



# Tentatively BOLD

## The strange campaign of Pete du Pont

At a small, informal luncheon in mid-1986 at Washington, D.C.'s Cato Institute, a dozen or so libertarian and free-market mavens were chatting with ex-Delaware governor Pete du Pont. The governor and his alter ego, aide Glenn Kenton, were laying out their strategy for du Pont's long-shot bid for the 1988 Republican presidential nomination. Kenton, in the give and take of conversation, confessed to the campaign's latest stratagem. "We've made a tentative decision," he confided, "to be bold."

By year's end Pete du Pont was off and running, the first long-shot candi-

date in a crowded and, may we hope, rancorous Republican field. Inaugurating his campaign with an alternately bold and loony speech at the (what else?) Hotel du Pont in Wilmington, the scion of Delaware's royal family surprised any of those assembled who expected a dose of updated Rockefeller Republicanism.

The announcement address contained the usual quota of platitudes. "There is potential in America that is untapped. There are problems that are unsolved." Zzzzzzzz.

But then, improbably, the clouds of banality dispersed. Du Pont enumerated

by BILL KAUFFMAN

the core proposals of his campaign. Some were trendy, some authoritarian, some genuinely radical. He called education "one of the last government monopolies" and urged the use of vouchers to refresh a sclerotic system. He advanced a "national schooling and training bank" where *anyone* over 18 could get a government loan for school. He said that welfare "demeans the human spirit" and he pushed, as an alternative, a massive workfare program. He demanded a separation of farm and state, to be phased in over five years. He said that teenagers ought to be subjected to mandatory drug tests. It was not your everyday campaign speech.

And du Pont's is not your everyday campaign. In two important respects he's performing for the Republicans the role Gary Hart played for the Democrats in '84: he's collecting mangy, handsome, or perverse ideas from the throng of policy analysts and think tanks that serve as governments-in-exile in D.C., and he's cautiously framing his candidacy in generational terms, thus testing the thesis that under-40 voters will respond to candidacies suffused with economic opportunity themes.

At first, it appeared that with the 52-year-old du Pont, the Republican primary season would become the latest Petri dish in the search for the economi-

lows Doug Bandow and Peter Ferrara, Howie Rich of Laissez Faire Books, and Vermont decentralist John McClaughry.

**D**u Pont's campaign is headquartered on the outskirts of Wilmington, Delaware, far from the pinstriped soullessness of downtown Washington. Wilmington advertises itself as a place where "You can be somebody," a regular Middle Atlantic existentialist haven.

Born to Delaware's most famous (and ubiquitous) family, Pete du Pont's résumé reeks of the patriciate. Exeter, Princeton, Harvard Law School, a daughter who shares her mother's first name...and, of course, a stint at the family chemical business. (Du Pont's background does have its drawbacks. Says Democratic pollster Harrison Hickman: "When you have the first name of a maître d' in a French restaurant and a last name that invokes toxic waste, you have problems.")

In 1970 du Pont was elected to Congress, where he compiled a moderate, distinctly Eastern Establishment voting record. (The paleo-liberal Americans for Democratic Action never scored du Pont below 40 percent.) He ran on that record in his campaign for governor of Delaware in 1976, boasting of his support for, among other things, public-jobs bills.

begin their stories with "Millionaire Pierre S. du Pont IV," rather than "former two-term governor Pete du Pont," complains deputy press secretary Ann Brackbill. "But they always call Pat Robertson [Christian name—Marion G.] Pat." Fair enough.

From all reports, du Pont was a better governor than most. He inherited a \$19-million deficit, the nation's highest income-tax rate, and unemployment well above the national average. Entering office with an apocalyptic "the state is bankrupt" jeremiad, du Pont proceeded to craft a series of income-tax reductions, spending cuts, and excise-tax increases that won batches of hosannas from editorial writers and fellow politicians. "There was no better governor in the country when he left office," gushed Tennessee Republican Lamar Alexander.

Delaware's income-tax rate was reduced 42 percent under du Pont's tenure. A constitutional amendment was enacted requiring super-majorities for any tax increase or new tax. A package of tax reductions and regulatory prunings induced nearly 20 banks to relocate operations to Delaware, directly creating more than 4,000 jobs. (Compare du Pont's record with Ronald Reagan's in California: during Reagan's eight years in office there, taxes on banks, sales, personal income, and corporations all increased. Anti-tax rhetoric, not anti-tax action, propelled him to the White House.

