

A portrait of Tim Pawlenty, a middle-aged man with dark hair, wearing a bright red button-down shirt. He is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a neutral expression. The background is a soft-focus landscape of green trees and a blue sky with light clouds.

COURAGE
to **STAND**

an American Story

**TIM
PAWLENTY**

FORMER GOVERNOR OF MINNESOTA

COURAGE *to* **STAND**





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to **STAND**

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an American Story

PAWLENTY



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Courage to Stand: An American Story

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*To Mary, Anna, and Mara,
and in memory of Gene and Ginny*

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INTRODUCTION

*A crushing deficit. Runaway spending. A rocky economy.
A broken health-care system. Big government out of control.*

AMERICA IS IN TROUBLE.

People I talk to in every small town and big city across this great country of ours recognize we're headed down a dangerous road. Here's what I mean.

In the spring of 2010, the world watched in horror as Greece's financial system suffered a near-total meltdown. There were protests and riots in the streets as a populace so addicted to entitlements and living the good life off the government dole faced the harsh reality that they might have to sacrifice what the government had promised them—because the government simply had no more money to pay for it. An entire population seemed horrified that they might have to work past the common retirement age of sixty-one. Imagine.

My family was eating breakfast one morning, discussing Greece and its financial trouble because it was in the newspaper. Mara, my then-thirteen-year-old daughter, completely unprompted, with simplicity and clarity, looked at me and said, "That will be America soon."

That's a quote. I didn't prompt her. A thirteen-year-old

recognized America is spending blindly toward the edge of a cliff. “That will be America soon.”

If a child can see it, why can't the Washington establishment? And yet here we are, faced with leadership at various levels of government—especially the national level—who are unwilling or unable to tackle the real issues of our time.

For years, politicians in this country have only been rewarded for saying yes. That's a basic, undeniable truth. Yes to more spending. Yes to big bailouts. Yes to finding new ways to bring the bacon back home to their states and districts and towns and friends, no matter what the cost to everyone else. Yes to the funding of big-government programs that sound like a dream come true for many Americans but wind up costing every one of us so much that they damage our economy. And in the long run, these programs damage something much more important. They damage the American spirit.

Whatever happened to the power of *Enough?* the power and the guts to say, “No”?

I'm hopeful we've reached a turning point in America's history. A point where it's no longer acceptable to complain while doing nothing to actually make things better. Let's stop admiring the problem and start proposing the solution. It's no longer okay to look backward, unless it's to find inspiration or recognize the errors of the past so we can be certain we don't repeat them.

More than anything, right now, at this moment in history, I believe it's time for America to square its shoulders and get about the business of fixing our problems ourselves. It's a difficult job. But it's an essential job. It must be done. And it's a job that will serve us well.

For the past eight years, I've tried to inspire just that kind of pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps reform in my home state of

Minnesota. I took the job of leading Minnesotans through one of the most trying and difficult periods of change the state has ever known. And guess what? We did pretty well in what is arguably the most liberal state in the nation. In the spawning ground of Eugene McCarthy, Hubert Humphrey, Walter Mondale, Paul Wellstone, and yes, even Al Franken, we've managed to cut spending, reform health care, reduce big government, and set Minnesota on a better course for the future. And we did it without raising taxes.

It wasn't easy. Political fists were bloodied. A few teeth got knocked out. There were even moments when we shook hands across the aisle and joined forces. I believe we succeeded because I was willing to do whatever it took to get the job done. The people of Minnesota deserved nothing less, and I believe the American people should demand the very same commitment from their leaders in Washington.

The political reward system needs to change. We must become a country in which we respect leaders who are willing to stand up, draw a line in the sand, and say no to the never-ending demands for more spending while saying yes to a future that makes sense not only right now, but for the America our children and *their* children will inherit.

Spending our way out of recession? Spending our way out of the health-care crisis? Spending our way out of debt? Does that really make sense? Runaway spending in Washington certainly isn't new, and many Republicans in recent history haven't exactly adhered to the "fiscally conservative" promise that the Republican Party is supposed to live by.

So there's plenty of blame to go around. But the fact is, the current administration, through the smoke-and-mirror effect of bail-outs and big-government spending, has taken America's future and leveraged it into a mountain of debt so large it's nearly impossible

for anyone to wrap their heads around. It pretends more spending will help our problems go away. That's fiction.

