THE EMERGENCE OF DAVID DUKE AND THE POLITICS OF RACE

EDITED BY DOUGLAS ROSE

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in the series
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TO KATE

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity.

. . . . . .

And what rough beast, its hour come at last,

Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

—Yeats, "The Second Coming"

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Douglas D. Rose

Introduction

Responses to David Duke

It is Thursday night in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in January 1991. I am behind one-way glass looking in as eleven supporters of David Duke sit around a table discussing their views. Despite the week-old Iraqi war, it is not hard for the participants to focus their sense of concern and uncertainty on the domestic situation.

They are talking about hard times—low pay, scarce jobs, few benefits, and short hours on the income side, and high prices, catastrophic health care costs, and increasing taxes on the outgo side. College graduates have to leave the state to get a job. What do you need to get a job? One says qualifications, others say political connections, and still others say to be a woman or a minority.

They feel squeezed from above. Employers squeeze them for a buck. Oil prices go up, oil companies pocket the profits. Companies dump waste, ruining the environment, for profit; S&Ls are looted by their officers. The government helps the "big boys" out through tax breaks, because politicians are influenced by lobbyists and campaign contributions. This goes on, they say, but it is sort of invisible—they are bleeding but they never saw the knife.

Their outrage comes from the squeeze from below, from welfare and affirmative action. There is little dissent on the main points. Free tax money

is going to people who could work and do not, who spend the money on drugs and feel that the world owes them a living. Who pays the tab? The middle and working classes—the rich get tax breaks. Yet it is the middle and working classes who are barred from an opportunity to better themselves by affirmative action, which gives any decent job to minorities, whether qualified and hardworking or not. They perceive the whipsaw: affirmative action on the income side and welfare abuse on the outgo side.

Most people in the room think they know why these unfair, antiworker, antiwhite policies persist. The beneficiaries of affirmative action and of welfare abuse are supported by minority group racial solidarity. Because all blacks support the same candidates, politicians support the policies to get bloc votes and stay in office. Thus, politicians get campaign contributions from the rich (who get tax breaks) and votes from minorities (who get minority programs) and rip off the white middle class. Then they raise their own salaries and use their connections to get benefits for their friends and families.

Other politicians who represent the interests and values of Duke supporters are mentioned. For working-class Duke supporters these politicians include Louis Lambert, a populist "watchdog" against high utility rates, and Woody Jenkins, a conservative antiabortion advocate. Middle-class Duke supporters prefer Buddy Roemer, the "scrub-the-budget" and anti–special interest governor, and George Bush, the stern enforcer of a line drawn in the sand.

David Duke, however, satisfies both groups. First, he speaks out against welfare abuse and affirmative action, whereas other politicians seem afraid to. Second, as a candidate he perhaps can rally enough votes on these issues to outweigh minority bloc voting. Third, he proposes what they see as universally fair policies, stressing individual equality and strict guidelines. Most of the anti-Duke campaign information and media coverage they dismiss as just more negative political campaigning from the same people who are already abusing the public trust. Supporters identify with David Duke: once convinced—often by his TV messages—they may not say anything, but when he is attacked or insulted, they feel offended.

Are they racists? They do not think they are. Yet their admiration of blacks is slow and grudging, while their criticism is fast and free. All say that blacks take away more than they contribute to contemporary American life. Though some are bothered by Duke's Ku Klux Klan background, they agree with his issues, and because they feel more strongly about the issues than about the background, they are prone to give their man the benefit of a large doubt. The KKK is not part of their lives, except when someone uses it to attack Duke. They feel less racist than victimized: they are not to blame for slavery, they

support civil rights—so why must they either submit to blatantly unfair policies or be labeled racist?

Duke's U.S. Senate campaign has brought their feelings out of the closet. They do not even know what other Duke supporters think on many issues because they have never talked politics as a group. They have learned to support Duke. Half plan to vote for him in the gubernatorial election in 1991, and many more would support him for the U.S. Senate against John Breaux in 1992. Perhaps a third say they would prefer him to George Bush in a bid for the White House.

David Duke, a state representative, garnered these supporters in his run for the U.S. Senate in the fall of 1990. He lost, taking 44 percent of the vote cast, but received 57 percent of the white vote. Duke then contended for the governor's office, making the runoff, which he lost in a blaze of national publicity. Duke subsequently turned to the presidential primaries. Though many people became aware of him during the gubernatorial runoff campaign in October and November 1991, David Duke had been emerging for several years. On election, he was perhaps the best-known state legislator in America. By the middle of the Senate campaign, his name recognition in Louisiana was unexcelled. Duke draws attention as a black hole absorbs light. He is noteworthy, less for what he is than for the responses he provokes—among supporters like those described here, among opponents, among political elites, and among people like me, a scholar who now studies David Duke.

I

Since July 1990, I have been coordinating the research project on David Duke that produced this book. It started, in effect, early in 1989, during Duke's runoff for state representative, with calls from journalists wanting material. Other than anecdotes about his early escapades, I found we had little of value to offer. We could provide information on Duke's past associations with fringe neo-Nazi and racialist groups, but only limited insight into his present political success.

