

Rudy Returns and Minnesota Pivots

The 1982 Election for Minnesota's Governor

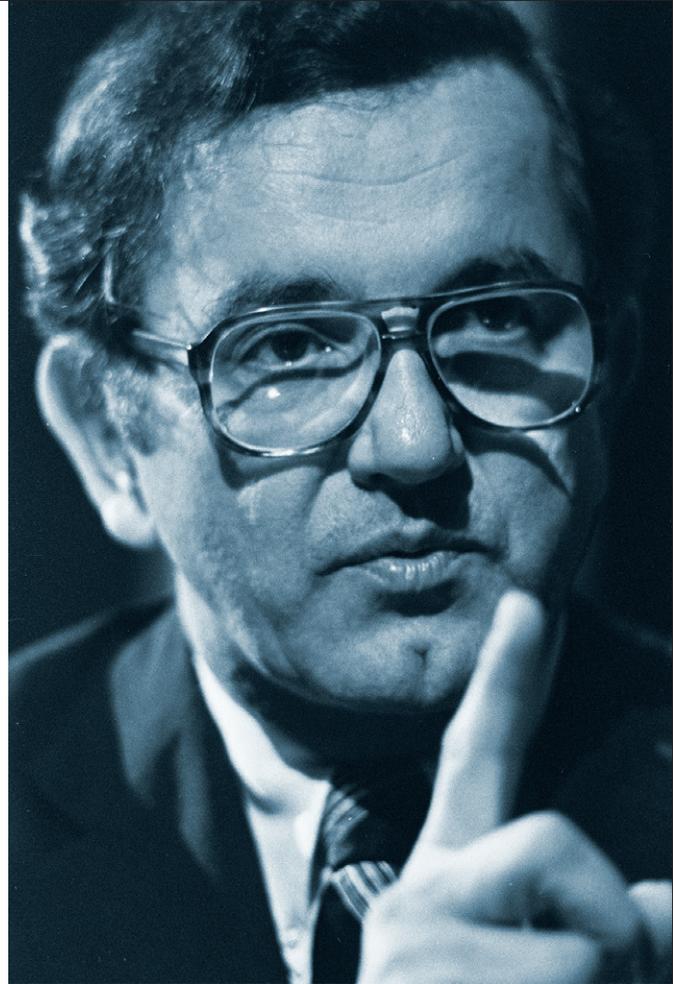
Benjamin M. Schierer

AT A TIME of hyper-partisanship and gridlock in state government, economic uncertainty, geographic divisions, and social unrest, history can help provide context and hope. Forty years ago, Rudy Perpich returned to Minnesota politics with a message of promise at a critical time for the state. His optimistic vision increased opportunities for women and minorities and embraced the role that immigrants and refugees played in Minnesota's history and its future. He promoted local industries to international markets and believed education was the great equalizer for all Minnesotans.

In the spring of 1982, Minnesota was at a crossroads. The national economy had endured a prolonged period of double-digit inflation; the state's economy had hit its lowest point since the Great Depression. Minnesota's state government budget crisis began in the fall of 1980. Recurring deficits required the legislature to add six special sessions to reach a remedy. Republican governor Al Quie had entered office in 1979 with a \$250 million surplus, allowing him to enact campaign promises of tax cuts and reduced expenditures. Ultimately, those tax cuts, plus a series of inaccurate budget forecasts, sent the state's government into a fiscal tailspin.

Minnesota enjoyed national renown as a state where government worked. A strong agricultural economy had helped shield it from previous recessions. But when the downturn of the early 1980s simultaneously hit three leading industries—farming, manufacturing, and mining—the entire state was in peril.

Politically, both the Republican and the Democratic-Farmer-Labor (DFL) Parties were also in crisis. Quie announced his decision not to seek reelection in January 1982, after realizing the state's fiscal calamity would require him to break his campaign pledge not to raise taxes. Quie's 1978 election had come during a window of opportunity for the Republican Party. Democrats had



Rudy Perpich, 1982.

been in complete control of Minnesota's government since 1973. The Watergate scandal and the ascension in 1977 of Minnesota US senator Walter Mondale to the vice presidency had led to an unprecedented DFL wave, with an unsustainably large legislative majority and a hubris that disconnected DFL officials from voters.

The DFL's tide had begun to turn in late 1976, when then-governor Wendell Anderson resigned so that Lieutenant Governor Rudy Perpich could, as governor, appoint him to fill Mondale's vacant US Senate seat. The move drew criticism from both sides. The ensuing 1978 election—known nationally as the “Minnesota Massacre”—proved disastrous for the DFL. Republican Rudy Boschwitz defeated Anderson for Mondale's former seat, and Quie beat Perpich in the governor's race. In a special election to fill the Senate seat that had been held by Hubert H. Humphrey until his death in January 1978, Republican Dave Durenberger defeated Minneapolis businessman Bob Short. Republicans gained 32 seats in the 134-member Minnesota House, leaving that chamber in an awkward 67–67 tie.