When the rain started to fall on America's picnic, Washington hung up a big old plastic tarp to protect us from the deluge. (Ever wonder why they call some of these things "TARP funds"?) Good intentions? Maybe. But a bad decision. The problem was, the rain just kept coming. The tarp started sagging in the middle and filling up with water. Poke it with a broom handle all you want, try to drain some of that rainwater over the sides, but the blanket below is getting awfully wet in the meantime. Everyone can see the tarp's starting to tear at the seams, and we've run out of duct tape. This whole thing's going to collapse—and the picnic will simply be over. Time for a new plan.

When it comes to big-government spending and the future of our economy, we've reached a point where politics must be set aside and new solutions must be found. This is no longer a dispute between Republicans and Democrats or conservatives and liberals. It's a matter of junior high math.

You simply can't have a spending graph that goes sharply up, coupled with a revenue graph that's nearly flat. Anyone who has ever balanced a ledger—scratch that—anyone who has ever balanced a checkbook at their kitchen table should be able to see the problem. Mercifully, Americans are beginning to see this. They're smart, and they get it.

Here's the breakdown: The federal government takes in approximately \$2.2 trillion per year, in total, from all sources. They—rather we, since it is our money after all—spent \$3.7 trillion last year. So we spend more than we make. It doesn't work.

But that's not the half of it. We have \$14 trillion of debt and a \$65-trillion liability in front of us if we include Social Security,

government pensions, and all of the various entitlement programs that are considered “off the books.”

The math just doesn’t work. No reasonable amount of revenue will ever offset that liability. Ever. The truth of the matter is, just as we’ve done in the formerly free-spending state of Minnesota over the last eight years, we’re going to have to change, to reform our ways. The problems we face now loom so large, and the citizens of this country are so well-informed and aware of what’s at stake, that I think most Americans are increasingly willing to take difficult but reasonable steps to fix them.

The bigger question, the question we all need to ask, is, “Do our politicians have the political will to do it?” Can the new breed of politicians that are making their way into Washington actually lead us through? I sure hope so. I mean, we have to find the resolve, the political backbone to stand up to the status quo, to say, “No. Enough’s enough. We have to do this. Right now.”

We did it in Minnesota, and we have to do it in Washington.

I don’t claim to have all the answers, and I certainly haven’t done everything perfectly in my time as Governor. But I have learned some things along the way and accomplished some things that are instructive for the country right now. Lessons built from experience. Lessons that could be instructive for the federal government and for those individuals now settling into Washington who care about the future of this great nation—who have what it takes to move us forward.

It won’t be easy. It never is. But America was built on grit and courage, on the backs of men and women who have been willing to shoulder the weight of the seemingly impossible tasks laid out before them, and who have only grown stronger in the face of obstacles and opposition.

Every one of us has that courage inside us. The courage to do

the right thing. The courage to say, “No” when everyone else says “Yes”—because we know it’s the right thing to do; and the courage to say “Yes” to what’s right, even in the face of staunch opposition. It comes down to the courage to stand up for what we believe in, as well as the courage to simply stand up—no matter how many times we’re knocked down.

Calling upon that courage when it’s needed most is the American way. It’s that powerful resolve that we all recognize as the American spirit.

That’s the spirit I was raised with here in Minnesota, the spirit I hope I can impart in some small way by sharing my story, sharing my views, and sharing a few insights I’ve gained on this journey—a journey that started on the streets of South St. Paul and led me through the end of my second term as Governor of the great state I call home.

As I left my time in office behind, I couldn’t predict what the future would bring, but I left the Governor’s office knowing I had worked hard and given my best. I used my best judgment and applied plenty of good old American common sense to the decisions I made. Most of all, I left being open to whatever might come next. A Christian friend gave me a reminder years ago to put things in perspective, not only in my political career, but in my life more broadly. *Although we’re in charge of the effort, some things are out of our control. We need to trust that the future lies in God’s hands.*

There is much work to be done, and I have the will and desire to do my part, whatever that part may be. If I can help to shape America’s future for the better in any small way, then it is my duty, and my honor, to serve in whatever capacity I can.

The funny thing is, through all of the debates and battles, triumphs and losses, I haven’t become tired—of any of it. In fact,

after all these years, I find just the opposite is true: I'm more energized every single day. With every person I meet, every hand I shake, every eye I lock, every speech I give across this great country, I'm more inspired by the possibility of what lies ahead for America.

Now we need to get it done.

1

GAME FACE

FOR ALL THE POMP AND CIRCUMSTANCE that comes with the changing of the guard after any big election in this country, there is one detail that someone along the way seems to have overlooked: No one hands the incoming Mayor or Governor or President a playbook. There's no instruction manual. Despite the plethora of people who want to offer advice and the memos that cover logistics, when it comes right down to making important decisions, you're on your own—and you'd better have the experience, faith, strength, and composure for whatever might come your way.