After the election, Lawrence Powell's initial regression analyses of the vote—indicating that Duke's voters were largely registered Democrats, for example—illustrated what could be done. When the need for information increased with Duke's run for the U.S. Senate, and when Paul Lewis promised support, I put together a research plan to uncover reliable information about David Duke.

Nine of us—professors, journalists, consultants, and activists—divided

up the work. The diversity of our backgrounds reflected the diversity of insights and approaches that might be employed to accomplish our goal. I wanted to provide the best information that could be collected and analyzed in a short period of time. I called on people familiar with Metairie and southeastern Louisiana who could place Duke in perspective given recent local history and long-standing local custom. The crucial expertise is not always evident from contributors' biographies. Gary Esolen, for example, is the expert on television techniques because he is a star political debate coach by avocation.

We took on the subject of David Duke as a political phenomenon. Conversely, our research is not about David Duke as a person—we do not try to answer questions such as "is he normal?" As we see it, Duke qualifies as a political sensation both for his performance and for how others treat him.

We focus both on the public and on political elites. Lawrence Powell, Douglas Rose, and Susan Howell and Sylvia Warren describe the public reaction to David Duke—in the 1989 state legislative contest, the 1990 Senate race, and the 1991 gubernatorial campaign—and consider public opinion about Duke in addition to voting behavior. Why do people support him? Why do they oppose him? What explains his success? William McMahon, Gary Esolen, and Elizabeth Rickey study how political elites—the legislature, the media, and Republican party officials—deal with Duke. Ferrel Guillory, William Moore, and Lance Hill put Duke into contexts—the changing South, American right-wing extremism, and opportunistic Nazi racial thought. Ronald King ties together our findings into themes.

The theme we all came to understand, the one that underlies our varied results, is this: David Duke is not just a phenomenon that happens in that weird state of Louisiana. He is not just a passing fad, and leaders who do nothing special to counteract him will fail.

II

The chapters of this volume are self-contained yet meant, in combination, to provide a broad understanding of the David Duke phenomenon. The main conclusions of one chapter can form a starting point for understanding the implications of the next. Together, they make a story that goes like this.

In America, in the South, in Louisiana, in Metairie, lived David Duke.

Ferrel Guillory sets the stage, recounting the changes in the South in the past twenty-five years that provide the context for David Duke. Mostly the

South's changes are America's changes, stretched out or speeded up, yet the changes involving party, race, and leadership are more dramatic in the South. Only Duke carries on the southern tradition of world-class demagoguery. Yet Duke is, more than a southerner, a Louisiana boy, raised on populist politics.

Louisiana is populism's only success, the only state where a populistic program was enacted—under the Longs—and retained as public policy to the present day, including the exemption of homeowners from property taxation. Originally, only Louisiana had enough mineral resources per capita to afford populism, and only Louisiana had the politics to enact it. The voters of Metairie grew up with a peculiar brew of Earl Long, segregation, Edwin Edwards, and soak-the-rich mentality.

Duke was elected as a Republican to the state legislature . . .

Lawrence Powell explores Duke's victory in the runoff for an open state legislative seat in House District 81. Though weak opposition and weak party ties play a role, Powell locates the main thrust of Duke's appeal in traditional populist politics—the right-wing version—and points to the key role of the Louisiana oil recession in alienating blue-collar workers from mainstream candidates. Seymour Martin Lipset's working-class authoritarians would be at home in District 81's Bucktown. Duke's appeal is neither local nor unique in Powell's analysis.

Powell shows that Duke's voters have in the past supported Democratic populist candidates, such as Edwin Edwards. The populist appeal has worked in Louisiana and elsewhere for one hundred years and it is not going away. Duke is following where others have gone before. Basically, that means that the audience is receptive to the messenger.

. . . despite his racist past . . .

William Moore recounts how Duke has been trying to combine mainstream and extreme for some time. This, however, has been more a matter of style and tactics than of substance. Moore traces Duke's political career over two decades, from raw media events and crude mailers to a few believers to slick television spots, from neo-Nazi youth groups to the electoral arena. Moore notes early aspects of Duke's movement of racial themes to the mainstream. Duke sought respectability for the Ku Klux Klan by avoiding violence and bringing in the middle class and women, and he continues to seek respectability for his themes: respectable techniques, racial themes.

. . . and his continued associations, which embarrassed other Republicans.

Elizabeth Rickey examines the response of the Louisiana Republican party. David Duke posed problems for a party that had stressed putting candidates in office without concerning itself about orthodoxy. Rickey details the celebration of Duke's state House victory at the neo-Nazi Populist party convention, her purchase of Nazi books at Duke's legislative office, and her attempt to have the Louisiana Republican State Central Committee censure Duke. Her conversations with Duke, in which he applauds the heroism of Rudolph Hess and argues that the Nazi extermination camps were a myth, leave little doubt about his racial ideas. Rickey shows that when state Republican leaders tried to avoid offending Duke supporters, they offended the national Republican leadership, they double-crossed members of the State Central Committee, and they left registered Republicans—the white voters who are least supportive of Duke—a choice between Duke and a Democrat. After the 1990 Senate election, the state Republican party was not in very good shape. After the 1991 gubernatorial election, the party was in shambles.