The losses set off fractious recriminations within the DFL. Some DFLers, like Perpich, used the defeat as a time to step away from politics. Days after the election, Perpich visited the executives of Minnesota-based Control Data, a mainframe and supercomputer firm in Bloomington, with

his hat in his hand. “I will be governor for another month, and then I will be out of work. . . . I need to work,” he said. Perpich would spend the next three and a half years based in Vienna, Austria, as a Control Data trade envoy in eastern Europe.¹

Rudy Returns to Minnesota

After Quie’s exit from the 1982 governor’s race, Attorney General Warren Spannaus was the DFL heir apparent and, given the Democratic Party’s rebound in state and national polls, the presumed next governor. He was a popular figure within his party, though some felt his liberal policies—particularly on gun control—would make it difficult to connect with voters outside the Twin Cities metro area. Any challenger to Spannaus would need a statewide platform to succeed.

That political reality was not lost on a core group of Perpich supporters, many of whom had known Rudy since childhood. They refused to believe that Perpich’s political career had ended with his 1978 defeat. While Rudy was in Vienna, they met in Chisholm, Minnesota, in a room above the Deep Rock gas station, owned by longtime Perpich friend Ron Gornick. It was hot and uninsulated, but it was secluded from the press. The group consisted of friends like Gornick and Frank Ongaro; family, including three different George Perpiches—Rudy’s state-senator brother, his hockey-coach cousin, and his cousin’s son; Iron Range

politicians, including legislators Dougie Johnson and Joe Begich; and union leaders like Baldy Cortish and Joe Samargia. They came to be known as the Monday Night Gang. To keep interest alive, they put signs in storefronts across Minnesota’s Iron Range asking, “Where is Rudy?” In the summer of 1981, they mailed flyers across the state, hoping to generate buzz for a Rudy return.²

Gornick traveled to Vienna to visit Perpich in early 1982. The two talked politics, and Rudy said that he had had his chance; that his new life was rewarding; that his wife, Lola, especially enjoyed Vienna. But Gornick detected that Rudy wasn’t at peace with his decision. A few days later, Perpich told Gornick, “I want to be governor. Go find out, Gornick.” He wanted to know his chances, and that was all the Monday Night Gang needed to hear.

Rudy would stay in Europe as long as possible while his friends sowed intrigue back home. Word of the clandestine gas station meetings leaked to the press. When local and state news outlets began contacting members of the group, Gornick was outraged. But then it became clear that the leak was an opportunity. The nascent Perpich campaign had stumbled into a wealth of free advertising. Newspapers across the state picked up the story. CNN reported that a “renegade ex-governor” would return home to take on the machine.³

In April, the *Minneapolis Tribune* and the *Minneapolis Daily Star* merged, becoming the *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*. The editors wanted a splashy front-page story to launch the combined paper and preview the coming



During his first term as governor, Rudy Perpich was seen by many as an affable everyman—whether showing off his bocce skills at the Minnesota State Fair or fishing on one of Minnesota’s celebrated lakes—but he returned to Minnesota in 1982 as a polished international businessman.



Members of the Monday Night Gang. Mark Phillips is seated at center (in glasses) and "Big" George Perpich is at the head of the table to Phillips's left. Continuing clockwise around the table to Perpich's left are Joe Drazenovich, Gary Lamppa, Frank Ongaro, Bob Scott, Joe Moren, George Perpich Jr., Dana Miller, John Ongaro, DeLyle Pankratz, unidentified, Ron Gornick, Phil Landborg, and Jeff Petrack. Seated to the right is Sawmill Saloon owner Andy Shuster, and standing behind him is noted accordionist Oskar Frykman.

political season. So, for the Easter Sunday edition, young journalist Lori Sturdevant was assigned to cover the return of Rudy and Lola Perpich from Vienna.

Perpich had left Minnesota's political scene in January 1979 with graying hair and a feeling that his opportunity to shape Minnesota had been lost. He had worked his entire political career to become governor, only to lose the office two years after attaining it. Still, his exile proved transformative. Living and working in Europe broadened his horizons and opened his mind to the potential of Minnesota as an international player. But none of this was immediately apparent when Sturdevant sat down with Rudy and Lola at the Russian Tea Room in New York City for their interview.

As he answered question after question, the change in Perpich began to emerge—and it was more than his hair, which was now dyed jet black. Sturdevant remembered him as an Iron Range folk hero during his first term—colorful, unique, and always good for a quote, though sometimes tongue-tied and unfocused. Now he was a polished international businessman, presenting ideas not being talked about by other state political leaders. He argued that state government could propel Minnesota

forward via international trade, better use of natural resources, and technology-driven economic diversification.

In response to Sturdevant's questions about the state's chronic budget deficits, Perpich said the first thing was to "realize that the real villain is energy." The state needed to lean into alternative energy ideas, Perpich said. He talked about timber, peat briquettes, pig farms, and opening Minnesota's agricultural markets to the world.⁴

On tax relief, which both political parties were proposing to aid the struggling economy, Perpich was dismissive. "I don't think that works. Spannaus is talking about a 75 percent tax cut the first year for a new business. A new business doesn't make any money the first year to tax!" Instead, Perpich would take a page out of Control Data's playbook; the company had started with 11 employees and had grown to 60,000 in 47 countries. "Why?" Perpich asked. "Because [they're] marketing worldwide, and that's what we have to help other Minnesota industries do."⁵

If the solutions were so simple, Sturdevant asked, why hadn't they been tried already? Why was no one else talking about this? Perpich said that political leaders "take too narrow a view of the world." He added, "I used to be like that, too."

Jobs, Jobs, Jobs

It became apparent that, while overseas, Perpich had never closed the door to a political comeback. Through weekly calls to his close friends and political allies, he kept apprised of the political and economic situation in Minnesota. He knew that some Minnesotans felt their Republican governor had led the state into financial ruin. This feeling was especially strong on Minnesota's Iron Range, where job losses were staggering.

