

Can Tim Pawlenty light a fire with Republicans?

By Karen Tumulty
Washington Post Staff Writer
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MINNEAPOLIS - In this era of outrage-fueled politics, can a nice guy finish first?

Even his adversaries say they can't help but like former Minnesota governor [Tim Pawlenty](#), who left office on Jan. 1 and is on a book tour, the next step in a campaign for the 2012 [GOP](#) presidential nomination that he has been quietly running for more than a year.

"A good, decent person - all of those things," said Roger Moe, who often squared off against Pawlenty back when they were both leaders in the Minnesota legislature and who unsuccessfully ran against Pawlenty for governor in 2002.

But there is one thing that gets a rise out of Pawlenty, and that is to suggest that he lacks a certain . . . pizzazz.

"Compared to who?" Pawlenty retorted in an interview. "I'll concede that [Sarah Palin](#) is in a league of her own, and a force of nature. As to most of the rest in the field? If you get to know me, I don't think that's an accurate rap. I mean, you think about all the other people running. With the possible exception of [Mike Huckabee](#), and Palin, there aren't exactly a bunch of Lady Gagas."

And this might even be the moment for nice. Asked Monday about Palin's now-infamous fundraising appeal that featured cross-hairs symbols, including one on the district of [Rep. Gabrielle Giffords](#) (D-Ariz.), Pawlenty told the New York Times that he believed it had nothing to do with the [subsequent tragedy there](#). But he also noted pointedly: "I wouldn't have done it."

Already, Pawlenty has a starry-eyed fan base in conservative circles.

"The successful conservative governor of one of the most liberal states in the union -- as if Ronald Reagan had been elected in Sweden," columnist Michael Gerson raved on The Washington Post op-ed page last year.

The tight-fisted, anti-tax Pawlenty was also one of but four governors - and the only one from a Democratic state - whose fiscal record won an "A" grade from the [libertarian](#) Cato Institute last fall.

The decades before he took office saw state budgets grow by an average of 21 percent every two years. He brought that to just under 2 percent, and in 2009, cut real spending in Minnesota for the first time in 150 years. To get there, he used his [veto](#) pen nearly 300 times, setting a Minnesota record for the most in one year.

His critics point out, however, that Pawlenty also left behind a projected \$6.2 billion deficit for his successor, Democrat Mark Dayton - even bigger than the \$4.5 billion shortfall he inherited from his predecessor, independent Jesse Ventura.

Yet Pawlenty also helped reorient politics in a state where party labels never carried the same meaning they did elsewhere, especially for statewide officeholders.

"We never had a conservative governor in Minnesota. We had Republicans," said former congressman Vin Weber, who is co-chairman of Pawlenty's [political action committee](#), which also functions as his embryonic presidential campaign. "Pawlenty was the first conservative governor in my lifetime."

That wasn't enough to win him a spot on [John McCain](#)'s presidential ticket in 2008.

Pawlenty made it onto the shortest of short lists, spending late nights filling out piles of documents with his wife, Mary, and furtively running his records to Kinko's, only to be told by McCain at the end of it all that the Republican nominee had decided to "try something different."

While the political world's attention that day turned to a new star rising from Alaska, Pawlenty took his dog for a walk. "As I put the little bag over my hand and bent down to pick up her poop, I thought to myself, *Well, this is the only number two I'll be picking up today*," Pawlenty wrote in his new memoir.

Nor was it the first time he had been shunted aside in favor of someone with more charisma. In 2001, Pawlenty - then the [majority leader](#) of the Minnesota House - was mulling a bid for the U.S. Senate when he got a call from Vice President [Dick Cheney](#) asking him to step aside in favor of the popular mayor of St. Paul, [Norm Coleman](#).

Pawlenty complied, so devastated that he decided to retire from politics. But Mary, then a state judge, convinced him to make a long-shot bid for governor instead.

"A number of doors have been slammed in my face," Pawlenty said as he announced his candidacy. "Now I'm gonna kick a few open."

He won a three-way race with 44 percent of the vote in 2002, and was reelected in 2006 - a terrible year for Republicans nationally - with a nail-biting victory margin of under two percentage points.

Pawlenty is betting that the 2012 presidential race will take just as many unlikely bounces.

"Anybody who tells you they know what's going to happen two years from now in politics is full of crap," he said.

But Pawlenty did venture to predict: "On the Republican side, there's going to be six or eight or 10 people standing on the stage in a year and a half saying about the same

thing. . . . I don't think the question is going to be, are there huge differences in policy details between me or other potential candidates?

"The question is going to be, does that person's life story and record demonstrate the kind of fortitude it's going to take to actually get this done - not as a matter of giving a fluffy speech or offering some failed amendment or taking some symbolic act, but actually getting it done."

His book describes in a homespun style his blue-collar background. Pawlenty was the hockey-playing youngest in a family of five siblings, the only one to go to college. He had a truck-driver father, a homemaker mother who died of cancer while he was a teen, a Polish American grandma who wore flowery housedresses and big hair rollers.

He described the trauma he felt all around him in the solidly Democratic town of South St. Paul in 1969, when the biggest meatpacking plant went away and took the jobs with it.

"Even at the age of nine," he wrote, "I felt this palpable sense that the bottom was dropping out of everything."

Pawlenty also wrote at length about his faith-- his drift from Catholicism to his wife's evangelical church-- and sprinkled the book liberally with passages from the bible.

That could give him an edge in Iowa, a neighboring state where religious voters have traditionally dominated the first-in-the-nation [caucuses](#).

While Pawlenty is a staunch social conservative, however, he is also a sunny one. Voters will sense that Pawlenty "isn't someone who is going to wake up every morning trying to figure out who to condemn," said one evangelical leader, who didn't want to be quoted by name because he is advising a number of possible presidential contenders.

But as has happened so often in his career, Pawlenty's prospects will likely be defined by who else decides to get into the race: Will Huckabee rally the evangelical vote, as he did in 2008? Will another fiscally conservative midwestern governor - Indiana's Mitch Daniels is getting a lot of buzz lately - jump in? If the debate stage is crowded by such oversize personalities as Palin and former House speaker [Newt Gingrich](#), will he make much of an impression at all?

If lightning does strike in Iowa, Pawlenty is trying to make sure that he doesn't make the same mistake that Huckabee did in 2008. He has been more active than any other potential candidate - with the possible exception of presumed [front-runner Mitt Romney](#) - in building a ground-level organization across the map.

Pawlenty's work as vice chairman of the Republican Governors Association had him traveling the country corralling big donors for the past year - giving him a network that will no doubt come in handy. His political action committee raised \$2 million last year, which put him fourth behind Romney, Palin and Huckabee.

But his real strength, Pawlenty insisted, is his ability to connect with the daily struggles of the people he calls "Sam's Club voters."

Can bland be beautiful?

"After what we've been through," Pawlenty said, "I don't think the country's going to be putting the highest value on who's got the biggest entertainment act."