The du Pont legacy is the sort that impresses good-government fetishists: a decade of budget surpluses, unemployment well below the national average, and one of the highest bond ratings in the land. The state's turnaround prompted a wildly enthusiastic 1983 *Reader's Digest* article that pronounced du Pont-era Delaware "The Little State That Could—And Did!" It was nice publicity for a retiring governor whose ambitions outstripped Dover.

**T**o avoid the anonymity of the manswarm, long-shot presidential candidates need to forge a public identity. Pithy and favorable, if possible: it's better to be tagged "protectionist" (Richard Gephardt) or "black guy" (Jesse Jackson) than "the one who screws 29-year-old models" (Gary Hart).

Pete du Pont has succeeded famously

## Du Pont seems utterly unaffected by the debate on NATO.

cally conservative, socially tolerant young voters the pollsters keep telling us are out there. (See "Making Republicanism Cool," *REASON*, June 1986). Then he cut a sharp right.

David Boaz, vice-president of the libertarian Cato Institute and articulate promoter of the baby-boom-vote thesis, says du Pont "has come close" to running a generational campaign, particularly by hawking Social Security reform. "But he hasn't implemented it right," notes Boaz, what with the draconian drug-testing proposal.

Though Boaz is no du Pont supporter, a number of veteran libertarian activists are involved in the campaign, among them Cato president Ed Crane, Cato fel-

Du Pont won election easily, becoming the first member of his family to reside in the state house.

Alas, you can take the preppie out of Exeter but...Governor du Pont's Tory comportment led to several early PR disasters. When he nicknamed Delaware's typical voter "Joe Six-Pack," the rabble struck back, christening him "Champagne Pete" and "Pierre S. Six Pacque IV." Trouble also dogged him outside a Chrysler plant when he asked a worker, "Did you make any good cars today?" and was met with the righteous hail of populist fury. Worried that he lacked the common touch, Governor du Pont took up bowling.

In du Pont's defense, reporters always

in this quest. Donning the tiara that crowned John Anderson in 1980 and Hartpence in '84, du Pont is the New Ideas Man of 1988. Scan his press clippings and you'll notice that, with the passage of time, media opinion has congealed in a form auspicious to the du Pont campaign: the *New York Times* relates that "du Pont's clear set of ideas" is propelling his crusade; the *Philadelphia Inquirer* has him "generating respect, good will, and genuine curiosity" among the populace; he's bravely pushing "ideas for massive change," according to the *Dallas Morning News*.

Viewed through the narrow eyepiece of conventional politics, the praise is dead on. For in the suffocating covey of ridiculous '88 presidential candidacies (Albert Gore? Al Haig? Paul Simon?), du Pont's is one of only two campaigns from which the occasional daring or heterodox proposal might escape. (Jesse Jackson is the other worth an eavesdrop; so was Jack Kemp, before he slid on his New Right codpiece.)

I talked with du Pont at his Wilmington headquarters, in a small conference room littered—no, garnished—with half-full Styrofoam cups and an empty pizza box. A nice, rumpled campaign feel. Now du Pont, like any pol, has his share of canned answers, spat out rote-style like a bored schoolboy reciting his multiplication tables. But amidst the inane chaff is a program for economic deregulation more sweeping than any since Barry Goldwater's 1964 platform. Much of it, he admits, is sketchy. A campaign is no place for details.

• *Social Security.* Congressman Jack Kemp, dervish of the American Right, has said that any politician who proposes tampering with Social Security "is a candidate for a prefrontal lobotomy." Heedless, du Pont senses an opening to younger voters and is making such reform a campaign centerpiece.

Du Pont's scheme, influenced by Cato analyst Peter Ferrara, would permit younger workers to direct an amount equal to all or part of their payroll taxes into tax-free "Financial Security Accounts." They'd receive tax credits equal to their FSA investments. Retirees, and those not opting for an FSA, would be guaranteed their benefits under the existing system, scheduled increases and all. With time, Social Security would become an irrelevancy to many retirees, who'd socked their money away in presumably high-yield FSAs. Du Pont ad-

mits his plan is expensive—it would mean at least \$20 billion a year less, and as much as \$50 billion, pouring into the Treasury. But he argues that it will avert the calamitous choice between huge tax increases and benefit reductions that looms as the baby-boom generation slouches toward retirement.

Du Pont's is a generational gambit:

## He is betting that younger voters will be seduced.

he's betting that younger voters, skeptical of Social Security's sturdiness, will be seduced by his plan, outweighing likely defections of older voters jittery at the mention of SS reform. Coincidentally, du Pont's boldness serves to highlight differences with rival Kemp. The Buffalo congressman has taken the bait, ridiculing du Pont as a charter member of a mysterious circle of "social libertarians of the right and left" out to destroy the New Deal's most durable hand-me-down.

