. The idea that a destitute third-party wrestler could actually win was beyond their concept of plausibility. Pundits and major party polls presumed Ventura's vote would follow the classic third-party pattern of falling away in the closing days of the campaign. Both Coleman and Humphrey tried to position themselves as the beneficiary.

"Neither wanted to be the one to stick Jesse with the 'emperor's clothes' routine," offers DFL executive director Kathy Czar. "They didn't want to alienate his voters by bursting his bubble."

The Late Fade Theory of third-party candidates relies on the assumption that such candidates will not have the resources to effectively compete in the final media battle. It also assumes that the "wasted vote" syndrome will kick in, that disaffecteds will grudgingly turn to the major parties—or not turn out at all—once they realize their candidate cannot win.

Neither of these assumptions applied to Ventura.

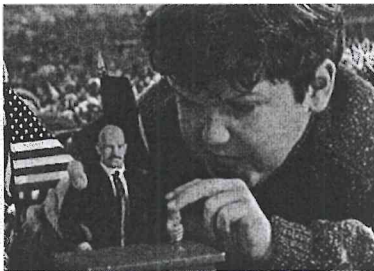
On October 20, a *Star-Tribune* poll reported that Humphrey's lead had vanished and that the Reform Party standard bearer was up to 21 percent. That helped the Ventura campaign close on a \$266,000 loan from the Franklin National Bank the next day.

The draft had been arranged by Minneapolis alderman Steve Minn, chair of the Reform state convention, and it had required the taking out of an insurance policy that guaranteed payment.

The cash infusion came at the precise moment it was needed to launch Hillsman's long-planned TV flights. The first spot used the simple graphic of an American flag, the voiceover decrying the debilitating effects of partisan division as the camera panned over the alternating red and white stripes; it then shifted into a paean to Ventura's unifying influence as the screen zoomed to a star on a true blue field.

The soft allegories were a letdown for the newsies, who expected more fireworks from the Ventura/Hillsman combo. "I could tell the press was disappointed," a sensitized Hillsman recalls, having been inculcated by the Wellstone race in the value of crafting spots for free media attention. "I knew, however, we had something coming down the production line that they would really push."

The press pleaser was a takeoff on Ventura's days as a WWF star, when he had his own toy "action figure" on the market, popular enough to buy



Thirty-Second TV Spot

"Action Figure"

Jesse Ventura for Governor

Produced by: North Woods Advertising

ANNOUNCER: New from the Reform Party.

BOYS: Yeahhh!!

ANNOUNCER: It's the new Jesse Ventura action figure! . . . You can make Jesse battle special interest groups.

BOY (imitating Jesse): I don't want your stupid money!

ANNOUNCER: And party politics!

BOY: We politicians have powers the average man can't comprehend.

ANNOUNCER: You can also make Jesse lower taxes, improve education, and fight for the things Minnesotans . . . really care about!

BOY (imitating Jesse): This bill wastes taxpayer's money! Redraft it!

ANNOUNCER: Don't waste your vote on politics as usual! Vote Reform Party candidate Jesse Ventura for Governor.

him a Porsche with a single month's royalties. Two boys were depicted playing with a new version of the figure—Ventura in a business suit—as he battled "Evil Special Interest Man" (see TV spot, facing page).

"I don't want your stupid money," one kid had Ventura hoot, as the corrupting lobbyist took a well-deserved sock.

True to its billing, "Action Figure" grabbed gobs of free newscast airtime as campaign money began pouring into Ventura's coffers at the rate of \$10,000 per day. And the hoopla over it helped douse the only major media crisis suffered by the campaign on October 21.

Asked if he supported legalizing prostitution and drugs, Ventura answered no, but said that legalizing prostitution might bear a second look, as "Nevada doesn't seem to have a problem with it."

"It was the worst timing," shudders Barkley, who at that very moment was getting ready to ink the bank loan. "I was afraid it would blow the deal."

But in the end, the damage was minimal. Humphrey and Coleman both took their first swings at the issue, but they were too absorbed in the task of destroying each other to bother following up. The news media was simply too enamored of the breaking story of Ventura's new-found viability to risk nipping it in the bud. For the first time, reporters began speculating about a third-party win.

