## Ventura's populist appeal wore off, making for easy exit

Many in Minnesota call decision not to pursue re-election a wise one

## LOS ANGELES TIMES

St. PAUL, Minn. - On Gov. Jesse Ventura's inauguration day, the resplendent Capitol rotunda here became a theater of popu-lism not seen at such a level since the election of Louisiana Gov. Huey Long in 1928.

A young mother in her "My governor can beat up your gover-nor" T-shirt stood near a man who worked the night shift at a gas station, who was standing not far from an unemployed truck driver, who was looking across the room at Ventura's movie pal Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Not everyone there that day had voted for the former pro wrestler. But nearly everyone seemed downright tickled that a loud-mouthed muscleman who fa-vored pink feather boas and ef-feminate sunglasses in the ring had rolled state politics onto its hack

Three and a half years later, Three and a half years later, that crazy magic is so far gone that when Ventura announced last week that he would not seek re-election, many Minnesotans thought it was one of the wisest decisions he has made as governor

Patrick Passe was the unem-ployed truck driver at the Capitol on Jan. 4, 1999, along with his wife and infant daughter. He's while and infant daughter. He s employed now, has a second baby girl, and is a political observer so astute he can name Ventura-backed bills and tell you how far they got in the Legislature — not very far, usually.

On inauguration day, the then 38-year-old who had voted Re-



Ainnesota Gov. Jesse Ventura (right) gets into a vehicle after leaving the Minnesota Public Radio uilding in St. Paul, where he announced this week he won't seek re-election. Ventura's jousting nced this week he won't seek re-election. Ventura's jousting with

This is how Passe feels now: "I was hoping to get an outsider in there," he said this week. "He wasn't really an outsider. He urmed out to be mostly personali-ty, and his personality got in the way of any effectiveness. I'm dis-appointed."

Ventura was elected in a fasci-nating upset. A Reform Party candidate whose only political ex-perience was as the mayor of a Minneapolis suburb, he refused to hold his tongue or read from a script as he spoke to mostly young, disenchanted voters.

Sixty percent of voters turned out in Minnesota on Nov. 3, 1998, the highest figure of any state. About 15 percent of them were people who, under state law, were

radio humorist Garrison Keillor hurt his popularity. publican for 20 consecutive years allowed to register and vote the had this to say: "They had their chance. Now it's his." der 30. Ventura defeated two es-gan upsetting people in Minnesotablished politicians — Norm Coleman, the Republican mayor of St. Paul, and Hubert H. Humphrey III, the Democratic state attorney general and son of the late vice president — by taking 37 percent of the vote.

Although he enjoyed what ap-

gan upsetting people in Minneso-ta right away, including many who shared his views.

He bolted the Reform Party for the Independence Party. He set up what analysts agree has been a well-oiled administration, but he handed almost all the impor-

tant posts not to fellow indepen-dents but rather more experienced Democrat and Re-publican operatives. Not a single independent candi-date has been elected to state-

vide office since, and many one-time supporters feel his failure to fulfill his own dream — a viable third party — has been Ventura's greatest failure.

He derided organized religion He made millions moonlighting as an author, a football commen-

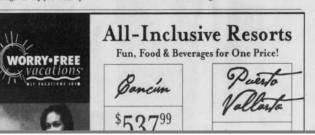
tator and a pro wrestling referee. And what began to make it all come apart, some here say, was that while he beat up on others endlessly and with apparent glee, the hulking former Navy SEAL couldn't take a verbal punch himself

"He really has quite thin skin,"

"He really has quite thin skin," said Alan Frechtman of Minneso-ta Public Radio, who works with humorist Garrison Keillor. On his weekly show "A Prairie Home Companion," Keillor pro-voked Ventura mercilessly with lines such as, "You couldn't pour water out of a boot if the instruc-tions were written on the heel." tions were written on the heel."

Instead of playing along, how-ever, Ventura ridiculed perhaps the last man Minnesotans like to see ridiculed, the folksy, bespec-tacled and beloved Keillor.

"Garrison was actually light-hearted," Frechtman said. "But the governor didn't see it that way. I think if he would have played along, a lot more people would have found him endear-



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