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## POLITICS

# Feingold's competition

A look at the Republicans who seek the job of U.S. senator

By Bill Lueders

**W**hat are the strengths of the four Republicans competing in the Sept. 14 primary for the right to go head-to-head with U.S. Sen. Russ Feingold? Here goes:

Bob Welch is the most qualified, Tim Michels is the most impressive, Robert Gerald Lorge is the most interesting, and Russ Darrow has the best chance of winning.

Their weaknesses? Welch is too conservative, Michels too inexperienced, Lorge too "out there," and Darrow too unprepared for the job.

The GOP challengers agree: Feingold is radically out of step with the Wisconsin "mainstream." This is a real look-who's-talking proposition, as all four embrace positions — from zealous opposition to legal abortion to enthusiastic support of the war in Iraq to an almost worshipful attitude toward George W. Bush — that large numbers of Wisconsin voters (even some Republicans) do not share.

Feingold, a two-term incumbent who nearly lost his last race, in 1998, against hard-driving right-wing Congressman Mark Neumann, is clearly vulnerable. He was the sole member of the U.S. Senate to vote against the USA Patriot Act, a move Darrow has chastised as "really un-American" and Lorge has called "cowardly." (Ironically, Lorge cast this aspersions because Feingold *did not go far enough*: Lorge says he would have filibustered to protect the civil liberties of U.S. citizens. As noted, he's both interesting and "out there.")

In other respects, Feingold has emerged as one of the Bush administration's sharpest critics — on Iraq, the war on terror, record-high deficits and domestic policy. Bush and his pals want to take Feingold out almost as much as they want to win a second term.

But can any of these Republicans do that? Let's take a look.

**Bob Welch** ([votewelch.com](http://votewelch.com)). This 46-year-old state senator from Redgranite is wicked smart and politically astute. A former surveyor with a degree in politics and government from Ripon College, he's served 10 years in the state Assembly and nine in the Senate, where he's giving up his post as president pro tempore to seek this seat.



"I'm the only candidate with a record of public service," says Welch, 46. "And I'm the only one [besides Lorge] who's not a millionaire."

Welch, who narrowly bested his rivals in a straw poll at the GOP convention (winning 33% of the total, not enough to clinch an endorsement), is also the only GOP contender who comes across as a political pro, answering questions decisively and with refreshing candor. Asked about a moment he regrets, he offers, "I should have never voted for the state lottery. That was a mistake." If elected, he would work to put "more boots on the ground" in Iraq, and further cut corporate taxes "to make our exports more competitive."

But Welch leans way to the right on most issues, and has a caustic quality about him

that some people find off-putting. Recently, he showed his nasty side in attacking Feingold as being part of a "small extremist minority" with regard to veterans benefits, an area in which Feingold's record is strong. Welch may win the nomination, thanks to diehard GOP primary voters, but he'll have a tough time coming across as more likable than the incumbent.

**Tim Michels** ([Michelsforsenate.com](http://Michelsforsenate.com)). At 42, the former U.S. Army Ranger (he headed the unit that guards the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier) is highly disciplined and dauntingly serious. He holds a bachelor's in political science, a master's in business administration and another master's in public administration. He lives in Oconomowoc and is vice president of a family-owned construction company in Brownsville.



"I have the three R's — recent, relevant, real-life experience," boasts Michels, who ran unsuccessfully for state Senate in 1998. "I'm the only candidate who has lived all of the issues that are going to be important in this job."

Like Darrow, Michels thinks the main problem in Iraq is the media's failure to report "the full story of all the good things that our military is doing over there." He describes Bush as "a straight-shooter and a man of commitment." What he fears most is that "our American way of life will be destroyed in a very successful terrorist attack."

Michels has shown independence from the party line, attacking "corporate corruption" and criticizing the Bush administration's ban on importing prescription drugs from Canada. He's tried to turn his lack of political experience into an asset, proclaiming he is not now nor will he ever be "a professional politician."

News flash: The U.S. Senate is a place where political experience matters. Michels would be a stronger candidate if, like Welch or Feingold, he had first paid his dues learning the ins and outs of legislating.

**Robert Gerald Lorge** ([law2win.com](http://law2win.com)). An attorney, farmer and real estate broker who turned 45 this week, Lorge is the son of long-time state lawmaker Gerald Lorge and the brother of Bill Lorge, the Elvis-impersonating former state rep now running for Congress. He has a bachelor's from the UW-Madison and a law degree from Marquette. In 2002, he won the GOP primary for secretary of state but lost to Democratic icon Doug La Follette.

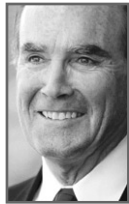


Well-read and worldly, Lorge brims with bold ideas, like letting Iraq's provinces become "autonomous or semi-autonomous states" to avoid civil unrest and making federal judges elected by voters, not nominated by the president and approved by the Senate. He touts himself as a "pro-labor Republican" and names Bruce Springsteen as his favorite musical artist. (Welch picks B.B. King, Michels the Rolling Stones and

Darrow Neil Diamond.) He's clever with words, calling Bush "a faith-based president" and the Second Amendment "the original Homeland Security Act."