"How would you deal with a legislature that includes no members of your party?" reporters asked, to which the brawny candidate responded by rolling up a sleeve and flexing a bicep. The copy and visuals were just too good to ignore.

The identities of Coleman and Humphrey were becoming merged into one gray, dispiriting backdrop against the vibrant color of Ventura's civic carnival. Coleman's platitudinous ad campaign had been pushing the slogan "Norm Coleman: The Only One." Now Humphrey blended in with spots trumpeting "Only Humphrey."

The dissing duo polluted the airwaves with attacks and counterattacks at their October 24 debate, Humphrey charging "Norman" with seeking "straight tax dollars for his cronies," while Coleman derided the Democrat's pledge to push for Medicare benefits in Washington as a promise Humphrey had made and broken a decade before. The beleaguered moderator was reduced to endlessly shouting "Stop!"

As the flak thickened, big guns from the major parties rolled into the state to fire a few partisan rounds, led by First Lady Hillary Clinton, USDA secretary Dan Glickman, and erstwhile GOP ticket-mates Bob Dole and Jack Kemp. To Clinton's calling him a "sideshow," Ventura dryly responded: "If I were her, I'd be more concerned about leaving Bill in the White House."

Now leading among all men and voters under forty-five, Jesse was looking less and less like a freak to be gawked at. But to push to a winning plu-

rality, he had to sober up his image, tighten his gender gap, and maintain a sense of bandwagon momentum that would run over any remaining "wasted-vote" qualms.

Hillsman quickly and effectively met these challenges, one by one. He produced a new version of "Action Figure" that introduced a new "war-wagon" accessory: the RV that Ventura would use to barnstorm the state in a nonstop performance over the campaign's last seventy-two hours (see TV spot, facing page).

To drive home the point that his candidate had a record of public service and had discussed issues more thoroughly than had his opponents, Hillsman produced "The Thinker" spot, playing against Ventura's nickname, "The Body." To assure viewers he had not suddenly begun to take himself too seriously, the statuesque statesman winks at the camera in the closing shot.

Filmed a week before the election (with a bodybuilder double minimizing Ventura's studio time), "Thinker" hit the air on Saturday night and proved to be the crowning blow. News accounts juxtaposed "The Thinker" clips with reports of Ventura rampaging across the countryside, exhorting student masses to storm the polls.

Hi-Tech Nervous System

In addition to the ads and news coverage, the campaign's Web site was a particularly effective mobilization and information tool. Early in the race, Ventura realized that the Internet was "tailor-made" for his kind of low budget, unconventional campaign. "It's reaching a huge amount of people at a very low price," he was quoted as observing.

Phil Madsen, director of the campaign's Web site and an initial organizer of Minnesota's Reform Party, was quoted as saying that the "Internet for us served as the nervous system of the campaign. The Web site was the difference; it was the mobilization."

According to American University researcher Rebecca Strauss, much of Ventura's use of the Internet was as a behind-the-scenes coordinating tool. The campaign's big closing event, a seventy-two-hour final drive through the state, was organized and coordinated entirely by email through its Web site. Madsen sent out an email to his 3,000-member list, called "JesseNet," inviting volunteers to a meeting; more than 250 people showed up to help organize the tour.

Another big factor in Ventura's favor was Minnesota's unusual election law. It gives voters the right to register at the polls on election day. That made Ventura's impact particularly hard to gauge, especially for pollsters who never showed the full force of the Reform surge.

In the end, voter turnout hit 61 percent of the voting-age population (the highest in the country), and 16 percent of the total election-day elec-

Thirty-Second TV Spot "Drive to Victory"

Jesse Ventura for Governor

Produced by: North Woods Advertising

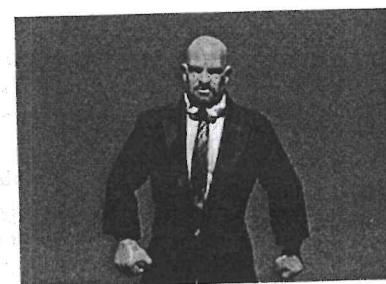
ANNOUNCER: Presenting the latest accessory for the Jesse Ventura action figure! The Victory RV! A full-size RV that Jesse rides on his seventy-two-hour Drive to Victory! . . . You, too, can join the Drive to Victory. Check our Web site at www.jesseventura.org to find out how!

