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## A blue-state governor with red-state qualities

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By George F. Will  
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### MINNEAPOLIS

Northern Iowans are Minnesota Twins and Minnesota Vikings fans. This fact could be portentous 16 months from now when the Iowa caucuses occur and Minnesota's two-term governor, [Tim Pawlenty](#), probably will be seeking the Republican presidential nomination.

The son of a South St. Paul truck driver, Pawlenty was 16 when his mother died. A short while later, his father lost his job. Nevertheless, Pawlenty became his family's first college graduate. His political message -- he calls himself a Sam's Club rather than a country club Republican -- should resonate in a social climate conditioned by voters' recoil against spending and the political class that does it. "All the stuff the country is now favoring, I've done," he says.

Settled by many Scandinavians and Germans who arrived with European, especially Bismarckian, notions of social democracy, Minnesota has furnished leaders of American liberalism -- Hubert Humphrey, Eugene McCarthy, Walter Mondale, Paul Wellstone. In the four decades before Pawlenty was elected governor in 2002, the average two-year increase in state spending was 21 percent. During his tenure, the average annual increase has been 2 percent. He says that the current two-year budget cycle will be the first in 150 years in which spending will be cut in real, constant dollars.

It took, he said, "World War III" with the teachers unions to make Minnesota the first state to offer performance pay for teachers statewide. The state is second in the nation in [health savings accounts](#): Approximately 10 percent of privately insured Minnesotans have these tax-preferred savings accounts that enable them to shop for routine health needs not covered by high-deductible insurance plans.

Pawlenty has benefited from an affliction -- Minnesota's Legislature. Currently, Republicans are outnumbered 47 to 87 in the House and 21 to 46 in the Senate. As a result, he has had, and has seized, ample opportunities to veto things, including increases in taxes on incomes, gasoline, beer and wine. He holds the Minnesota record for most vetoes cast in a single legislative session. The Cato Institute murmurs, "Be still my heart!"

A libertarian think tank ardent for government both limited and frugal, Cato gives A grades for fiscal responsibility to only four governors -- Mark Sanford (R-S.C.), Bobby Jindal (R-La.), Joe Manchin (D-W.Va.), and Pawlenty, the only one governing a blue state.

Pawlenty dismisses the Obama administration's stimulus as "mostly government sustenance money." He would have preferred a cut in payroll taxes. Actually, giving the nation a one-year holiday from federal payroll taxes would have been no more expensive and more stimulative than Obama's stimulus.

Tall (6 feet 3), slender and rarely strident, Pawlenty probably is the only potential president who will

announce: "I'm not exactly [Lady Gaga](#)." Indeed, he must solve the problem of "Minnesota nice" -- his state's reputation for a pleasantness incompatible with today's appetite for politics with a serrated edge.

He is, therefore, eager to emphasize brawls he has initiated, and won, such as cutting \$2 billion from public employees' pensions and helping to win a 44-day bus strike -- it concerned retirement benefits -- in this, the nation's 16th-largest metropolitan area.

His mild manner seems to appeal to some jalapeño-flavored conservatives. A new biography of Rush Limbaugh says that, so far, Pawlenty is second only to [Sarah Palin](#) as Limbaugh's choice for 2012. [Dick Arme](#)y -- the former Texas congressman who became majority leader when Republicans took control of the House in 1994 -- is about as close to a leader of the Tea Party movement as its agreeable anarchy permits. He has his "eye on Pawlenty," who is on the "safest ground" of any potential candidate: "He has no major disappointments behind him."

Because Minnesota was the one state that President Ronald Reagan did not carry in his 1984 contest with native son Walter Mondale, it is the only state that has voted Democratic in nine consecutive elections. So it might seem to be a strange base for a Republican candidacy. But the candidate who carries the states of the Mississippi Valley -- basically, the Midwest -- usually wins the White House. Two other Republican practitioners of Midwestern conservatism are considering presidential runs -- [Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels](#) and [South Dakota Sen. John Thune](#).

Undeterred by the fact that George W. Bush is the only Republican since Dwight Eisenhower to win in his first try for the presidency, Pawlenty has dutifully enriched his résumé for national office by visiting Iraq five times and Afghanistan three times. And Iowa six times this year.

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