



# THE AMERICAN SPECTATOR

EDITED BY R. EMMETT TYRRELL, JR.

## Remembering Pete du Pont: An Ideological Heir to Reagan

*The Delaware politician, who matched an aristocratic name with innovative ideas, died last week.*

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May 12, 2021

Ronald Reagan's 1980 presidential campaign brought me to Washington, beginning a 40-plus year career in public policy. While attending Stanford Law School, I worked as a research assistant at the Hoover Institution and met Martin Anderson, Reagan's domestic policy adviser. It turns out that he had been reading my biweekly column in the *Stanford Daily* and told my boss, who happened to be his friend and another Reagan backer, that he wanted to meet me.

That led to an offer to join the Reagan campaign when I graduated in 1979. After taking the bar exam, I drove down to Los Angeles and started with the campaign on August 1. It was a grand adventure. I didn't spend a lot of time in California, instead wandering around the country with the campaign. Among my more memorable trips was joining Reagan's bus tour across New Hampshire, which reinvigorated his campaign with a big victory over George H. W. Bush. In the season's final primary, California delivered a landslide for its favorite son, who already had clinched the nomination. It was on to Detroit for the convention and then, even more improbably to many, including incumbent President Jimmy Carter, to the White House after a big win in November.

I didn't last very long in the administration. Anderson left after just a year, and I was frustrated with the constraints of a process dominated by careerist Republican placeholders. Some of us joked that the latter wore Adam Smith ties, then the rage on the right, without knowing who he was or what he wrote. After leaving I wrote a couple articles detailing my disillusionment, one memorably entitled "When They Stop Returning Your Phone Calls," but the pieces predate the internet age and now seem to exist only in my memory.

In those days, however, I still enjoyed politics. In 1987, I was contacted by Bill Roesing, a political consultant with Capitol Hill experience who wondered if I wanted to do some issue work for Pete du Pont, who was tossing his proverbial hat into the proverbial ring for president. Du Pont, who died a few days ago, presented himself as the true ideological heir to Reagan while running against Vice President George H. W. Bush. I believed the latter remained little more than a decent factotum on domestic issues, which later was demonstrated by his dismal performance. I met and liked du Pont and accepted. So did a close colleague of mine from the Reagan campaign of eight years before.

Bush was the obvious frontrunner, presumed to be Reagan's heir but without the incumbent's endorsement until wrapping up the nomination. Kansas Sen. Bob Dole, the Republican vice presidential candidate in 1976 who spent a decade alternating between minority and majority leader of the U.S. Senate, appeared to be the most serious alternative. Eight years later he was the unsuccessful GOP presidential nominee.

Next up was religious broadcaster Pat Robertson, who had a corps of committed followers and apparently genuinely believed he had been anointed by God to become president. The other contenders were New York Rep. Jack Kemp, who made a name pushing for the income tax rate reductions that Reagan adopted as his signature policy, and retired Gen. Al Haig, who had been chief of staff under presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford and, less successfully, secretary of state under Reagan. Paul Laxalt, former Nevada governor and senator and close Reagan friend, lasted just four months as a candidate, quitting after fundraising proved barren.

Du Pont was a little-known political figure from the small state of Delaware, so his challenge was immense. But his record won positive attention. A graduate of Princeton and Harvard Law School, he chose politics over the family chemical business, proclaiming that he would be "bored" waiting decades for a chance to run the company. He started in the state Legislature, moved to the U.S. House of Representatives, and almost ran for Senate in 1972. But with President Richard Nixon's encouragement the GOP incumbent decided to run again, causing du Pont to demur. (In the general election a very young Joe Biden won his initial upset victory over that uninspiring opponent.)

In 1976, du Pont, who had demonstrated his street appeal in a small state where everyone seemed to know everyone, ran for governor. The state was a fiscal mess and had suffered through a series of one-term governors. He later told the *Washington Post*, "We took the attitude, well, you know, if we're not going to get reelected anyhow, maybe we just ought to go into office and really do what needs to be done and straighten the place out. And so we did."

He foreshadowed Reagan's "supply-side" economic policies, cutting taxes, slowing spending, reducing regulation, and attracting business. He paid off the state debt and pushed a constitutional amendment to restrict spending and taxing. Economic growth returned. Du Pont was rewarded politically. He explained to the *Post*, "Lo and behold [I] got 71 percent of the vote the next time around. And there's a moral in there somewhere, that if you do the right thing it'll work."

The citizens of Delaware appeared to agree. Oliver O'Connell observed for the *Independent* that du Pont "left office in 1985 with approval ratings approaching 90 per cent, a booming state economy, relatively low unemployment, low taxes, and a balanced state budget — even winning the praise of Democrats." That sentiment was reflected in President Biden's tribute to du Pont. Although noting their (obviously wide) policy disagreements, Biden said, "Pete embodied the idea that we can serve the people best when we come together, cross the divide, and treat each other with dignity and respect. It was through that approach that Pete became an indelible figure in the story of Delaware, a mentor to public servants of both parties, and a leader deeply admired by the people he served."