KID (imitating Jesse): I only answer to the people of Minnesota!

ANNOUNCER: The Jesse Ventura Friday-to-Monday seventy-two-hour Drive to Victory.

JESSE: I can't do it without you!

ANNOUNCER: Join in and meet the man, the action figure, and our next governor!



torate had registered at the polls, a figure unseen since the law's inception in 1974. Analysts estimate more than three of every four new voters opted for Ventura.

The result would stun political analysts across the country. Only a few local pundits predicted a Reform Party win, and of the national predictions, only *Campaigns & Elections'* Internet handicapping service, *The Political Oddsmaker*, came close, calling Ventura an even bet to win. The final vote percentages were Ventura 37, Coleman 34, and Humphrey, the initial front-runner, 28.

Not surprisingly, the late-night comics had a field day with the Minnesota results (make that a field week), and Minnesotans soon grew testy about their ridiculed voting behavior. Several days after the Ventura earth-

quake, David Letterman introduced a special segment titled "What the Hell Happened in Minnesota?" a question he intended to pose to a caller chosen at random from the state's phone books. After identifying himself and his "little podunk show on CBS," Letterman pitched his query. He quickly received a click and a dialtone.

"We've circled the wagons," explains Wy Spano. "Everybody defensively insists Jesse will do just fine."

But there is no shortage of political operatives ready to answer Letterman's question.

"Jesse's participation in the debates was probably the most important factor," says Kathy Czar. "He came across as real and established his credibility. After all, he makes his living in radio and has got the sound bite routine down pat."

Steve Minn points to Minnesota's unusually reform-minded election laws: same-day registration, public financing, and a provision by which the first \$50 donated to any candidate for state office is rebated by the state. "I don't think it could happen anywhere else," he admits, though he concedes that the threshold for third-candidate credibility may have been lowered.

A widely perceived arrogance of the state's power structure was key to Ventura's appeal, an attitude that was sustained "in the elevator," as Minn puts it: reassuring word of mouth among friends and coworkers that bolstered their own inclinations. The vaunted opinion makers were bypassed and disregarded with revolutionary relish.

"I was fooled because conditions here are so good," explains Spano. "Unemployment is the lowest in the country, home ownership is the highest, test scores are at the top. We have the best-run state in the Union. You naturally assume people who have all that will vote for the status quo."

Although times are good in Minnesota and around the nation for now, more and more voters are coming to the conclusion that a two-dimensional electoral system does not represent their will very well, or even respect their opinions. They see two hypocritical political parties ignoring the public interest while they tear at one another and operate as slaves to a corrupt campaign finance system.

If a Jesse Ventura can win the highest elective office in one of America's most prosperous states in the most prosperous of our national times, political professionals should start asking, then what power structure is, indeed, truly secure?

12 'Bama Bash

Endorsement Backlash Saves a Governor from Primary Defeat in Alabama in 1998

GOV. FOB JAMES (R) VS. WINTON BLOUNT (R)

David Beiler

More than a generation later, the images remain indelible: Governor "Big Jim" Folsom on an election eve TV hookup, flapping his arms and squawking like a chicken until he fell off the stage.

His successor, George Wallace, confronting federal marshals at the schoolhouse door after declaring "segregation forever!"

Alabama's colorful, in-your-face political traditions are legend. Yet, even against this backdrop, Gov. Forrest "Fob" James (R) seemed to have stumbled out of a time warp in hyperspace.

In the eighteen months leading up to the election, James had declared a U.S. Supreme Court decision on school prayer null and void, claiming the Bill of Rights does not apply to the states in such matters; he had implied that he would use the National Guard, if necessary, to keep a replica of the Ten Commandments hanging in a courtroom; he had become the first governor in history to secede from the National Governors' Association; and, in a performance before the state Board of Education mocking the theory of evolution, he had traipsed across a room emulating an ape being transformed into a human being.

In performing these dramatic acts of defiance, James had shown administrative audacity reminiscent of Andrew Jackson and made constitutional arguments that hark back to John C. Calhoun. Presented with a colorful flair and a common touch, the whole production at times evoked images of the 1830s—replete with minstrel show.

The Great Unwashed applaud. The elites are appalled.

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