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Duke Softens Past in Louisiana Race

By Roberto Suro

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First came the warnings. State Representative David Duke told a crowd of supporters gathered in a rural meeting hall here that their way of life was threatened by racial quotas and welfare babies.

Then Mr. Duke, a 41-year-old former grand wizard of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, promised that if he was elected governor he would save Louisiana by giving poor blacks his own version of "tough love."

With a month to go before the voting in Louisiana's open primary, Mr. Duke's past has not emerged as a major issue in the campaign. Poll takers, political analysts and even aides to rival candidates agree that Mr. Duke has succeeded in presenting himself as a legitimate candidate for governor, and he is widely credited with putting his message into language that has a potentially broad appeal among white voters.

With public opinion polls showing that he has a fair chance to win a place in a runoff, Mr. Duke has become the wild card in an election that will provide this year's most prominent test of racial issues in American politics. Appeal to Racial Identity

Although much of his message is framed in terms of budget cuts and changes in the welfare system, Mr. Duke still makes a direct appeal to his supporters' racial identity.

"If you are white these days you are a second-class citizen in your own country," Mr. Duke said at his rally here on the shore of Lake Pontchartrain, drawing loud applause.

Within the next 10 days both President Bush and Vice President Dan Quayle are scheduled to campaign in Louisiana for the incumbent, Buddy Roemer. The Governor was wooed by the White House last spring when he switched parties and became the Republicans' prize catch to date in their long effort to convert Democratic officeholders in Southern states.

The other major contender for a spot in the runoff is a populist Democrat, Edwin W. Edwards, who previously won three terms as governor with strong support from black voters and is now trying to rally his party's traditional constituencies.

The operatic qualities of Louisiana politics, with larger-than-life personalities and melodramatic plots, are reinforced by the state's election laws. All candidates regardless of party affiliation appear on the same ballot in an open primary, which will be held on Oct. 19 this year. If no one wins a majority, the top two candidates will meet in a runoff on Nov. 16. 'A Very Dicey Contest'

"It is virtually a three-way race and it is certainly a very dicey contest for second place," said Edward Renwick, of the Loyola University Institute of Politics.

The race is further complicated by the candidacy of United States Representative Clyde C. Holloway, who has the endorsement of the state Republican Party. Mr. Roemer did not seek the endoresement. Nor did Mr. Duke, who calls himself a Republican even though he has been disavowed by both the state and national party organizations.

In a poll made public last week by the Loyola institute for several Louisiana television stations, Mr. Renwick found that Mr. Roemer was preferred by 26 percent of the electorate, Mr. Edwards by 25 percent, Mr. Duke by 10 percent and Mr. Holloway by 9 percent. The poll of 750 registered voters had a margin of sampling error of nearly four percent.

But taking into account what has come to be known as Mr. Duke's "hidden vote" -- people unwilling to admit their preference for him except in the privacy of the voting booth -- Mr. Renwick recalculated Mr. Duke's share at 25 percent.

This hidden vote came out massively for Mr. Duke last year in his unsuccessful effort to unseat Louisians's senior Senator, J. Bennett Johnston, a Democrat who has been an influential voice on Capitol Hill for 20 years.

Just days before the election, public opinion polls were predicting that Mr. Duke would win from 20 to 30 percent of the vote. His actual total was 44 percent, including about 58 percent of the white vote. Duke Attracts Protest Vote

Charles and Sandra Wagoner are examples of Mr. Duke's hidden vote. Mr. Wagoner is a 29-year-old economist, and Mrs. Wagoner, 30, is a paralegal. They concede they are uncomfortable with Mr. Duke's involvement with the Klan and with several of his positions on specific issues.

But they came to Mr. Duke's rally here because, as Mrs. Wagoner put it, "He strikes a very sympathetic chord in those of us who are working to death, who are taxed to death and don't see much for it."

Mr. Wagoner said, "There is a protest vote out there of people who will go for Duke in the end because even if they don't like everything he stands for, they are even more unhappy with the way things are going."

A major factor in determining the size of the hidden vote this year is Mr. Duke's apparent ability to overcome the less savory aspect of his past.

In last year's Senate race the electorate was constantly reminded of Mr. Duke's past as a Klansman and a neo-Nazi by the news media and by Senator Johnston's television advertisements. This year, for the first time in his political career, Mr. Duke's past is rarely mentioned.

For example, Mr. Duke appeared before a political science class at the University of New Orleans this week and took several hostile questions from students on issues like his proposal to give welfare mothers cash payments if they agree to be implanted with long-term contraceptives. But no student ever referred to his past.

"It's been gone over and over and now it's old news, said Alan T. Leonhard, the professor who taught the class. "People in Louisiana are used to him. The shock value has worn off."

Douglas Rose, a professor of political science at Tulane University, said: "Duke is now following a relatively well-trod Republican trail. He is saying some things we've heard from George Bush and certainly from Jesse Helms," the Republican Senator from North Carolina.

In his campaign appearances Mr. Duke bemoans excessive government spending and rising taxes. He also deplores crime, drug trafficking and the high costs of welfare. He frequently stresses the charge that affirmative action programs are unfair to whites. Drawing a Battle Line

Like other politicians who raise the same issues, Mr. Duke refrains from outright appeals to racism. But he is more explicit than others in drawing a battle line between his constituents, white voters, and his scapegoats, poor blacks, who are blamed for everything from rising crime to rising taxes.

"The rising welfare underclass is taking more and more from the working class," he says. "They are overwhelming us."

Mr. Duke was on his home ground in Covington, a community about 40 miles north of downtown New Orleans. Addressing an all-white crowd, he said, "It is time to reform the liberal welfare system because it is not helping the poor escape poverty, and it's not helping the people who are paying for it."

Then, in tones heavily laden with sympathy, he added: "We have not helped these people by giving them our money. We have not been very Christian. I want to help them." 'It's Called Tough Love'

Mr. Duke, who is divorced, compares welfare recipients to his teen-age daughters, saying it would be wrong to give them everything they want. "It's called tough love," he said.

In an interview, Mr. Duke said he has had a change of heart. "I used to blame minorities for a lot of the conditions in their communities," he said. "Now I blame the liberal social welfare system for creating those conditions, and I feel sorry for the people."

But he cautions against making too much of this change.

"I have not given up the basic conservative values I started out with," the candidate said. "I've become more moderate, but I'm not afraid to say I believe in white rights. I do say that because I believe in protecting our nation's western, Christian culture, but now I can also say I believe in black rights, in equal rights for all."