Barred from a third run by term limits, du Pont was urged to take on Sen. Biden in 1984, which again might have dramatically altered U.S. history. Instead, du Pont aimed higher.

I spent a lot of time on Biden's beloved Amtrak back and forth to Wilmington to work with du Pont, Roesing, and the rest of the du Pont team. Despite the notorious brutality of presidential politics, du Pont was a pleasure to work with. He put on no airs and understood the challenges facing those without a trust fund. He talked easily to everyone and had a deadpan sense of humor. During one briefing session he mentioned that he'd read an article of mine with which he apparently disagreed: "Were you smoking a funny cigarette when you wrote it?" he asked with an arched eyebrow.

Although he easily won votes at home, he found the national stage more difficult. The *Post's* Marjorie Williams described his efforts: "On the stump, he is Dudley Do-Right running for Chief Mountie: a mix of goggle-eyed sincerity, crisp enthusiasm and slightly goofy charm. But so far, he has failed to raise a pulse."

In small meetings he connected with voters. To larger gatherings he seemed more distant even though he spoke well. There was none of the faux familiarity affected by the smoothest campaigners. He was friendly, but did not emote "I feel your pain," as Bill Clinton so famously did four years later. In one television exchange with Bush, the latter referred to du Pont's given name of Pierre, which he never used. It was unfair — Bush was much more the patrician — but effective political theater.

Arguably du Pont had the best experience of the bunch, having successfully managed a state government, as had Reagan, with the added benefit of having spent time in Congress. To set himself apart from Bush, who years before when running against Reagan had accused the latter of promoting "voodoo economics," du Pont pushed an agenda that Williams described as "a blend of libertarianism and Reagan conservatism."

The usual GOP suspects were upset with du Pont's candidacy for two reasons. First, they saw the nomination as the presumptive property of whoever was first in line — after Bush's defeat in 1992, it would be the uninspiring Dole, who predictably lost. Williams noted that "Within his party [du Pont] is accused of hubris, at the very least, in running against such GOP stalwarts as Bush and Dole." Only in 2016 did Donald Trump completely, and hopefully finally, demolish political primogeniture within Republican ranks.

Second, du Pont believed that ideas mattered, which is anathema in Washington. As Williams' characterization suggested, du Pont and his team — which included a couple still reasonably young Reagan stalwarts! — pushed several eminently sensible but seemingly radical ideas: kill farm subsidies, supplement Social Security with private accounts, provide educational vouchers, require workfare for welfare. No wonder *Washington Post* columnist George Will lauded du Pont's "substance to blather ratio." Du Pont was more hawkish than me on foreign policy, but that wasn't my focus then, and the world still seemed in flux even though the Cold War was ebbing.

Unsurprisingly, the other candidates, led by Bush, ran screaming from the room when presented with such proposals. Indeed, most of them, Kemp excepted, sought to avoid ever hearing anything approaching a new idea. But several of du Pont's proposals ultimately went mainstream. The Republican Congress and President Bill Clinton agreed to a welfare reform bill that included workfare. Bush's son, George W., who succeeded Clinton, pushed private investment accounts as part of Social Security. Educational vouchers became a GOP staple and have been enacted by states across the country. Finally, after the agricultural policy debacle of

the Trump years — paying even more to farmers to make up for retaliation against his protectionist trade policies — the need for killing farm subsidies never has been greater.

Du Pont was ambitious, no doubt, but, like Reagan, he appeared comfortable with himself. He observed, “Before you run for president, you ought to decide why you want to be president and what you do if you get there. The only thing that would be worth being in that job is to try to change the things that need to be changed.”

He left the race with class. After dismal showings in the Iowa caucus and New Hampshire primary, so different from the experience of the Reagan campaign, he dropped out. At the time Roesing told me that the campaign was in the black. It could borrow money and forge ahead, he observed, but du Pont and those around him realized that “it,” the presidency, wasn’t going to happen. They did the best that they could and were proud of their efforts, so it was time to move on. How sensible — and unlike most presidential campaigns.

Afterwards du Pont remained active, writing frequently about policy issues. We didn’t have much contact, but I always enjoyed seeing his byline. I fondly remembered our grand little crusade years before and occasionally thought “what if?” What if a president promoting his ideas had been elected in 1988?

“I was born with a well-known name and genuine opportunity. I hope I have lived up to both,” he said when announcing his long-shot presidential candidacy in 1986. You did both, Pete. We will miss your thoughtfulness, modesty, commitment, decency, and vision. RIP.

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