

# POLITICS IN MINNESOTA

## Pragmatic partisan: Former GOP operative Golnik talks political pragmatism

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Ben Golnik was on air talking to National Public Radio's Dick Gordon recently about being a Republican observer during the long recount in the recent U.S. Senate election between Norm Coleman and Al Franken.

The Oct. 6 conversation was going along normally, and then Gordon asked him an unexpected question:

"Was there a time at the end of each day when you sort of stretched your shoulders and turned to someone on the Franken camp and go, 'Let's go for a beer.' Or did those divides sort of exist 24 hours a day?"

For the 32-year-old former executive director of the Minnesota Republican Party, who regularly watched the combatants on CNN's old "Crossfire" program while growing up in Florida, the divides were round-the-clock.

Golnik admitted to the radio host that after a couple of days working in the same room, the opponents did come to appreciate each other – to a degree.

"But," he added, "it was never to a point where if we're going to run out for coffee we were going to ask the other side, 'Hey, how do you like your coffee?'"

Doing that kind of thing just wasn't an option, Golnik says during a subsequent interview. Why not?

The sides were simply too polarized.

"In my opinion it was after 2000 with that Bush-Gore recount that I think things got extremely polarizing," Golnik says.

It also didn't help, he says, that the lengthy Coleman-Franken recount wore everyone down.

And then Golnik can't help himself, and gets in a partisan jab: "I think especially it was because this was Franken, and he was kind of this very polarizing character himself."

According to Steve Schier, a Carleton College political science professor, it's possible that Golnik and those around his age on both sides of the partisan political divide really can't help themselves.

Schier says Golnik is representative of a younger generation of politicians who came of age during the Clinton-Lewinsky impeachment saga and the Florida recount, at the dawn of media-driven hyper-partisanship.

"If they don't like a political party or a candidate or a president, they view them almost as cartoon characters," Schier says. "I think that younger people have only known that environment and can't imagine anything else."

## **Bridging the Divide**

But all that may be caricature.

In fact, Golnik, a self-professed pragmatist who currently is out of electoral politics, might now be looking for ways to bridge the partisan gulf.

Two years ago, Golnik formed a company, Golnik Strategies LLC, which he describes as a grass-roots public affairs and political consulting firm. It leverages his campaigning skills to help corporations and nonprofit groups mobilize supporters around political issues.

One of the company's early projects is trying to end Minnesota's moratorium on new nuclear power plants. In that effort, Golnik Strategies represents Sensible Energy Solutions for Minnesota, a consortium that includes executives from Northern States Power, the Minnesota Pipe Trades Association, the St. Paul Building and Construction Trades Council, and the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce, among others.

In April, the Minnesota Senate voted 42-24 to end the moratorium, though a companion House bill lost 70-62 later that month. "It's just a matter of moving a few people," Golnik says.

He hopes to do that by hammering home the message in the districts of the legislators who voted against the House bill—one of whom was Republican, the rest Democrats. "Let's get people in these districts to understand," he says. "Let's educate them."

Tom Steward, a former McCain campaign staffer and TV broadcaster who has occasionally teamed with Golnik Strategies, says it is notable that Golnik is working on issues that cross party lines: Not only conservatives, he says, but moderates and some liberals want to end the power-plant moratorium.

"As polarized as things have gotten here over the last few election cycles, there is something really satisfying about finding issues that commonsense folks on both sides of the spectrum can get behind," Steward says.

"It is better to be working together than not."

Golnik grew up in Altamonte Springs, Fla., the son of committed Reagan Republicans, he says. After graduating high school in 1995, he attended Middlebury College in Vermont, graduating in 2000.

Though he's been in Minnesota only since 2005, Golnik has already made a significant impact. He was executive director for the state GOP in 2006, after having served in the same capacity in Vermont. He also worked for a time as a staffer in Washington, D.C., to Sen. Mike Crapo (R-Idaho). But he realized quickly that he doesn't have the patience for the legislative side of politics.

"I like that kind of rough and tumble nature of political campaigns, where it's who won this news cycle and who is going to win the next news cycle, what's going to be a good political story," he says.

In 2007, Golnik worked as regional director for the John McCain for President campaign until he got caught up in a massive staff purge after McCain ran out of money and had to retool his entire operation.

Even then, Golnik continued volunteering for McCain, which brought him into the orbit of Gov. Tim Pawlenty. Golnik essentially worked as Pawlenty's unpaid publicist, booking cable news appearances for the governor to speak as a McCain spokesman. (Pawlenty's gubernatorial staff was barred from performing those duties.)

Golnik and his wife, Allison, live in St. Paul's Lexington-Hamline neighborhood. Allison is a pediatrician at the Fairview Children's Clinic who specializes in treatment of autism. Their son, Alexander, is 16 months old.

## **Riding the meteor**

It's natural to wonder how Golnik has managed to rise so fast while drawing the notice of such powerful Republicans as Coleman, McCain and Pawlenty.

He says it's just a matter of hard work and career choice. "There are a lot of opportunities in politics for people that are passionate about this stuff and who work hard," Golnik says.

Steward thinks it's more about skill. "I think he is really detail-oriented, very thorough, and he is able to really size up a situation," Steward says. "That serves him very well when it comes to the ground game in politics."

Golnik is just as adept, Steward says, at being personable. "He can work well with people and kind of make them want to contribute and put in all sorts of hours that they really shouldn't be doing," Steward says with a laugh.

Tony Sutton, the state Republican chairman who served as party treasurer during Golnik's stint as executive director, agrees. Golnik is "a cut above," says Sutton, who attributes Golnik's success to raw intelligence. "In politics, he is one of the brightest Republican political people that I've ever met," Sutton says.

And he's got a pragmatic understanding of things. For example, he knows he can't run for public office, living in the area he does – even though he's a deacon at the House of Hope Presbyterian Church on Summit Avenue in St. Paul.

"In my neighborhood, one of my neighbors flies the U.N. flag," Golnik laughs. "I would not get elected dogcatcher in St. Paul as a Republican."