• *Farm subsidies.* Du Pont wants to phase out all agricultural subsidies over a five-year period for what he claims would be an ultimate savings of \$25 billion a year. Marketing quotas, a Depression-era legacy that has partially cartelized American agriculture, would be abolished forthwith. The impact on rural America? "Diversification," says du Pont, a delicate euphemism for more farmers going out of business.

Ironically, du Pont's namesake, the 18th-century French economist Pierre S. du Pont de Nemours, was a leading physiocratic philosopher who taught that agrarian freeholders were the backbone of a stable republic. Du Pont supporter McClaughry sympathizes with embattled farmers but muses that "the idea of government propping up farm prices would have turned [the old agrarians] into raving lunatics."

• *Federal welfare programs.* Welfare checks and food stamps would be abolished for all but the aged, disabled, and infirm. Anyone unable to find a private-sector job—including mothers with preschool children—would be assigned a government job at 90 percent of the minimum wage. Du Pont estimates that his mandatory workfare program might em-

ploy up to four million people; he notes, approvingly, that "50 years ago, America gave temporary employment to over three million."

Du Pont's enthusiasm for public employment places him in odd electoral company: only antediluvian Democrat Paul Simon is as zealous on the subject. Yea, close your eyes during du

Pont's rhapsodies and can't you just hear Hubert Humphrey's happy trill escaping through his lips: "How about paying someone to ride a school bus to keep order? What about paying someone to clean the graffiti off New York City subway cars?"

• *Education vouchers.* Parents would be given vouchers for their children's education, redeemable at public or private schools. If an exodus threatened the worst public schools with extinction, so be it. Du Pont's rhetoric here approaches radicalism: "Government tells us where we go to school, what subjects we take, what we read, and what we learn. The way you break up monopolies is with competition." But lest he be thought an enemy of government aid to education, du Pont usually stresses his school loan scheme as a complement to the voucher plan.

**R**ounding out the idea quintet is a "Rambo-like crusade" against drugs prominently advertised in du Pont's announcement speech. He talks about it much less these days, prohibitionist fever having cooled in the countryside, but it remains lodged in his inventory of new ideas. It's also the issue that makes Republicans sympathetic to individual liberty roll their eyes when du Pont's name is mentioned.

Let du Pont explain his scheme whereby kids who use drugs would risk losing their drivers' license: High school students are "going to be tested every year, year and a half. Your name is going to be picked out of a hat and you come that morning and you get tested. The purpose is not to catch people who

use drugs; the purpose is to send the message so peer pressure begins to develop. So people say, hey, if I get involved in this I'm going to lose the privilege to drive."

Du Pont twins his drug proposal with an effort to purge that other mainstay of teen turpitude, drinking. The crack medical teams assembled to assay the urine of America's youth would vet it

## Du Pont's libertarian supporters are not fools.

for evidence of alcohol use as well. Du Pont is no enemy of neo-prohibitionism: he emphatically endorses the 21-year-old drinking age.

Despite the tough talk, the suspicion persists that du Pont is a closet tolerant using the drug issue to placate New Rightists who, some pundits speculate, have been hesitant to commit to du Pont rival Jack Kemp because of recurring rumors that Kemp is homosexual. In our talk, du Pont at first expressed support for decriminalizing marijuana—then, after a few moments' reflection, reversed his initial answer. Bye-bye, gaffe.

Our conversation:

REASON: "If an individual is an adult, if Ann or I want to smoke a marijuana cigarette in the privacy of our own living rooms, no children present, should we be arrested?"

Du Pont: "No, I don't suppose you should. But if you are using cocaine and break into a shop to support your habit, of course you should be arrested."

But a question or two later, he had a change of heart: "Why should you send a signal to the kids of America that smoking joints is okay? That's the wrong signal. It isn't okay. It's not good for your health. It leads to other drugs."

After the interview, du Pont asked that the tape recorder be turned back on so he could add this coda to our dope talk: "No one has asked me the marijuana question in so many years that I didn't really focus on it. You said, should I be arrested if I use marijuana? The answer to that question is yes, if it's against the law in your state."

REASON: "Well, what I'm saying is, Do you think it should be against the law?"

Du Pont: "It is against the law, and I don't think we ought to change that. And yeah, we ought to be sending the signals to people that the use of drugs is not a good thing. That would include if I grew the marijuana in my back yard."