Never was that made more clear to me than in the first few days after I was elected Governor of Minnesota in 2002.

My election was hard fought. I got into the race pretty late, I had far less money than my opponents, and despite serving as Majority Leader in the Minnesota House of Representatives,

I didn't have much name recognition. In the back of my mind, I'm not sure I ever fully expected to win. Running on a truly conservative platform, promising not to raise taxes in the bluest of the blue states? My chances of becoming Governor of Minnesota could best be summed up as more of a remote possibility than a foregone conclusion.

The morning after the election, I remember waking up in our family's suburban home, the same house where I'd slept nearly every night since 1994, and looking out our bedroom window to find the surreal new presence of State Troopers milling about my driveway. *What will the neighbors think of all this?* Despite having served ten years in the legislature, this clearly marked a major transition for my family.

And that word, *transition*, loomed incredibly large. I would have only about sixty days to build a team and set everything in place before the inauguration in January. How would I start the actual work of fulfilling the promises I'd made to the people of Minnesota? I tried to wrap my mind around it all over breakfast. That's when I received a phone call reminding me of a meeting with Governor Ventura.

Jesse Ventura, the ex-professional wrestler with the larger-than-life personality (and the stature to match) had served four years as one of the more colorful Governors in Minnesota's history. Being a bit of a wrestling fan myself and having watched matches including masters like Hulk Hogan and Jesse Ventura, I respected Governor Ventura's intensity as well as his willingness to enter public service.

Jesse "the Body" Ventura had not been my election opponent; he'd decided not to seek a second term. My DFL (that's the Democratic-Farmer-Labor party, generally the prevailing party in Minnesota and fully aligned with the national Democratic party)

opponent was Senate Majority Leader Roger Moe, a thirty-plus-year veteran of the state Senate. Former Congressman Tim Penny was the Independence Party candidate.

From what I could tell, Governor Ventura was ready to move on. Life in public office had taken a toll on his family, and after reaching a high point on the bell curve of national and international prominence, he had decided it was time to step off the mat.

The meeting was a way of passing the symbolic baton, and a press conference was scheduled to reinforce that point.

Even though I'd served in the legislature for years, stepping into the Governor's office, that physical space in the southwest corner of the capitol, still inspired a great deal of awe for me. There's a kind of confusion about how you get to the office itself, through a series of doors—one door leads to another, and another, to the point that the uninitiated might feel like they're caught in a carnival mirror maze.

By now I know my way, of course, but I remember stepping into the room that day thinking how remarkable it all was. I had just been elected Governor of the state and would have to carry all the responsibility that came with the office. There are 5.3 million people in the state of Minnesota, and no matter how many of them had actually voted for me, all of them would be turning to me for leadership and guidance at the highest level.

Now it was time to take that first step.

Governor Ventura and I had weathered our share of run-ins through the years and had actually grown to know each other quite well. I was conservative, and he was famously Independent, so while we were on the same team in serving the people, we were periodically adversaries on some pretty big issues. And when the administration was doing something I didn't agree with, it fell to me as House Majority Leader to engage the issue in the press.

Sometimes it was even fun—a good sound bite helps draw media attention to your cause.

I recall one particular instance when something I said publicly turned out to be more provocative than I could have imagined. Responding to an increase in state taxes, I said in an interview, “In the cause to cut taxes, Jesse Ventura has left the taxpayers behind enemy lines.”

Ventura, a former Navy man, apparently heard my comment on the radio and was deeply offended by it. As I returned to my office, the phone rang. It was Ventura’s assistant. “The Governor’s going to be in your office in five minutes.” He was driving all the way in from his house in Maple Grove, she told me. If he was driving twenty-plus miles to see me instead of just calling, clearly he was intent on delivering his message in person.

The next thing I knew, Governor Ventura appeared in my office in casual clothes, shut the door, and started shouting. “I was in the military, and we don’t leave anybody behind enemy lines, you blankety blank-blank!” It was loud. The Speaker of the House had an adjacent office and later told me he could hear the shouts through the thick, old walls.

At one point we were both standing, and my back was against the wall as he moved toward me. I thought, *He’s gonna hit me!* Truly, I thought for sure it was coming. *He’s gonna smack me.* He was the kind of guy who could get agitated quickly, and I’d seen it often, but I’d never seen him take it to a physical level. I realized that as dramatic and bizarre as this whole situation was, we needed to de-escalate. Without shouting, I calmly told him that I had used the phrase “behind enemy lines” as a rhetorical device, a metaphor, and I never meant for it to reflect on his military service or commitment. He was owed an apology, and I apologized.