Perpich saw economic distress as his political opening and an opportunity to unite the state. DFL frontrunner Spannaus's message was murky at best and held little prescription for the state's economic pain. Perpich's message would be very simple: Jobs, Jobs, Jobs.

In 1982, Minnesotan's hearts and minds were with the Iron Range. The mining industry was in shambles, with some economists forecasting that the jobs were gone for good. Families were devastated and communities were decimated. Statewide, unemployment rose to nearly 10 percent; but some Iron Range communities saw unemployment rates as high as 50 and 60 percent. Churches all over the state were sending food and were worried about finding jobs for unemployed Rangers. Against this backdrop, Minnesotans were ready to listen when Perpich talked about an economic development strategy for the whole state, with a particular understanding of what the Range needed.⁶



Perpich formally announced his candidacy for a second term as governor during a press conference at the Minnesota Press Club in Minneapolis on April 22, 1982. "I want to be Minnesota's number one salesman, number one fan, and number one promoter," Perpich said. His campaign message would incorporate natural resources, education, high-tech, medicine, alternative energy, and tourism—but it all came back to one thing: providing jobs for Minnesotans. He wanted to reach the dairy farmer in southern Minnesota as much as the miners of the Iron Range. He needed the union leaders of Minneapolis and leaders of business across the state. The state must leverage what it had to avoid spirals of increasing taxes and reducing services, he argued.⁷

Employment was important to Perpich, going back to his childhood at Carson Lake, a mining location just north of Hibbing. As a kid, seeing his father's lunch pail on the counter meant his dad was out of work. It meant his family wouldn't have money to provide the basic necessities for Rudy and his three brothers. But the Rudy of 1982 was a far cry from the kid who threw rocks at the mine supervisor's front door when his father was out of work. His Vienna experience had taught him to engage with the business community, while still relying on support from labor. "This campaign is about jobs," he said. "We have got record unemployment. . . . What I'm going to do is bring Minnesota back to the position it was in when I was governor. . . . If I take care of that, many of the other issues will take care of themselves."

Business leaders noticed Perpich was acting like a governor, a leader. He was involved. He was talking trade initiatives. Perpich introduced executives from St. Jude Medical, TELEX, and other Minnesota corporations to trading companies from the former Yugoslavia. One executive from St. Jude said afterward that his company had been trying to get into Yugoslavia for years without any success. Now Perpich was bringing them to the front door.⁸

Across the state that spring, Perpich fan clubs began popping up, each with their own initiatives and reasons for supporting Rudy. Somebody in Rochester loved him because he was committed to keeping the state hospital open. Somebody in Worthington because he understood the impact that neighboring states and businesses have on local economies. Farmers in western Minnesota, miners on the Range—all had their issues, and he spoke to them all. Rudy and his message of Jobs, Jobs, Jobs began appearing on buttons across Minnesota.

Perpich lays out his ideas for Minnesota at a press conference on April 22, 1982.

Single-Issue Politics

Like today, the political parties of Minnesota and the nation in 1982 were divided on gun control and abortion. Lola believed that abortion had been the key factor in her husband's loss in the 1978 election, when anti-abortion groups distributed leaflets in church parking lots on the Sunday before the election. The Perpich family called the leaflet "an emotional smear sheet" that mischaracterized Rudy's position. Perpich said that while he was personally pro-life, he would not be defined by a single issue.⁹

Gun control was equally divisive, and it was a topic Perpich wasn't afraid to use against Spannaus. Gun control had played a central role in Spannaus's 12 years as attorney general. In 1975, he had backed a major gun law requiring waiting periods and background checks for firearms purchasers. The legislation made him a target for gun-control opponents. Perpich argued that Spannaus had divided the rural and urban areas of the state, which Perpich saw as a trap. He believed that arguments about guns and abortion wouldn't make a better Minnesota. "This campaign is about jobs. We have got record unemployment," Perpich said to deflect controversial topics. "Our single issue is jobs, jobs, jobs."¹⁰

Perpich had no illusions where his positions left him with the DFL Party. Ever since he began considering a return to politics, he understood that single issues, along with the DFL's support for Spannaus, would require him to avoid the party's endorsement process and take his campaign straight to the people. His renegade approach wasn't without cost. The party shunned him at its state convention in Duluth. On Saturday, June 5, party activists removed Perpich signs and did anything else they could to discourage delegates from noticing Perpich's candidacy. Later that day, Spannaus was endorsed, winning 81 percent of the delegate votes. Even former governor Wendell Anderson, under whom Perpich had served as lieutenant governor, gave a speech that chastised Rudy for running against the party's endorsed candidate.¹¹

Convention organizers finally agreed to allow Perpich to address the delegates on the last morning of the convention, when attendance would likely be sparse. Rudy Jr., who along with his sister accompanied their mother and



Gubernatorial candidates (left to right) Rudy Perpich, Warren Spannaus, Harold Stassen, and Lou Wangberg participated in a debate on Thursday, September 9, less than a week before the DFL primary.

father onstage, watched in surprise as Spannaus supporters jumped up from the audience, shouting so Rudy could not be heard. The Perpiches were appalled by such rudeness, later recalling, "[Rudy] got about halfway through and turned and walked off. And we followed him. That was the end of it."¹²

Perpich left the convention abruptly and spent the rest of the day at his home near Hibbing. Ultimately, all the drama proved little more than theater for political junkies. The average Minnesotan held little regard for political conventions, something Perpich understood perhaps better than those who held leadership posts in the DFL Party. His focus was on the September 14 primary election.

