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Pawlenty, the Mirror Image of Sarah Palin

By Joseph Lawler on 10.25.10 @ 8:41AM

Yesterday George Will published a very flattering mini-profile of Minnesota governor and 2012 hopeful Tim Pawlenty yesterday. The article included a summary of Pawlenty's accomplishments:

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.

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He is...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.

In part by mentioning that Limbaugh considers Pawlenty second only to Sarah Palin for GOP nominee in 2012, Will sets up an implicit contrast between Pawlenty and Palin. It's a natural comparison, especially because Pawlenty was thought by many to be McCain's pick for running-mate before he chose Palin and propelled her to national fame.

As Will takes care to note, Pawlenty is from a blue state with a major city. Palin is basically from a reddish wilderness. Minnesota is about 10 times as populous as Alaska.

Palin's record as a small-government conservative never matched her appeal as a committed social conservative, or her sky-high ratings. She presided over a dramatic

increase in state spending, enacted a "windfall profits" tax on oil companies, and backed the "Bridge to Nowhere" -- the symbol of egregious pork. When McCain picked her, it was regarded as an attempt to shore up the Republican base, as opposed to tacking to the middle by picking someone like Joe Lieberman (who was considered a candidate at the time) or Pawlenty, who was regarded as a moderate Republican.

Yet at the same time he was garnering a national reputation as a moderate, Pawlenty started the program that, as Will points out, earned him an "A" on the Cato Institute's governors' report card. The only other Republicans to earn that distinction were Bobby Jindal and Mark Sanford -- hardly RINOs. As 2012 approaches, it is clear that Pawlenty will never have the appeal to the base nor the ability to inspire hatred from the left that Palin has -- but she'll never have anywhere near the record of accomplishments he has put together.

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