The hockey player and wrestling fan in me would have taken

some pride in surviving a Jesse Ventura smackdown. But the apology felt better. And that was all it took to let the air out of the balloon. He went from enraged to reasonable and graciously accepted the apology. The meeting ended well.

Sometimes an apology is itself a sign of strength.

That's just one of many meetings I had with Ventura that were colorful, to say the least, but over the years I've come to like and respect him. He has been fair-minded about my work as Governor, and we've even played golf a few times. I see him as different from his public persona. He is engaging, has a great sense of humor, and is a strongly devoted family man.

So walking into his office that November day in 2002, I kind of hoped he would share some insights on what lay ahead for me, maybe tell me a few things that a Governor needs to know or share some practical steps that I ought to take to get ready for January. Something. When he wasn't forthcoming after a bit of small talk, I came right out and asked him, "You got any advice for me?"

"Nope," he said.

That was it! Minutes later we stepped out into the reception room for our press conference. He was decent. He was kind. He didn't try to tell me what to do, and I respected that, and his team turned out to be very helpful during the transition.

I would soon need all the insight, wisdom, and guidance I could draw upon, because I was about to get hit harder than any blow Ventura could have laid on me.

A FEW WEEKS into the whirlwind of pulling together my transition team, planning an inaugural celebration for January, and figuring out that I could turn to the National Governors Association for advice while preparing my family for this strange new world in

which State Troopers were staking out our house in order to keep us all safe, I was called to another meeting to receive the official November budget forecast.

Minnesota is on a two-year budget cycle, and budget forecasts are put together twice a year—in February and November—in order to give everyone a heads-up on how things are looking. In an election year, the November forecast is typically shared with the Governor-elect just before it is announced publicly, and that was exactly what this meeting was all about.

Back in February of that year, the forecast had predicted something close to a \$2 billion deficit. In a state in which spending had been out of control for decades, that didn't actually sound so bad. The only problem was, the economy in Minnesota had been deteriorating all year.

As I sat down with some of my transition leaders in a nondescript government conference room in a nondescript government office building that served as our transition headquarters just down the street from the capitol, I remember thinking that surely the deficit would have grown. *Okay, it could get as high as two-five, two-eight. . . . Huge problem? Yes. But we can handle it.*

So we settled in, and the state finance officials dimmed the lights a bit and threw a slide up on the screen, and right off the bat they let us have it. The projected deficit had ballooned to nearly \$4.6 billion.

For a moment, it was as if all the oxygen had been sucked out of the room. Everyone went silent, and I noticed a few eyeballs glancing my way, anticipating a reaction.

To put into perspective just how big this problem was, the entire Minnesota state budget back then was around \$28 billion. We were overextended by about 17 percent.

Hearing a number that big, no matter who you are and how

well you think you're prepared to handle the job of Governor, you can't help but feel challenged. You can't help but think, *This is awful*. I mean, I wasn't even sitting under the capitol dome yet, and here I was faced with what seemed like a nearly insurmountable economic challenge, in an economy that was already in decline.

In that moment, the weight of my new position took hold. It's one thing to be a legislator when the state is hit with bad news. As Majority Leader, I could have made a comment or held a press conference or responded as part of a larger process. But in that moment, I realized, *This team of people is looking to me for leadership. They're looking to me for strength. I need to be their Governor—right now.*

Over time, organizations tend to take on the tempo, characteristics, and personalities of their leaders. It's something I've observed in practice, and it's been written about by an endless parade of business experts and leaders from all walks of life. In any moment—but especially in moments of crisis or stress—what you project truly matters. It matters in terms of emotion, character, strength, perspective, values, and vision. This was just such a moment, and it was an early test for me.

Luckily, it was only a small group of people in that conference room, because I'm pretty sure a couple of those staffers caught a glimpse of my pale-faced horror at the size of that deficit—even if only for a second before I pushed that feeling of shock and dismay aside. I remember thinking, *I can't project this as a knockout blow. The team needs to see we can handle this.* So as much as I wanted to show my frustration, I held my reaction at bay.

Thinking and acting like a true leader in times of great difficulty is a huge responsibility. It takes discipline and focus. It's a switch that flips more naturally for me now, after eight years

in office leading Minnesota through all of the ups and downs and challenges we've endured. Yet one of the things I find most remarkable about leading is the leeway it affords you to recognize opportunity in even the most dire of circumstances.