RVs and Renegade Rangers

The fledgling Perpich campaign avoided the DFL Party machine, with its county and district chairs and perennial operatives. "We . . . didn't pay attention to them because they weren't with us anyway, and they could only hurt us—we didn't trust them," said campaign chair Eldon Brustuen. "We just simply ignored them and went to the people."

Brustuen saw the campaign as seven separate organizations: Minneapolis, the Iron Range, St. Paul, the unions, the anti-abortion Minnesota Citizens Concerned for Life, southeastern Minnesota, and the Seventh District. He noted, "Any time we would bring the leadership of them all into one room, it was a disaster. It was chaotic. It just absolutely wouldn't work."¹³

He wanted Minnesota to be world class, and he shared that vision with everyone he met: teachers unions, farm interest and commodity groups, Main Street shop owners, and everyday people at the local café—Perpich wanted everyone involved.

Perpich saw a simpler campaign. He saw his path to a 1982 primary victory starting in the Eighth Congressional District, which included Duluth and the Iron Range, and then flowing to the rest of the state. His core supporters on the Range were already organizing the eighth district, allowing Rudy and Lola to focus on the remainder of Minnesota.

Every weekend, members of the Monday Night Gang joined the Perpiches to canvass the state. Traveling in a handful of RVs plastered with signs and pictures of Rudy, they shouted, “Get out and vote! Get out and vote!” They went to county fairs, church suppers, picnics, and coffee parties—in the suburbs, in the inner city, throughout the countryside. Like a bid for local office on steroids, “The campaign was very naive, innocent, and filled with down-home, folksy people,” Brustuen recalled.¹⁴

Part of the campaign’s advertising and endorsements came from small daily newspapers, such as the *Swift County Monitor* and the *Faribault Daily News*. In Sleepy Eye, one of Rudy’s vehicles appeared unannounced at the radio station and went live on the air within five minutes. In a front-page article titled “Perpich Campaign Comes to Our

Town,” the next day’s newspaper reported that this was the first time a governor’s campaign had visited Sleepy Eye.¹⁵

Perhaps the biggest benefit of the RV campaign was the perception that Rudy and Lola were everywhere. Lola was critical to the campaign. “During that ’82 election, if Lola was there, we knew we were going to get attention. . . . People liked Lola,” remembered Ongaro. When Connie Perpich, wife of Rudy’s brother George, waved out the window, the crowds mistook her for Lola. Joe Begich, who shared Rudy’s same curly black hair, said, “I think I could pass for Rudy.” If Begich was behind the wheel and the sun visor was down, most couldn’t tell the difference. According to radio reports, Rudy and Lola were in Austin, Roseau, and Moorhead all in the same day.¹⁶

Once at a campaign stop in southwestern Minnesota, Perpich spoke to a group of 40–50 people. After the speech, he saw an advertisement for a polka, which turned out to be a political event. Of course, Rudy wanted to go. “It was incredible,” Bob Scott, one of the original members of the Monday Night Gang, said. “People were packed in there, and of course every woman wanted to dance with him. . . . The entire campaign was magic,” he recalled. Not brilliant, but magic. “Everything that campaign touched turned to magic, except not a lot of money came in.”¹⁷



Mary Sue, Rudy Jr., Lola, and Rudy Perpich take a break from the campaign trail.

Creating Opportunities

The Perpich campaign was grounded in creating opportunities, and opportunities began with education. This was ingrained in Rudy by his parents—particularly his mother, Mary, who had been forced to quit school and give up her dream of becoming a teacher after an arranged marriage at age 16. Her children became the focus of her own unrealized educational aspirations. Mary Perpich told Rudy and his brothers, “It would be better to be dead than not to be educated.” Rudy wanted to ensure the next generation wouldn’t need to make the sacrifices his mother had.¹⁸

Perpich saw Minnesota as the brainpower state and proposed the Minnesota Job Skills Partnership—a collaboration between the private sector and higher education—to beef up the training and retraining of the state’s existing workforce. He wanted Minnesota to be world class, and he



Rudy dances the polka at the Bel Rae Ballroom in Mounds View during a campaign stop in September 1982.

shared that vision with everyone he met: teachers unions, farm interest and commodity groups, Main Street shop owners, and everyday people at the local café—Perpich wanted everyone involved.

Perpich's closest political confidant, Lola, believed defeating Spannaus would require a platform that included greater opportunity for women. They committed to choosing a woman as his running mate, which, if successful, would mean the first female lieutenant governor in the state's history.

It wasn't out of character for Perpich, who had a strong record of promoting women and minorities. Even during the 1950s, as a member of the Hibbing school board, he had made pay equity for women a top priority. As governor, he had appointed the first female justice, Rosalie Wahl, to the Minnesota Supreme Court in 1977. Perpich would go on to appoint Harriet Lansing in 1983 as the first female judge in the newly created Minnesota Court of Appeals. He also appointed Michael Davis, the first African American judge in Hennepin County, who would later

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serve as chief judge of the US District Court for the District of Minnesota. Beyond the courts, his record included dozens of female and minority appointments to lower-level positions within state government.