Duke attacked blacks for holding to the wrong values . . .

What is Duke's message? Susan Howell and Sylvia Warren identify the content of his appeal as "symbolic racism," a campaign theme used nationwide. Howell and Warren, in examining public opinion and voting preferences in District 81 and the surrounding area, show that support for David Duke rests on the symbolic racism that worked for Republican candidates throughout the 1980s. It worked for several candidates in the U.S. Senate contest in Louisiana. Symbolic racism blames blacks for cultural failure—the lack of an appropriate work ethic—using themes that are at once racist and embodiments of traditional American folk culture, including populism. The appeals of Duke in District 81 have worked, and will work, elsewhere. Although voters have additional reasons to support or oppose him, the core appeal is symbolic racism. This is the current version of right-wing populism among white voters. It differs from the segregationist themes of a quarter century ago in its stress on culture rather than genetics.

. . . whereas he used to attack blacks for carrying the wrong genes.

Symbolic racism is at odds with the message David Duke first espoused. Lance Hill shows that Duke, when not on the campaign trail, proclaimed a different type of racism, the genetic racism embraced by Adolf Hitler. Duke's Nazism goes beyond wearing a uniform or lighting birthday cakes for Hitler—it is an ideology. Hill's analysis of the place of Nazi race doctrine in Duke's political thought shows just how essential racism has been to Duke's thinking and appeal. Even if his voters are responding to a modern symbolic racism, Duke himself has espoused genetic racism from the beginning. Hill,

by comparing Hitler's speeches from his preofficial days with Duke's publications, demonstrates a similarity of concept and program. Ironically, he shows Duke as truest to Nazism in his use of symbolic racism to acquire political power, the opportunistic tactic that Hitler employed in Nazism's electoral period.

Duke found an audience for his new message . . .

How do voters get the revised message? Gary Esolen recounts the success of television in winning support for David Duke. Duke was successful because he created a technique of attention getting and message delivery that exploited weaknesses in TV news coverage. Esolen shows that Duke uses controversy to get media attention, then delivers the message to his audience. Controversy attracts television coverage, which, in turn, gives Duke an audience. Ignoring Duke does not work either, as that leaves his message unchallenged. Esolen, a former talk-show host, also reviews the difficulties most interviewers have with David Duke and explains why a few questioners have been successful.

. . . because political elites couldn't make up their minds what to do.

William McMahon's report of the legislature's response to David Duke indicates a less-than-heroic grappling with the issues. Republican leadership, television editors, and the legislature all were ineffective in handling Duke. Duke provoked controversy in the legislature from the first day, but the members largely tried to treat him as just another representative. McMahon points out that, in the end, David Duke severely polarized the state House along racial lines, something that body had never previously experienced. While Duke was not an accomplished policymaker, he was an accomplished newsmaker. He also took the heat for legislators with similar views.

If the political elites—who, in some models of American politics, protect us from the weaknesses of the mass mind—were vulnerable to Duke's appeals, how about the voters?

Supporters liked his message, opponents didn't like his past.

Douglas Rose examines the many explanations offered for white voter reactions to Duke's U.S. Senate campaign and finds them all true in part. But the main division is simple. According to Rose, the contrast between Duke's past associations and views and his current positions is central to support and opposition. In the Senate race Duke split the electorate into ardent factions, supporters upholding his positions on issues and opponents condemning his Klan background. The issue became Duke himself, and it was difficult to change views about him once they were formed. If Duke appealed to voters

before opponents had a chance to communicate facts about his background, he won support.

Voters, the press, the party, the policymakers, and his opponents did not know what to do about David Duke . . .

In the Louisiana gubernatorial election of 1991, Duke and former governor Edwards defeated the Republican incumbent Roemer. Douglas Rose and Gary Esolen show that the media and the opposing candidates largely kept quiet about Duke's past in the primary campaign, during which Duke successfully targeted supporters with his direct mail appeals. In the nationally covered runoff, anti-Duke sentiment carried Edwards to a landslide victory. Yet the media coverage helped launch Duke's 1992 candidacy for the Republican presidential nomination.

. . . and uncertainties remain.

Ronald King reexamines the questions animating this study: Is Duke a Louisiana oddity or part of a national phenomenon? Are Duke's supporters racists? Are television newscasters dupes? Does the electorate learn from press coverage of the candidates? As King points out, the chapters do not contain everything we might wish to know about the David Duke phenomenon. Even the central, consensual points—Duke is not an isolated phenomenon, Louisiana's response is not unique, and political elites do not handle Duke well in their normal routines—leave question marks. This is not everything there is to know; it is what we know now.

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