

CHALLENGING RUSS FEINGOLD IN 2004

LIKELY REPUBLICAN CONTENDERS

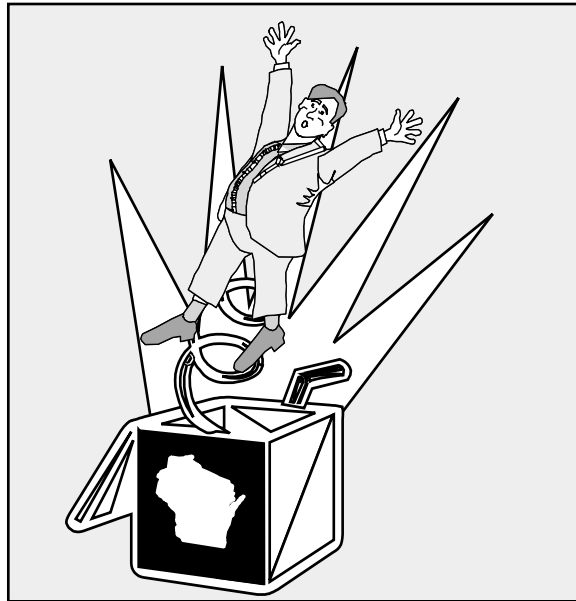
PHILIP J. McDADE

Will Karl Rove come calling on the state of Wisconsin? And does he have U.S. Senator Russ Feingold in his eyesights?

Rove and the man he works for — President George W. Bush — rolled the dice in the 2002 elections. They put the president's political stature on the line in an effort to strengthen the Republican's hold on the U.S. House of Representatives and wrest control of the U.S. Senate away from the Democrats.

They came up big, picking up six seats in the House (they now control the chamber by a 229-206 margin) and gaining control of the Senate. But the GOP's hold on the Senate is still tenuous, with only a bare majority of 51 seats on the Republicans' side. Any number of Bush initiatives — be it overhauling federal medical programs, pushing for permanent tax cuts, or getting judicial appointments approved — could be derailed by wayward Republicans in the Senate who don't toe the partisan line.

So Bush, in his anticipated run for re-election in 2004, is certain to be looking for seats in the Senate that he can turn over to the Republican side with the same powers of per-



suasion he utilized so skillfully in 2002. And that means Rove, Bush's chief political advisor and strategist nonpareil, is almost certainly eyeing Wisconsin and Feingold.

Wisconsin's junior senator has succeeded in garnering an odd confluence of accomplishments — a politician who is respected and admired by the electorate, yet struggles to win broad levels

of its support. He first won election to the Senate in 1992 with 53 percent of the vote, defeating incumbent GOP Senator Robert Kasten, in what turned out to be a good year nationally for Democrats. His margin fell in 1998, when he garnered just 51 percent of the vote against GOP Congressman Mark Neumann.

Part of Feingold's struggle in connecting with a broad majority of the electorate can be explained by his politics. He's quick to invoke Wisconsin's Progressive Party heritage, and that often involves taking stands to the left of Wisconsin's political mainstream. For instance, Feingold in 1999 and in 2000 received perfect or near-perfect ratings from liberal groups

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such as the American Civil Liberties Union and Americans for Democratic Action. Those rankings put him to the left of his fellow Wisconsin Democrat in the Senate, Herb Kohl. In the year 2000, the respected non-partisan *National Journal* ranked Feingold as voting the liberal line on economic issues 94 percent of the time, compared to 61 percent for Kohl. Following the Democrat Party's poor showing in the 2002 mid-term elections, Feingold said the problem with the party was that it had forgotten its progressive, liberal traditions.

"We need to get back to some of the progressive roots of the party," he told the *Green Bay Press-Gazette* shortly after the 2002 elections. "My goal here is to work with . . . all the other (Democratic) members of the Senate to have a stronger message, a message that the average person can relate (to) that is more populist in nature, so we don't try to win the election just through Washington talk."

Yet Feingold also enjoys a certain level of respect and admiration from Wisconsin voters, tied in part to his often-quirky voting habits. He famously opposed the U.S. Patriot Act, the only senator to do so, on the grounds that it impinged on civil liberties. Those same concerns made him one of the few senators to oppose Bush's Homeland Security Act. For the state that brought the U.S. Senate Joe McCarthy, Feingold's civil libertarian concerns have a certain resonance. Similarly, his support for Bush's nomination of John Ashcroft to attorney general — on the grounds that presidents conservative or liberal ought to have broad discretion on cabinet appointments — showed a willingness to cross the standard liberal line drawn in the sand on such controversial appointments. In addition, his longtime support for campaign finance reform, regardless of its potential constitutional problems, probably scores him points with voters in a state that's long embraced political reforms. And in some national quarters, Feingold is viewed as one of the likely heirs to the progressive, liberal mantle long worn by Minnesota Senator Paul Wellstone, who died in a plane crash just days before the 2002 elections.