Perpich's first choice for a running mate was Minnesota's second female secretary of state, Joan Growe. His campaign manager remembered the day that Growe approached Perpich and, with typical Joan Growe class, said, "I need to be able to say that I wasn't asked, so before you ask me, Rudy, you need to know that if you did ask me, I would have to turn you down. . . . I have a political future in front of me, and I cannot run on an unendorsed ticket." Perpich also asked Lori Sturdevant about her interest as a possible running mate (she demurred), and he considered Emily Anne Staples, a former Republican elected in 1976 as the first female DFLer in the Minnesota Senate.¹⁹

On Wednesday, May 26, 1982, the *Minneapolis Star and Tribune's* front page headline read, "Spannaus Chooses Rep. Carl Johnson; Feminists Unhappy." Spannaus tapped Johnson, a long-serving legislator from St. Peter, as his running mate to add "geographic and occupational balance," the newspaper reported—much to the disappointment of not only feminists but also Growe admirers across the state who believed she would be selected. Spannaus's press conference was interrupted by Minnesota Women's Political Caucus members, who told him they were "very, very disappointed that [he] did not choose a woman."²⁰

Spannaus's choice for running mate provided an opportunity for Perpich. He blasted Spannaus, saying the attorney general had committed a political blunder. He called Growe "the most popular woman in state politics." On June 8, Sturdevant wrote the story recapping the convention and reporting Perpich's commitment to selecting a female running mate.²¹

Madame Lt. Governor

Businessowner Marlene Johnson, a founder of the bipartisan Minnesota Women's Political Caucus, sat in her office at the Minnesota Building on Fourth Street in St. Paul considering the news of Perpich's campaign promise. The move had her full support. Later that night, she wrote in her journal, "If he really wants to win, he will call me."²²

The next day, Perpich called. On June 9, the two met at the Brother's Delicatessen in Southdale shopping mall. He told Johnson about his vision for governing and how he had always wanted to be governor. He told her he had run for lieutenant governor in 1970 knowing there was no way a "hunkie [a derogatory term for Slavic immigrants] from the Range was going to be elected governor of Minnesota." The lieutenant governorship had opened the door to his governorship, and he felt the same would be true for women.²³

"As liberal a state as Minnesota was, there was a conservative bent here that was going to make it next to impossible for a woman to be elected governor for the first time," Johnson later recalled. "It meant a lot to him that he opened the door for women in the courts, and he wanted to do that for the governor's chair."²⁴

Johnson had not held elected office, was active in the business community, and had many political friends. She was savvy and had a good reputation. Perpich also felt that she was closer to the party than he was. Spannaus may have had the DFL endorsement and the traditional party machine, but the party included many younger female voters who were increasingly active and were turned off by the status quo.²⁵

Perpich believed that Johnson could help him carry St. Paul. Minneapolis primary voters would stick with Spannaus, but it was possible for a Perpich-Johnson ticket to carry both St. Paul and the Eighth Congressional District—

When a woman does something that women have never done before, it changes us.

Not only that one woman, but all of us. Because the experience is shared by many people and that experience can never be taken back.

Marlene Johnson was selected by Rudy Perpich to be the first woman ever to run for Lt. Governor on a major party ticket in Minnesota's history. In Rudy's previous term as governor, over 40% of all appointments went to women and minorities, including the first woman Supreme Court Justice. His demonstrated willingness to include women and minorities in the leadership of our state is unequalled.



Marlene Johnson understands the concerns of women and minorities in a way that no other candidate could. She has lived them. Her work as a small business leader, a women's advocate, and a political activist speaks for itself.

Together Marlene and Rudy represent the diversity of leadership experience that will result in decisions that meet the needs of all Minnesotans. Therefore, we've purchased this ad and added our signatures to publicly encourage Minnesota women and minorities to join us in taking this important step forward. Vote for Marlene Johnson and Rudy Perpich on November 2nd and change everything... for all of us.

PerpichJohnson

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Perpich's selection of business leader and women's advocate Marlene Johnson as the first major-party female candidate for lieutenant governor in Minnesota history was crucial to his primary victory.

and that could win him the primary. When Perpich offered her a spot on the ticket, Johnson said she needed a week to decide. He said she could have a day. The next day, Sturdevant got the leak that Marlene Johnson was Perpich's choice for lieutenant governor.

Perpich spoke of his deeply held belief in the responsibility of community, driven by his experience and those of other immigrants and their strong ties to family.

Perpich's choice of a capable and accomplished woman was critical to his success. Many political observers believed that had Spannaus chosen a woman as his running mate, he would have won the primary and been elected governor. Marlene Johnson provided Perpich with political balance, gender balance, and geographic balance. She was strong on issues like pay equity and women's rights, appealing to female voters across the state. Carl Johnson, on the other hand, could provide Spannaus only with votes from St. Peter.

A Patchwork Quilt

Perpich had lived the immigrant experience. His father had emigrated from Croatia and his mother was the child of Croatian immigrants. Following the passing of the US Refugee Act of 1980, many Hmong immigrants sought a home in the Minnesota metro area. During his 1982 campaign, Perpich wrote that Minnesota "will welcome any and all." He knew Minnesota could not reach its economic potential without embracing diversity. He also understood that this integration required overcoming cultural barriers, language barriers, and challenges to educational delivery. Perpich's future chief of staff, Lynn Anderson, later recalled, "I think he saw Minnesota, coming from the Iron Range, not so much as a melting pot, but as a patchwork quilt."²⁶



During his first inaugural address, Perpich reflected on the struggles his family faced when he was a kindergartener and expressed his commitment that all Minnesota children be afforded educational opportunity.