The fact is, leadership takes optimism. Not blind optimism. *Informed* optimism. Imagine what would happen if a leader emerged from behind closed doors in the midst of a crisis and told the American people, "Well, folks, I've got some bad news. We're in some hot water here, and I don't know what to do about it. Basically, we're hosed. Things just aren't looking good for the future, and we may just have to throw in the towel."

It seems like common sense that no leader in his or her right mind would ever say such a thing. And yet it takes more than common sense to see beyond the dire circumstances that are sometimes laid before you. It takes thoughtful optimism and courage and the ability to recognize that those challenges may actually create opportunity.

As the budget-office gurus continued to lay out the details of the dismal financial situation I was about to inherit as Governor, I quickly began throwing coal on the engine of a whole new train of thought. *This isn't a disaster; it's an opportunity, because it's going to force change. Positive change. Change that will set this state back on the right track, and finally—finally!—force state government to accept some fiscal responsibility.*

Forcing fiscal responsibility on a government that had been overspending for forty years wouldn't be easy, of course, even in the face of financial disaster. It's tough to make anyone eat plain old potatoes when they've grown accustomed to pouring on boatloads of gravy for decades. But when the battle came, and it would most certainly come, I knew I had a powerful weapon in my arsenal. I had a platform that I had just successfully stood upon to

win the election. A key plank in that platform was that I absolutely refused to raise taxes.

I realized as I sat in that conference room that there was a line in the sand here—a promise I had made to the people of Minnesota, a promise I intended to keep with all my heart and soul. I knew I had to maintain that position as a matter of credibility and integrity, in addition to the fact that it was something I wholeheartedly believed in.

Minnesota at that time was already one of the top five most highly taxed states in the country. The thought of adding to that burden, which already heavily weighed on the hardworking people of the state, was unfathomable to me. So while this budget crisis was a major problem, and it definitely worried me, I also immediately knew there was only one way forward. We would have to cut spending. We would have to cut back on the big-government promises and programs of the past. We would have to find the strength to move Minnesota in a new direction.

That moment when the budget news slapped us all in the face was the first chance I had as Governor to demonstrate the calm, steady demeanor that effective leadership demands. My team needed to see it, just as the people of Minnesota would need to see it when this problem came their way in the morning news reports.

We see the effects of steady leadership all around us. We recognize great leadership in many walks of life. When something goes wrong, people either get nervous or they gain assurance from their leader's strength. Often, it's not even anything that's said. Sometimes it's in precisely what's not said. And sometimes the message is conveyed simply by the way a leader holds himself when confronted with a trying and difficult situation.

By the time I left that conference room, I knew that tackling the

tasks that lay before me would take all of my strength, faith, hard work, and commitment. But I also knew the people of Minnesota would be up to the challenge and help me lead the state down an entirely new path.

A few weeks later, in my very first State of the State address, I did my best to distill the essence of my newfound resolve into words my listeners would be ready and willing to hear. It's been eight years since I've gone back and looked closely at that speech, but I clearly remember the simple message: "Sure, we've got a problem, but this is Minnesota. And let me tell you about Minnesota strength, and Minnesota people, and Minnesota resolve, and Minnesota commitment and service. Let me remind you how we've overcome these challenges historically."

It's funny, thinking about it now. The highlights of that speech could very well serve as a road map for the life that led me to the Governor's office in the first place. A life in which I was surrounded by Minnesota strength and Minnesota people. A life filled with examples of Minnesota resolve and commitment and service. The fact is, I would need to lean on every bit of my upbringing, my family, and my faith in order to stand up to the opposing forces and unexpected twists of fate that would pummel our state over the course of the next eight years.

After all, that personal experience and history made me the person I am today.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

WHEN I COUNT MY BLESSINGS, those who have been friends and neighbors throughout the years always top the list. No matter what twists and turns life has taken, I've been fortunate to have been surrounded by people who know me just as "Tim." So a special thank-you to our friends from Eagan, our neighborhood, our children's schools, law school, and our places of employment, all of whom know Mary and me in environments that, for the most part, do not intersect politics. Each of you has been a source of joy and instrumental in keeping our lives truly "normal."

From the beginning of my involvement in elective politics, I've been grateful for steadfast supporters. No one, myself included, accomplishes anything in politics without them. Thank you to each and every one who volunteered during my campaigns, who worked as part of the staff, who provided financial support, who wrote me heartwarming notes at just the right time, and who made all the difference in the outcome of each election. My official office was also filled with dedicated public servants. I am profoundly grateful for all you have done and all we were able to accomplish together.

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