In addition, Feingold has cultivated a sort of cheapskate, man-of-the-people image akin to that of former Democrat Wisconsin Senator William Proxmire. He's one of the Senate's least wealthy members, owns a heavily mortgaged home in a middle class Middleton neighborhood, and writes checks for his childrens' public college education — all facts he proudly owns up to. His practice of holding listening sessions every year in each of Wisconsin's 72 counties is reminiscent of the old saw about Proxmire — that you couldn't go to a Green Bay Packers game at Lambeau Field without first having to shake Proxmire's hand outside the stadium.

Feingold also has recent Wisconsin electoral history on his side. By most measures, Wisconsin trends Democratic in statewide elections. The recent successful candidacies of Democrats Jim Doyle for governor and Peg Lautenschlager for attorney general proved once again that Republicans not named Tommy Thompson face uphill battles in statewide elections. Feingold will also be running in a presidential election year, which usually results in an upswing in the Democratic turnout in Wisconsin. The last Republican presidential candidate to take Wisconsin was Ronald Reagan way back in 1984. (Even repeated visits to the state by Bush in 2000, and the statewide Republican organization built up by Thompson, failed to deliver the state to the GOP side.)

Still, any list of vulnerable senators on the Democrat's side in 2004 is likely to include Feingold. For starters, he's never garnered more than 53 percent of the vote in either of his two Senate campaigns — incumbents are usually viewed as vulnerable if they consistently poll below 55 percent. Secondly, Feingold's stance on campaign financing, and his lack of personal wealth, can put him at a financial disadvantage in a high profile, expensive race. (This is a point of contention between Feingold and Republicans. Feingold says he doesn't want outside or third-party groups spending money on his behalf; Republicans accuse Feingold of proclaiming his abhorrence to outside money with a wink and a nod, knowing

full well that outside money will find its way into the campaign.)

Finally, the field of Senate candidates up for election in 2004 appears chock full of candidates on both sides — Maryland's Barbara Mikulski, Connecticut's Christopher Dodd, Indiana's Evan Bayh, and Louisiana's John Breux among the Democrats, and Utah's Robert Bennett, Kansas' Sam Brownback, Oklahoma's Don Nickles, Alaska's Frank Murkowski, and Idaho's Mike Crapo among the Republicans — who appear set for easy victories.

Sure, there are vulnerable incumbents — Illinois' Peter Fitzgerald and Kentucky's Jim Bunning on the Republican side, and Nevada's Harry Reid and Arkansas' Blanche Lincoln on the Democrat side.

But the field of potentially vulnerable candidates in 2004 appears to be a narrow one, meaning that parties and interest groups will be targeting the vulnerable seats with both barrels. Any objective list of the top half-dozen vulnerable Senators up for election in 2004 is sure to include Feingold.

So who is likely to challenge Feingold? Wisconsin Republicans generally try to avoid expensive, contentious primaries. They like to save their money for the general election, knowing that Democrats enjoy an inherent edge in statewide elections. They also don't like to criticize each other, harking back to Reagan's view that Republicans should avoid criticizing each other if they want to become the country's majority party.

But the Rove tactic for targeted races is to pick out one person, clear the field of other intra-party challengers, and focus attention and resources on the favored candidate. He did this in Georgia and North Carolina, where

he cleared the way for the successful candidacies of Saxby Chambliss and Elizabeth Dole. He did the same in Missouri, backing challenger Jim Talent in his successful victory over incumbent Jean Carnahan. He exerted tremendous control over Minnesota's statewide races in 2002, convincing Tom Pawlenty to run for governor when he was contemplating a run for the Senate, and backing one-time Democrat Norm Coleman for the Senate race. Both Pawlenty and Coleman won, in a state that has long favored Democrats in statewide elections. And Rove lays the groundwork early; planning for the 2002 mid-term elections began within months after Bush took office following the controversial 2000 presidential election.

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What's important to remember when considering Rove's tactics is that political philosophy, or adherence to a certain set of values, is a minor matter. Chambliss and Talent are stout conservatives, while Coleman was a former Democrat who took issue with Bush's position on issues such as trade with Cuba. Dole, a former Labor and Transportation secretary, has long been viewed skeptically by elements of the GOP's right-

wing core. Rather, Rove looks to find a candidate who “fits” the state and — most importantly — is electable statewide. He also prefers candidates who have experience in politics, and have withstood the trials of tough campaigns. (Dole ran for president in 2000, Chambliss and Talent were former members of the U.S. House of Representatives, and Coleman was the former mayor of St. Paul.) In the words of *Washington Post* columnist George Will, the ideal Republican candidates are “experienced public officials . . . who are so well-defined in the state's mind that they are insulated from Democrats' attempts to define them with negative advertising.”