Five years earlier, as he took office, Perpich had signaled his commitment to extending opportunity to all. His oath of office that day had been administered by Hibbing judge Gail Murray, one of the few female judges in the state in 1977. It was a fitting portent for a governor whose legacy would include appointing more women and minorities to the state's judiciary than any previous Minnesota governor. Dismissing a lengthy policy speech written for him by staffers, he improvised a three-minute inaugural tribute to family, education, and the importance of the immigrant story in Minnesota's past and future.

Forty-three years ago, I entered a kindergarten in a small school in Minnesota's Iron Range. Millions were unemployed, many were ill-nourished or ill-housed, and few had any real economic security. As I entered class that day, my father was unemployed, and I spoke no English. And, yet, today, I have taken the oath of office as the 34th governor of Minnesota. This could not happen in many parts of the world.²⁷

Perpich spoke of his deeply held belief in the responsibility of community, driven by his experience and those of other immigrants and their strong ties to family. Education had been his "passport out of poverty" and fueled his core conviction that no child should suffer from their parents' unemployment. Public initiatives had allowed Perpich and his brothers to advance out of the life of miners on the Range. He received his education on the GI Bill and his first pair of eyeglasses through his elementary school. Years later, Minnesota US senator Paul Wellstone would say of Perpich that "everything had to do with education and opportunity. That was the core value. He never forgot his own immigrant experience."²⁸

Primary Night

The Monday Night Gang's final meeting before the primary election was nerve-racking. Rudy's brother George warned that the northwestern section of the state was critical to victory. They needed one final push of advertising to secure a strong turnout. With no time to lose, \$12,000 was needed for the media campaign. Those who could write



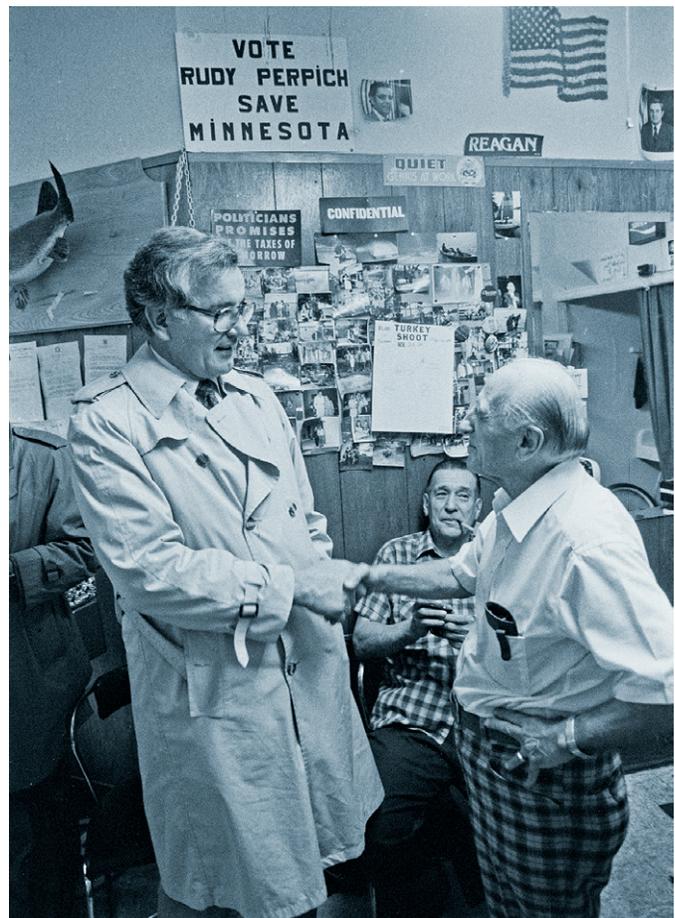
As early returns come in on primary night, Warren Spannaus congratulates his running mate, Carl Johnson, at DFL Party headquarters in the Sheraton-Ritz Hotel in downtown Minneapolis. Two hundred miles north, at the Rustic Rock in Eveleth, Perpich supporters thought the campaign was lost, until results starting coming in from across the state after midnight.

checks for \$1,000. Those who could not were as loyal as ever, some offering their hunting rifles and shotguns as collateral for quick loans.²⁹

The night of the primary election was unseasonably hot and muggy across Minnesota. Perpich's campaign gathered in Eveleth at the Rustic Rock restaurant, which was jammed full of people. Polka music blared from the speakers, and TVs played in every corner. Dougie Johnson, Gary Lamma, and Tom Rukavina took turns working a single phone set at a center table—with a cord going straight through the ceiling. When a member of the press asked Lamma where the line went, he told them, "Right to heaven. Right to heaven."³⁰

But as the early Twin Cities returns came in, it looked bleak for Perpich. Pessimism snowballed, and even die-hard supporters thought the campaign was lost. They could not make up 100,000 votes! Casual supporters thinned out as the night wore on, and only the most ardent remained. George and Connie Perpich were sitting at the bar crying. Ron Gornick joined them.³¹

Rudy had left the party early for the quiet company of Lola at their cabin on Esquagama Lake. But things started to change. Sometime after midnight, returns came in from Rochester, where Perpich did extremely well, thanks in part to the support of former Rochester state senator and lieutenant governor Alexander "Sandy" Keith. Then came



Perpich visits with Julius "Clipper" Fiola at Fiola's barbershop in Virginia, Minnesota, the epicenter of political gossip on the eastern Iron Range.

returns from St. Cloud and other outstate areas, where Perpich picked up ground. The Iron Range results roared in around two or three in the morning.