One last drug vignette. Du Pont was recently challenged by a New Hampshire high-school student who ventured the opinion that drugs ought to be legalized.

"That's an outrageous position!" the candidate replied. "You don't have the constitutional right to use cocaine....It'll kill you if you use it! You ought to vote for someone else for president."

**O**n foreign and defense issues, du Pont walks the hard-right line: deploy Star Wars, support rebel movements in various Marxist Third World countries (the "Reagan Doctrine"), eschew arms control negotiations with the Soviets. Like many who have made the journey from center to right, he does not believe the legislative and executive are coequal branches in the construction of U.S. foreign policy: "The role of our Congress is to start backing our president."

Du Pont seems utterly unaffected by the debate over NATO swirling around him on the right, and insiders say that he has resisted the entreaties of Cato's Ed Crane, among others, to reexamine the U.S. government's multitudinous commitments. Even U.S. troops' presence in South Korea is beyond his reproach.

Indeed, du Pont thinks his right-wing allies are *not interventionist enough*. Most Reagan Doctrine partisans hesitate to support indigenous forces opposed to tyrannies of the right; du Pont, flush with the crusading, Wilsonian virus so rife among Republican evangels, wishes to be "forceful" in exacting change in Chile and South Africa, among others. Like New Right guru Newt Gingrich, du Pont favors sanctions against Pretoria—a stance for which he was booed at the pro-South Africa National Conservative Political Action Conference in

Washington.

But when economics impinges on foreign policy, du Pont breaks with his Cold War comrades. Singularly among Republican candidates, he loudly denounces trade embargoes. Though he allows that sanctions sometimes send the "right signal," he is vigorous in supporting the right of farmers, at least, to sell to whom they please. "I would sell grain, chicken, Iowa beef, anywhere we can."

Including Cuba, trading partner non grata for the last 25 years? "Sure, as long as we're not at war." (Opposing the Cuban embargo is near-heretical on the Republican right; even suave pragmatist Robert Dole has moved to appease Cuban exiles by introducing legislation to constrict the meager channels still extant between the United States and Cuba. Though lifting the embargo is a popular issue with traditionally free-trade farmers, don't look for du Pont to advertise Cuban trade as a logical corollary of his free-market agriculture proposal.)

In refreshing contrast to the gang of Vietnam-age Democratic candidates clamoring for a return to the draft, du Pont views conscription as an abridgement of individual rights. (He does not, however, favor the repeal of draft registration.) One advisor recalls that when an aide brought up draft resumption as a potential addition to his battery of *soi-disant* new ideas, du Pont dismissed it immediately as violative of "individual liberties."

A hodgepodge of other du Pont stances: against the Equal Rights Amendment (he supported it in Congress); against penalizing employers who hire illegal immigrants; for voluntary public-school prayer; opposed to an amendment outlawing abortion; opposed to the protectionist Gephardt amendment; opposed to an oil-import tax. His political hero is Winston Churchill. When asked to list potential members of a du Pont cabinet, he names Jeane Kirkpatrick and William Bennett.

**T**he trouble with having a New Ideas man in the race is that sententious journalists will repeat, ad infinitum, Richard Weaver's famous dictum that "ideas have consequences." But perhaps, in du Pont's case, the provenance of those ideas is the more interesting fact. How does a man who supported wage

and price controls, the Chrysler bailout, and Democratic public-jobs bills now carry the banner for curtailed state intervention in the economy? And how has he become one of the few GOP politicians who, as advisor John McClaughry puts it, "thinks creatively about problems that don't require the continual expansion of government"?

In innumerable interviews, du Pont has credited his experience as Delaware's chief executive with his conversion to free-market partisan. "Kemp, du Pont, and Bob Dole voted for Nixon's wage and price controls," he says. "We learned."

Unlike prepresidential Reagan, du Pont denies that a visceral or philosophical aversion to big government motivates his candidacy. "My idea is not that you reduce the size of government because big government by itself is something you want to eliminate. You get rid of it because it isn't working. It's pretty expensive, so yes, I do have a philosophical objection. But the real proof of the pudding is, does it work?"

Du Pont's blend of ideas is a strange brew indeed. *The New Republic* tags him a "patrician populist." *The New York Times* prefers "modified libertarian." *The Economist* settles for "iconoclastic." Mandatory drug tests...choice in education...the partial privatization of Social Security...a new WPA...free-market agriculture...bankrolling the *contras*—the common thread is elusive.