Who might Rove have in mind for Wisconsin? Possible candidates fit into several categories:

The Unlikely Ones

If Rove turns to the state's congressional delegation, he'll likely bypass GOP Representatives Tom Petri and James Sensenbrenner. Both are wealthy individuals who could throw a lot of money at a statewide campaign. And both are well known in their home bases — suburban Milwaukee for Sensenbrenner and the lower Fox Valley for Petri.

But Petri and Sensenbrenner are unlikely for three major reasons. Both are presumably on the tail ends of their congressional careers; Petri is 62 and Sensenbrenner turns 60 this year. Both are ensconced in safe seats — the two safest for Republicans in the state — and thus haven't run the vigorous, back-and-forth campaign that any race against Feingold will surely become. And both have real seniority in Congress — Sensenbrenner chairs the House Judiciary Committee, and Petri chairs the highways subcommittee of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. Those assignments come with significant perks and responsibilities. Petri and Sensenbrenner are unlikely to feel the need or pull to head over to the upper chamber.

The Also-Rans

A few well-known Republicans have already run a statewide race for Senate. Neumann came within 38,000 votes of topping Feingold in 1998. State Senator Robert Welch lost to Kohl in 1994, garnering 41 percent of the vote. And former Governor Scott McCallum ran against William Proxmire in 1982, losing by a near 2-to-1 margin.

Neumann and Welch are well-liked by the conservative wing of the party for their views on taxes, cutting government spending, and abortion. But both have become marginalized. Neumann — a successful businessman before his foray into politics — has dropped out of the political scene altogether since his loss four years ago to Feingold. Republicans have said

they doubt he would return to public life. Welch, on the other hand, now sits in the majority in the Wisconsin Senate. But he's been bypassed for plum assignments, such as co-chairman of the budget-writing Joint Finance Committee, which would give him the kind of high profile needed for another run.

McCallum, although only 52 and in extremely good health (one rap on him was that he played too much basketball at the expense of old-fashioned politicking), generates little enthusiasm among Republicans. He's the one, after all (bad economy or not), who lost the governorship after 16 years of GOP control, Republicans reason. And he's never generated much enthusiasm from the Republican faithful. "He's served his time," said one unnamed GOP wag after his loss in the 2002 governor's race. "He's done."

Two Wild-Cards Named Scott

One Scott gave up one of the most promising congressional careers in Wisconsin. The other turned heads by winning an election in Milwaukee County, home to Socialist mayors and the state's Democratic base.

Former television anchor Scott Klug of Madison won a surprise election to the House in 1990, upsetting 32-year veteran Robert Kastenmeier. He then easily won three more terms in the House, and seemed primed for a long career there. Republicans also openly talked about him advancing to either the Senate or the governor's seat. He was the kind of candidate that parties love — smart, good on the stump, comfortable and familiar with television, and able to distill a campaign message into digestible sound bites. Plus, he hailed from Madison, and political pros love nothing more than candidates who can eat into the opposition party's base — in Klug's case, Madison and the rest of Democrat-leaning Dane County.

But Klug gave it all up in 1998, stepping aside to spend more time with his family. He bought a magazine publishing company in rural Dane County, and still makes the occasional pitch for Wisconsin Republican candi-

dates. He's still a visible presence in Madison, although not in an overtly political way.

Political pros say it's often hard to come back into politics after being out of the lime-light for more than a few years. And Klug has never made any secret of his unwillingness to become a permanent politician. Still, such is the draw of Klug and his potential appeal that his name comes up almost any time Republicans and political observers speculate about statewide candidates for the GOP.

Like Klug, Wauwatosa's Scott Walker seemingly came out of nowhere to stake a claim as one of the GOP's most attractive potential statewide candidates. Barely out of college when elected to the state Assembly in 1993, Walker carved out a steady legislative career as one of the young Republican stalwarts that helped Thompson and former Assembly Speaker Scott Jensen wrest control of the lower chamber from the Democrats.

Then, when a pension scandal roiled Milwaukee County politics, Walker jumped at the opportunity. He got behind an enormously successful recall petition effort that ousted several county board members and led to the forced resignation of County Executive Thomas Ament. Walker jumped into the 2002 race for county executive after some better-known Milwaukee politicians passed on it. Few expected Walker to win, given his standing as a Republican — and a staunchly conservative one at that — in a heavily Democratic county. But Walker won going away, parlaying a reformist message with pledges to not raise taxes and keep the lid on county spending.