Even with its limited number of votes, the Iron Range carried a disproportionate influence, particularly in primary elections. The Range was known for some of the best voter turnout in the nation for primary elections—sometimes turning out 80 percent compared to the rest of the state's 20 percent. But this election was special. The 1982 Minnesota primary voter turnout was the highest it had been since 1970, at 31.1 percent, which has not been matched to this day. In the Eighth Congressional District, registered voter turnout was more than 49 percent. In St. Louis County, which includes Duluth and the bulk of the Iron Range, more than 87 percent of primary voters cast their lots for the DFL, with Perpich picking up more than 82 percent of those votes. The eighth district put Perpich over the top in the 1982 primary election—exactly as he had predicted at the beginning of the campaign.³²

Loyalists at the victory party tried to call Rudy, but he had taken his phone off the hook. His brother George rushed to the cabin but got no answer at the front door.



DFL leaders scolded Perpich for threatening party unity when he chose to run against their endorsed candidate, but he moved quickly to mend fences after the September 14 primary.

He pounded on the window, saying, “Rudy! You won! You won!” In a short time, an overwhelmed Rudy was back at the Rustic Rock with his friends. Perpich had beaten Spannaus by more than 28,000 votes, 275,920 to 248,218.³³

The General Election

The morning after the primary, the general election race for governor took shape as Rudy Perpich vs. Republican Wheelock Whitney, a wealthy retired investment banker. “It was hard to imagine two more opposite people,”



remembered Tom Triplet, who would become Perpich’s revenue commissioner and, later, executive director of the Minnesota Business Partnership. “George Perpich would say, ‘Rude, just keep reminding folks that Wheelock plays polo on weekends. Use that. Polo. Polo. Folks out there aren’t going to like someone that plays polo on weekends.’”³⁴

After his primary victory, Perpich turned his focus to reuniting the DFL Party. He wanted to avoid the kind of division that had contributed to the Republican Minnesota Massacre victories in 1978. He met with Mark Dayton, the DFL’s candidate for US Senate and a future Minnesota governor. Dayton showed up for a simple meeting over coffee to find Perpich with *Minneapolis Star Tribune* reporter Jim Klobuchar and a newspaper photographer. Their meeting, with a smiling photo, made the front page, and the next Saturday, at a DFL Central Committee meeting in St. Cloud, Dayton gave an impassioned speech in support of Perpich and the unification of the DFL. Perpich was endorsed by 80 percent of the delegates.³⁵



During a debate in October, Wheelock Whitney (left) makes a point while Independent Party candidate Tom McDonald tries to get a word in. By this point in the campaign, it was clear that Perpich would win handily, and Rudy was turning his attention to assembling his administration to include diverse viewpoints from across the state.

It soon became obvious to the state's veteran political observers that the general election contest for governor would not be close. Perpich knew it, too. He began to use campaign stops to recruit key personnel from across the state for his upcoming administration. Unlike his first term as governor, when critics accused his administration of favoring close friends and allies, now Perpich sought a diverse range of viewpoints from both business and labor. In so doing, he not only revealed a much more confident Rudy than the man who had been defeated in 1978 but also signaled that his administration would be engaged with constituency groups from all regions of Minnesota.

Perpich and Johnson went on to beat Whitney and his running mate, Lauris Krenik, by 1,049,104 votes to 711,796—a margin of nearly 20 points. Rudy Perpich Jr. later remembered the 1982 campaign as the culmination of his parents' work over the prior 30 years. "My father had a very simple message," he noted. "It was 'jobs, jobs,

jobs.' People knew him, they loved him, and that was what took him to victory."³⁶

The 1982 campaign foreshadowed Perpich's second administration, which altered Minnesota's trajectory to this day. At a critical moment in state history, Perpich returned home with a vision for Minnesota as a world-class economic actor, renowned for its well-educated and productive workforce. The Mall of America, the Minnesota World Trade Center (now Wells Fargo Place), Super Bowl XXVI, the NCAA Final Four, the Perpich Center for Arts Education, the Minnesota Discovery Center, a higher profile for the University of Minnesota, and an international role for Minnesota businesses were the result of Rudy Perpich's creativity, innovation, and foresight. The story of Perpich's long shot gubernatorial campaign of four decades ago serves as an antidote to our current political ails: a pro-growth, progressive vision of state government built upon the resources, labor, and brainpower of the entire state. As Rudy was fond of saying, "None of us is as smart as all of us." □



Lola, Rudy, Mary Sue, and Rudy Jr. celebrate victory with supporters at the Sawmill Saloon in Virginia, Minnesota, on November 2, 1982.

Notes

Author's Note: In October 2017, I joined a handful of mayors from across Minnesota for a conversation in Bemidji about how rural-urban divisions were limiting our state's potential. There were no policy aims or partisan affiliations, only an attempt to build relationships and bridge divides. It was the start of a personal journey for me to understand our state's history of overcoming political and geographic differences. This journey led me to historians and politicians; conversations in small-town coffee shops and the archives of the Minnesota Historical Society; and ultimately a friendship with author and Minnesota's foremost political observer Lori Sturdevant. During these travels, I discovered a collection of 41 unpublished oral histories on former governor Rudy Perpich housed in the Iron Range Research Center in Chisholm, Minnesota. This article is taken largely from those histories.

