



PROFILE: IOWA HOUSE MAJORITY LEADER MATT WINDSCHITL

‘How we collectively serve’: Veteran of the Iraq War joined the House at an early age, and has since risen to one of his home state’s top leadership posts

by Derek Cantù (dcantu@csg.org)

In 2006, Matt Windschitl was a young, self-described “knuckle dragging Marine” who had returned home to Iowa after a recent tour of duty in Iraq.

A life in politics was the furthest thing from his mind.

But one day, a customer of his family’s gun shop in western Iowa was at the store and on the lookout for potential candidates for state office.

“My mom chuckles and says, ‘Well, my husband, Chris, would be good at it, but he just couldn’t do it. He’s got too many obligations and he’s too outspoken,’” Windschitl recalls.

“Then my mom looks across the shop and she goes, ‘But Matt over there, Matt would be great for it.’”

Windschitl, age 22 and a new father at the time, wasn’t so sure the job would be a good fit or if the timing was right. It took conversations with his wife, talks with party officials, and a lot of prayer before he decided to run.

He won that first race and has been a member of the Iowa House ever since, rising in the ranks of leadership along the way. He became majority leader in 2019.

Initially, Windschitl didn’t think he would stay long in the Legislature; control had shifted to the Democrats following the 2006 election and would remain so for two cycles. However, he looks back at that time now as being invaluable, an opportunity to “sit back, listen and learn, and not have too many preconceived notions, and not be arrogant or haughty.”

Good attributes, he has learned, for any lawmaker — whether he or she is a 20-something new legislator in the minority party or a veteran of nearly two decades in a top leadership post.

In a recent interview with CSG Midwest, Windschitl shared his views on legislating and leadership. Here are excerpts, with questions and answers lightly edited for clarity and brevity.

Q How did your service in the U.S. Marine Corps impact or prepare you for legislative leadership?

A A lot of the things that you get taught in the Marine Corps are core fundamentals of leadership: how to lead other people, how to not only take commands, but also to be able to listen to concerns of a group and then apply that by action or apply that by working within that group to resolve differences.

Q How do you approach and view legislative service?



BIO-SKETCH: IOWA REPRESENTATIVE MATT WINDSCHITL

- ✓ has served as House majority leader since 2019; previously served as speaker pro tempore and as assistant leader (in the minority and majority)
- ✓ first elected to the Iowa House in 2006
- ✓ served as sergeant in U.S. Marine Corps: enlisted in 2001, served a tour in Iraq in 2005, and honorably discharged in 2009
- ✓ works at Doll Distributing, a beer distribution company
- ✓ lives in western Iowa town of Missouri Valley; family includes his two daughters and wife, Ivelisse

“Don’t put daylight between the leadership team because when you do, it’s going to make the caucus try and choose who the favorite is. You can’t have that.”

A You can’t forget that these seats that we have in the chamber, they are rented, they’re not ours. ... This job is not about the individual legislator; it is about the people we serve and how we collectively serve together.

As majority leader, I always try to put policy and budgetary issues through one main lens before anything else: Is this good public policy? Is this good budgeting for Iowans? If the answer is “yes,” it doesn’t matter whose idea it was or whose name was on it, majority or minority. Let’s see if we can work out the kinks and get an agreement.

Q Disagreement is inevitable in a legislature or caucus. How do you work through intra-caucus differences among leaders, such as yourself and the House speaker?

A When we don’t agree on things, we simply talk about it, but we don’t talk about it openly. One of the things that I learned from a former speaker was you don’t put daylight between the leadership team because when you do, it’s going to make members of the caucus try and choose who the favorite is. You can’t have that.

When [Speaker Pat Grassley and I] disagree, sometimes I win, sometimes he wins. But at the end of the day, he is the speaker. He’s the top constitutionally elected officer in the House, and being a military veteran, I respect rank.

Q What are the ways to build trusting inter-caucus relations among leadership?

A Working with Leader [Jennifer] Konfrst, as she came into the minority leader’s role, has been a breath of fresh air. She and I have a deep and profound respect for the institution and what it is intended to do for the good of Iowans.

Now, do we disagree philosophically and politically on things? Absolutely. But we’ve been able to build a bridge where she and I, if we know something controversial is going to come up, we talk.

I say, “Okay, is this going to be a five-hour debate? Is it going to be an eight-hour debate? How can I make this smoother? I know I’ve got my member over here who is probably going to say ‘this.’ I’m going to try and tamp it down, make sure there’s decorum in the chamber, make sure they’re respectful.” And she does the exact same thing with her caucus.

And there are times you get members that say something that you probably wish that they wouldn’t, and then we’ll just text each other from across the chamber: “Sorry, I’ll correct that action.” And then she’ll do the same thing.

Q You’ve been a leader on issues related to gun owner rights, including the voter-approved “Freedom Amendment” from 2022. Why has this policy area been important to you?

A The best way I can answer that is it’s not about the firearm itself, it is about the fundamental right to self-preservation. With the voters of Iowa affirming, with such a large majority saying, “Yes, we want this fundamental right enshrined in our

[state] Constitution,” that tells me that we are on the right path.

There’s always years where I want to try and get something done a little bit further — to restore freedoms that I believe should never have been taken away and remove restrictions that shouldn’t be there.

But at the same time, make sure that you’re not just having a free-for-all and having people that shouldn’t have access to firearms have access. That’s why we rely heavily on the federal government, the NICS background check system. We’ve also got protections in place in Iowa where if a sheriff does deem that someone should not get a permit, the sheriff can deny it. And then that person can go through an appeals process.

Q Is there potential this session for common ground with those concerned about firearm access?

A What I’d like to look at, and I’m exploring legislation right now [as of the start of 2024], is a new approach to this issue for people who are having a mental health crisis, maybe a life crisis, and they don’t feel as though they should have their firearms around them.

I’d like to evaluate if there is a way that these people can take their firearms to their local firearm store and say, “Hey, can you guys store these for me? I’m just in a bad place. I don’t want to have law enforcement take them because then I don’t know what the process is to get [them] back. I don’t want that stigma. Can you just bound them in and hold them for me until I get some help?”