Walker, like Klug, is an articulate politician, comfortable with the demands of television and talk radio, who knows how to put

together a campaign. He, too, makes for an attractive statewide candidate, because his base cuts into the Democratic stronghold of Milwaukee County. Still, current speculation has Walker solidifying his hold on the county executive's spot by seeking re-election to the post in 2004.

The Up-and-Comers

In 1998, Wisconsin voters elected two new Republican faces to Congress — Janesville's Paul Ryan and Green Bay's Mark Green. The two Republicans, many in the party suggest, are the party's best candidates for taking on a statewide race and winning.

Both are young — Ryan is 32, and Green is 42. Both are sharp, articulate politicians with a firm grasp of policy nuances and political themes that appeal to voters. Ryan cut his political teeth in Washington, D.C., working for the likes of William Bennett and Kasten before returning to his Janesville home in 1998 to run for Congress. Green was elected to the Wisconsin Assembly in 1992, and quickly rose to become

one of the Republican Assembly's chief strategists. In 1998, he ran for Congress, and became the only Republican that year to defeat an incumbent Democratic congressman when he knocked off Representative Jay Johnson.

Both Ryan and Green are almost always mentioned — by people in both parties — as potential statewide candidates. Green, a lawyer, passed on running for Wisconsin attorney general in 2002. But Green's camp, and party insiders, suggest Green may be a more likely candidate for a Wisconsin-based office. He has three young children, and some suggest he leans toward spending more time with his family in Wisconsin, and less as a commuting congressman.

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Ryan, however, learned his politics in the nation's capital, and has a Jack Kemp-like enthusiasm in him for the wonky policy workings of Washington. Moving over to the Senate would be the next, natural progression for the Republican Ryan.

The Elephant in the Room

Of course, no discussion of potential statewide candidates for office would be complete with mentioning Tommy G. Thompson. Two years into his stint as Secretary of Health and Human Services, Thompson in many ways remains the state's dominant political force.

He's better known than any politician in the state, still admired and well liked, and is known for keeping tabs on matters back home. He even came back to Wisconsin in the waning days of the 2002 election, and campaigned for two state Senate candidates hoping to unseat incumbents. Both won, giving control of the state Senate to Republicans, and proving to many that Thompson still had the touch. He's just about the only politician in Wisconsin who could walk through any VFW hall, bowling alley, or factory floor in the state and not have people wonder "Who's this guy?"

Most of the immediate speculation following the 2002 election centered on Thompson seeking his governor's seat again in 2006 against former rival Jim Doyle. But in many respects, Thompson would make an ideal Senate candidate. After two years fighting the bureaucratic battles as a cabinet secretary, he's well versed in how Washington works. He'd have instant access to money, having organized a premier fundraising operation in Wisconsin. He'd probably get the blessing of Bush, who might need someone of Thompson's stature if the Republicans really want to go after Feingold. And he would fit columnist Will's articulation of the ideal GOP candidate — someone so well known that attempts to define him negatively would inevitably fail.

Would he? "(I)t's people back home speculating," Thompson spokesman Tony Jewel told

the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* shortly after the 2002 elections about the talk surrounding the former popular governor's plans.

Maybe It's No One Notable

Success in politics, wags like to say, is as much about timing as anything else. Just ask Jim Doyle, who bided his time as attorney general, waited for Thompson to leave for Washington, ran when the economy turned sour, and ended up governor.

Many in the GOP suggest 2006 would be the ideal time for Republicans to make their move. Some predict the state's budget deficit will force Doyle to make unpopular spending cuts and thus be weakened as a candidate up for re-election. And then there is Kohl, who is up for election in 2006. He'll be 71 when his term comes up, and will have served three terms. Does he have the energy and drive for another term? Any departure by the big-spending Kohl will almost certainly result in an aggressive Republican bid for the seat. Republicans thinking of running for the Senate may think it wiser to hold off on challenging Feingold and take their chances on a possibly vacant Kohl seat.

Thompson's possible interest in the race may also be tempered by ambitious plans the Bush Administration has for major health-care reforms. If Bush pushes a health-care initiative, he'd likely want Thompson around for it, rather than see him leave midstream for an extended Senate campaign back home.

And for the likes of Ryan and Green, there is considerable risk in giving up promising — and safe, given the political makeup of their districts — congressional careers, particularly as members of the majority party. A race against Feingold is no guaranteed victory; their current congressional seats all but are. Ryan in particular has secured a high-profile seat on the House's Ways and Means Committee.

"People ask me that stuff all the time," Ryan said to the *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* recently, dismissing speculation about his future plans. "I want to get to work."