1. Mary Sue Perpich Bifulk, interview by Barbara W. Sommer, 1997, Rudy Perpich Oral History Project, Iron Range Research Center, Chisholm, MN.

2. Ron Gornick, interview by Barbara W. Sommer, 1997, Rudy Perpich Oral History Project, Iron Range Research Center, Chisholm, MN.

3. Gornick suspected that longtime *Star Tribune* journalist Gene Lahammer, whom he had confided in days earlier at a Metropolitan Sports Facilities Commission meeting, was behind the leak. Gornick, interview.

4. Lori Sturdevant, "Perpich Returns, Says He's Changed," *Minneapolis Tribune*, Apr. 11, 1982.

5. Sturdevant, "Perpich Returns, Says He's Changed."

6. Lori Sturdevant, interview by Barbara W. Sommer, 1997, Rudy Perpich Oral History Project, Iron Range Research Center, Chisholm, MN.

7. Betty Wilson, *Rudy! The People's Governor: The Life and Times of Rudy Perpich* (Cambridge, MN: Nodin Press, 2005), 309.

8. Eldon Brustuen, interview by Barbara W. Sommer, 1997, Rudy Perpich Oral History Project, Iron Range Research Center, Chisholm, MN. Perpich also proposed a trip to Japan with executives

from across the state to tour small iron specialty producers that could buy Minnesota taconite. Politics got the better, though, and Vice President Walter Mondale, who along with other party insiders supported Spannaus, encouraged the US embassy in Japan to postpone the trip. It would have to wait until after the general election.

9. Minnesota Citizens Concerned for Life, "Debate a Battle in Perpich's 'War' on MCCL," *MCCL Newsletter* (Oct. 1979): 7.

10. Rochelle Olson, "'Giant of Minnesota Politics' Former Attorney General Warren Spannaus Dies," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, Nov. 27, 2017; Brustuen, interview. Gun-control opponents circulated photos of Spannaus's face behind a bull's-eye and launched a "Dump Spannaus" campaign during his run for governor.

11. Lori Sturdevant, "Spannaus Wins DFL Endorsement by Large Margin," *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, June 6, 1982, 1A.

12. Rudy Perpich Jr., interview by Barbara W. Sommer, 1997, Rudy Perpich Oral History Project, Iron Range Research Center, Chisholm, MN.

13. Brustuen, interview.

14. Gary Lamppa, interview by Barbara W. Sommer, 1997, Rudy Perpich Oral History Project, Iron Range Research Center, Chisholm, MN; Brustuen, interview.

15. Robert T. Scott and Richard Nordvold, interview by Barbara W. Sommer and Edward Nelson, 1997, Rudy Perpich Oral History Project, Iron Range Research Center, Chisholm, MN.

16. Frank Ongaro, interview by Barbara W. Sommer, 1997, Rudy Perpich Oral History Project, Iron Range Research Center, Chisholm, MN; Lamppa, interview; Brustuen, interview.

17. Scott and Nordvold, interview.

18. Joseph Perpich, interview by Barbara W. Sommer, 1997, Rudy Perpich Oral History Project, Iron Range Research Center, Chisholm, MN.

19. Brustuen, interview; "Emily Anne (Staples) Tuttle," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, Feb. 11, 2018.

20. Lori Sturdevant, "Spannaus Chooses Rep. Carl Johnson; Feminists Unhappy," *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, May 26, 1982, 1A.

21. Lori Sturdevant and Betty Wilson, "Perpich, Spannaus Bid with Iron Range Aid Plans," *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, June 8, 1982, 3C.

22. Marlene Johnson, interview by Barbara W. Sommer, 1997, Rudy Perpich Oral History Project, Iron Range Research Center, Chisholm, MN.

23. Johnson, interview.

24. Johnson, interview.

25. Sturdevant, interview.

26. Mai Na M. Lee, "Hmong and Hmong Americans in Minnesota," MNopedia.org; Lynn Anderson, interview by Barbara W. Sommer, 1997, Rudy Perpich Oral History Project, Iron Range Research Center, Chisholm, MN.

27. Hy Berman, with Jay Weiner, *Professor Berman: The Last Lecture of Minnesota's Greatest Public Historian* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 112.

28. Paul Wellstone, interview by Barbara W. Sommer, 1997, Rudy Perpich Oral History Project, Iron Range Research Center, Chisholm, MN.

29. Scott and Nordvold, interview.

30. Lamppa, interview.

31. Gornick, interview.

32. "Minnesota Election Results: Primary Election and General Election," Election Division, Office of the Minnesota Secretary of State, 1982.

33. Lamppa, interview; Scott and Nordvold, interview; "Minnesota Election Results: Primary Election and General Election."

34. Tom Triplett, interview by Barbara W. Sommer, 1997, Rudy Perpich Oral History Project, Iron Range Research Center, Chisholm, MN.

35. Mark Dayton, interview by Barbara W. Sommer, 1997, Rudy Perpich Oral History Project, Iron Range Research Center, Chisholm, MN.

36. "Minnesota Election Results: Primary Election and General Election"; Rudy Perpich Jr., interview.

Images on p. 92, 95, and 100 (top, right) from the Iron Range Research Center. All others from MNHS collections.



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