

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

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

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St. PAUL, Minn. — On Gov. Jesse Ventura's inauguration day, the resplendent Capitol rotunda here became a theater of populism 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 governor" 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 favored pink feather boas and effeminate sunglasses in the ring had rolled state politics onto its back.

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 unemployed truck driver at the Capitol on Jan. 4, 1999, along with his wife 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-



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Minnesota Gov. Jesse Ventura (right) gets into a vehicle after leaving the Minnesota Public Radio building in St. Paul, where he announced this week he won't seek re-election. Ventura's jousting with radio humorist Garrison Keillor hurt his popularity.

publican for 20 consecutive years had this to say: "They had their chance. Now it's his."

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 turned out to be mostly personality, and his personality got in the way of any effectiveness. I'm disappointed."

Ventura was elected in a fascinating upset. A Reform Party candidate whose only political experience 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, disenfranchised 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

allowed to register and vote the same day, many of them men under 30. Ventura defeated two established 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-

peared from the outside to be a two-year honeymoon, Ventura began upsetting people in Minnesota 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 independents but rather more experienced Democrat and Republican operatives.

Not a single independent candidate has been elected to state-wide 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 commentator 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," said Alan Frechtman of Minnesota Public Radio, who works with humorist Garrison Keillor.

On his weekly show "A Prairie Home Companion," Keillor provoked Ventura mercilessly with lines such as, "You couldn't pour water out of a boot if the instructions were written on the heel."

Instead of playing along, however, Ventura ridiculed perhaps the last man Minnesotans like to see ridiculed, the folksy, bespectacled and beloved Keillor.

"Garrison was actually lighthearted," 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 endearing."



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