

Mondale addresses crowd

Veteran politician stops at MSU after being thrust into U.S. Senate race

It was something no one expected to see ever again - Walter Mondale running for the U.S. Senate - and about 500 people came to Minnesota State University Friday to take a look. The mostly Democratic crowd gave the former vice president, senator and ambassador a number of standing ovations, and Mondale joked that the level of interest in him has picked up compared to his retirement days.

"Normally we draw about 15 people here, and I see we packed the hall," Mondale said, later adding that he wanted to take the energetic crowd with him. "Could you come with me and follow the campaign?"

Mondale said he and fellow Democrats are in a difficult position emotionally - still grieving the loss of Sen. Paul Wellstone, his wife, Sheila, their daughter and campaign staff in a plane crash, but also needing to try to carry the late senator's message forward.

"We are in an unbelievable situation in Minnesota," Mondale said. "There's never been anything like it before. Just a few days ago, we lost one of the truly remarkable public servants in the history of Minnesota."

But with the election less than a week away, the dialogue about who should represent Minnesota in the Senate needed to be restarted, Mondale said. And he told the crowd that he can best carry forth Wellstone's message of giving all Americans a good education and an opportunity to succeed, opposing any efforts to put Social Security payroll taxes into private investments and opposing unilateral military action against Iraq.

After speaking for about 15 minutes, Mondale opened the meeting up for questions. Although several of the people who stepped to the microphone simply wanted to praise him, others asked him to clarify his positions on abortion (he's a strong abortion-rights advocate); setting up national databases to track potential terrorists (he would make sure that people's constitutional rights were always protected); and the Bush administration's environmental record (he opposes oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and attempts to ease air- and water-pollution standards).

Before leaving the stage, Mondale asked the College Democrats on hand to work hard for him in the days leading up to Tuesday's election.

"I know one thing about students - you don't need sleep..." Mondale said. "My friend Hubert Humphrey said, 'Stay out of bed. Most people die there.'"

In an interview after the public event, Mondale said he would favor repealing a portion of the tax cuts passed last year.

"I think the tax cut went much too far," he said. "A trillion dollars and 40 percent of it went to the top 1 percent."

The revenue should be used for reducing payroll taxes for workers during the current economic downturn, he said. Longer-term, Mondale said, the federal government needs to return to balanced budgets, which will help America deal with the burden on Social Security, which will be caused by the looming retirement of the baby-boom generation.

And he said rural America has to think particularly hard about who represents them in the U.S. Senate. While the House, which has representation based on population, has become much more urban and suburban in recent decades, farm states still can have clout in the Senate.

"One thing hasn't changed, and that's that each state gets two senators," he said, suggesting that's the only reason farm subsidies continue to be a federal priority. "[The House and the executive branch] can't forget the Senate. That's put a growing burden on senators to remember the farmers."