Which leads to the one unanswerable question: Is Pete du Pont an authentic, freewheeling reformer, or is he just another political whore? Du Pont watchers split along predictable lines. His admirers claim that du Pont is a genuine, if idiosyncratic, article, whose free-market conservatism was forged in the smithy of experience. Writes George Will: "He has the intellectual insouciance of someone who, having governed successfully and thought seriously, has much to say and nothing to lose by saying it."

Detractors find the patchwork quality of du Pont's platform the mark of an ambitious and expedient man. The feisty Howard Phillips, chairman of the Conservative Caucus, scoffs: "I think he is a contrived candidate who is trying to figure out what people are looking for and remake himself in that mold."

Apropos Phillips, a reading of du Pont position papers recalls ex-senator Russell Long's theory of public finance: "Don't tax you, don't tax me, tax that fellow

behind the tree." That is, sculpt a distinct, "principled" profile by antagonizing inhospitable groups with controversial positions. And never, ever, insult a friend.

Du Pont talks tough when the subjects are far afield his desired constituency. Debt-ridden farmers, welfare mothers, voteless kids, and inaffluent retirees likely to be repelled (at first exposure) by du Pont's rhetoric were never going to vote for a long-shot Republican in the first place. Du Pont brags that his campaign "is not for the faint of heart," but he says nothing that might offend his target audience: the upper-middle class, solid burghers, and the enterprising young. The candidate has been reticent—silent, actually—on the topic of welfare for the aspiring and the well-to-do. (Indeed, his schooling and training loan program would be an enormous subsidy to the better-heeled.)

Veteran Delaware political writer Ralph Moyed of the *Wilmington News-Journal* views the du Pont platform as the latest manifestation of a "career-long devotion to success. He takes polls and then decides principles. It's the most cynical campaign going." What of du Pont's claim that the crucible of governance produced his market-oriented vision? "I give that no credence at all," says crusty newspaperman Moyed. "How does that explain his proposal to have every high-school kid piss in a bottle?"

Du Pont's libertarian supporters are not fools; they freely admit their man's shortcomings. But as du Pont fundraiser Howie Rich, respected co-proprietor of Laissez Faire Books, says, "I want to be part of a coalition for a candidate who is head and shoulders above the rest." Du Pont, after all, is "talking about Social Security, which is one-third of the government"—and no one else has gone even that far.

**D**oes Pete du Pont have a chance? More than you might think. Though Robert Dole and George Bush are generally vouchsafed the top two spots in the lead-off Iowa caucuses in January, a third-place finish by any of the other candidates (except Jack Kemp, currently running third here, there, and everywhere) will win the kindly attention of the news media as the campaign moves to New Hampshire. There, du

Pont hopes to place second, supplanting either Bush or Dole as a front-runner.

Horse-race journalists are touting du Pont as a potential surprise. His sterling presentations in candidate forums in Iowa and New Hampshire have inveigled praise from a number of quarters and have made du Pont "the most interesting presidential candidate," according to conservative blusterers Evans and Novak. The political insider rag *Roll Call*, handicapping the field, dispenses this equine assessment: "Sleeper continues to move, good organization."

Du Pont's main chance will come with the televised debates prior to the Iowa and New Hampshire contests. He has an assured, if not particularly inspiring delivery, and an impressive exposition of his creed ought to do for du Pont what the 1980 debates did for John Anderson. Among GOP longshots, he is the least likely to go quietly into obscurity and night.

If you're looking for a Paine or Sam Adams or Thoreau, forget this campaign. Pete du Pont is a political pastiche, emerging from no recognizable tradition in American politics. He grazes at the free-market end of the Jack Kemp/Newt Gingrich wing of the Republican Party, assertively pro-enterprise and ebulliently so. His rhetoric on drugs and defense suggests a preppy Pat Buchanan, reflexively pro-government. But giving him the benefit of the doubt—accepting that the modalities of Republican politics require obeisance to the New Right—my best guess is that Pete du Pont is a Gerald Ford Republican on noneconomic matters, and if that's your cup of tea then by all means drink it.

At the least, a respectable showing by du Pont ought to convince other Republicans that a political market exists for someone willing to take on the sacred cows of the entitlement state. If his campaign can stretch the discouragingly inelastic bounds of political discourse in this country, all to the better. Says du Pont, hopefully, "You know what's the wonderful thing about all these proposals we're making? If it looks like I have a chance of becoming president, all of a sudden there's going to be one hell of a debate." Man, do we need it. □

*Washington-based editor Bill Kauffman doesn't think there is any such thing as a new idea.*



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**Photographs by George Lange**