At the GOP convention, Lorge urged a no-endorsement vote and claimed victory when no candidate snared the requisite two-thirds approval. But the delegates weren't voting for him, and it's unlikely many voters will either. Lorge lacks cash as well as cachet, and is seen as a marginal contender.

**Russ Darrow** (*therightruss.com*). The only candidate in the race without at least one college degree, he dropped out after two years at the UW-Madison to become a car salesman, eventually building an empire that includes 19 auto dealerships and 29 franchises. Darrow, 64, thinks having satisfied customers in the auto biz means he'll satisfy constituents as a politician, but he seems to lack even a rudimentary grasp of the issues or the job.

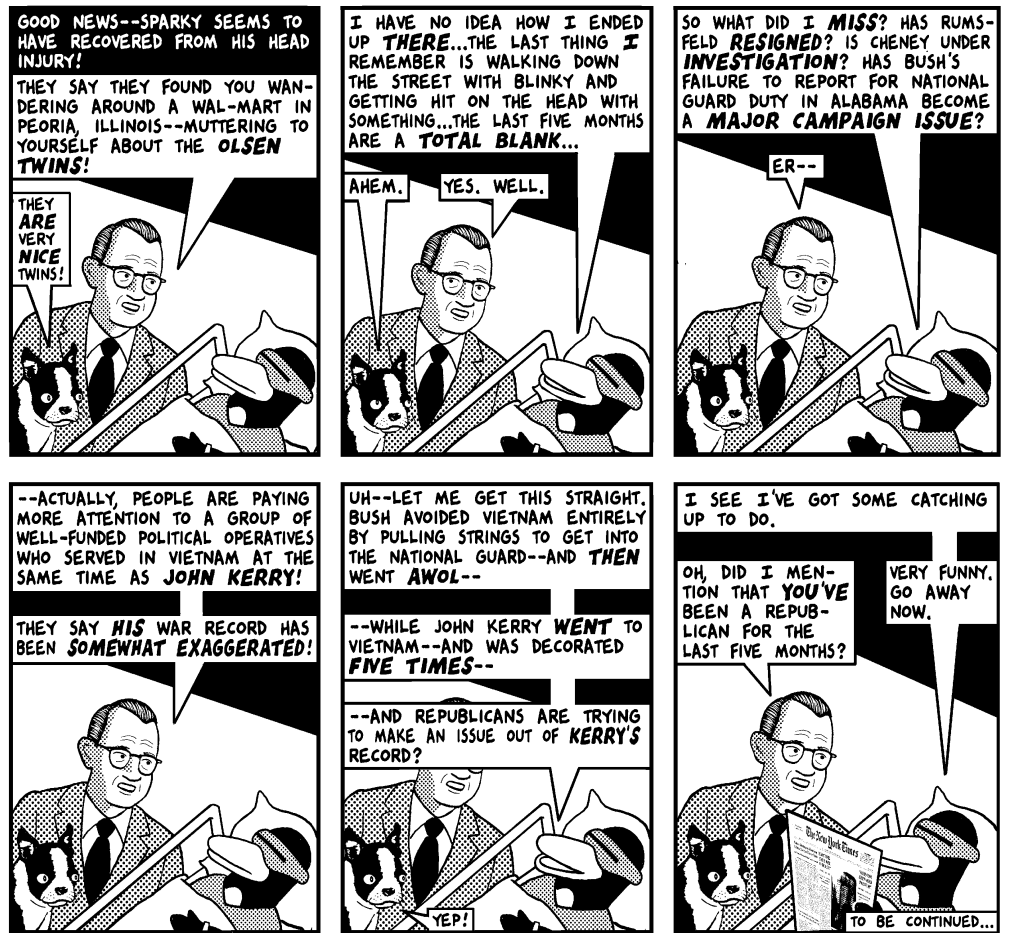


Asked to name a single piece of legislation he would introduce if elected,

Darrow draws a complete blank. "My main focus is going to be the values of Wisconsin families," he flounders, before making vague promises to reduce taxes, create jobs and "propose a private health-care system," as though we lack one now. Eventually, he settles on, "I'd vote to make the president's tax cuts [not Darrow's idea] permanent because we all know it's working very well." (Not true: Many people, economists included, consider the cuts a bad idea.)

So what makes Darrow, in the estimation of Milwaukee PR exec Evan Zeppos, the one Republican who could "position himself against Russ Feingold and win"? Darrow himself provides the answer: "I have the resources to do whatever it takes to win." His slick campaign lit and ubiquitous commercials attest to his willingness to spend boatloads of cash.

Recently, amid concern that the McCain-Feingold campaign reform act might bar his company from running ads in the weeks before the election (it's decided to do so anyway, unless ordered to stop), the claim was floated that this would cost the company \$58 million in revenue. Darrow, clearly, believes in the power of advertising to help make a sale. ♦




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