

The Education of Lance Hill



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David Duke was out of federal prison and planning his own welcome-home party. Earlier this summer, the approaching Memorial Day weekend found Duke preparing for a three-day meeting of leading white supremacists, neo-Nazis and Holocaust deniers from North America and Europe, held in a Kenner hotel near the Louis Armstrong International Airport. Duke's Web site suggested that the fragmented Far Right would put aside longstanding differences to attack the "crisis" of low white birth rates. Duke himself would be giving the keynote address, his first since serving a 15-month prison sentence for admittedly swindling his political supporters out of hundreds of thousands of dollars that he blew on casino dice games.

Some 250 people ended up attending Duke's private "European-American Unity" weekend, according to The Associated Press. The Southern Poverty Law Center and other monitors of political extremists and hate groups view the conference as a potentially troublesome re-alignment. Over the course of the weekend, the controversial Liberty Monument in New Orleans was vandalized with anti-Duke graffiti. Someone splattered pink paint on a statue of Jefferson Davis.

Lance Hill is not impressed. An adjunct professor of history and director of a pro-tolerance program at Tulane University, Hill is widely credited with leading a grassroots campaign in the early 1990s that stopped Duke's most serious insurgency into American electoral politics. In back-to-back Louisiana campaigns for the United States Senate and then governor, Duke captured more than half the white vote in each contest, while losing both elections.

Hill, then a Tulane graduate student, led a nonprofit organization that exposed Duke as an unrepentant racist and neo-Nazi -- revelations that led to Duke's crushing defeat by former Gov. Edwin Edwards in 1991. As director of the Louisiana Coalition Against Racism and Nazism, Hill also documented Duke's history of questionable fundraising practices, which federal investigators used 10 years later as a template for their successful criminal probe of Duke.

Since then, whenever Duke and his cohorts try to recapture the public spotlight, journalists, researchers and opposition groups from across the country invariably call Hill for his view on what significance to attach to their activities.

Today, the answer is "not much."

"David Duke is the O.J. Simpson of the Klan," Hill says. "He's been widely discredited. The only novelty about him is that he's still around."

While he still responds to queries about Duke and his confederates, Hill says he has "moved on to life beyond Duke," enjoying a relatively low public profile since the heated campaigns that once thrust him into the international spotlight. He has earned his doctorate in history at Tulane, turning his dissertation into his first book, *Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement*, published earlier this summer by University of North Carolina Press.

Hill and Tulane historian Lawrence N. Powell, the former vice-chair of the Louisiana Coalition, still champion racial and religious tolerance, but their strategy has changed. "We have dug in for the long term," Hill says.

HILL WAS BORN IN 1950 IN BELLEVILLE, Kan., the fourth of seven children. His father was a maintenance mechanic at a local chemical plant, and a union organizer. His mother worked as a nurse at the local hospital. (A friend once said Hill got his determination from his father, and his compassion from his mother.) When Lance was 6, his family moved to Lawrence, the center of the state's anti-slavery movement during the Civil War.

Lawrence's public schools have been racially integrated since the Civil War -- Hill proudly notes that his grandmother attended classes with the black poet Langston Hughes. Still, segregation in Kansas took other forms. Belleville was a "sundown town," meaning that African Americans were not allowed to stay overnight in the all-white town. The public swimming pool was segregated in Lawrence, as were theaters and other facilities.

Hill can't recall there being a single moment when he suddenly questioned segregation, though his eighth-grade English teacher may have received the first clue. In 1962, at the age of 12, Hill took the lyrics from a song he heard on a television show and put them in a poem: "Red, yellow, / Black, white, / merely reflected light. / Our Lord is colorblind."

That same year, Hill took a job as a bus boy at the Kansas University student center. It was not long before Hill, the son of a union shop steward, tried to organize a bus boys' strike for higher pay. His supervisor, a college student, threatened to bring in his fraternity brothers as "scabs," Hill recalls with a chuckle. The effort failed.

Salting the boy's defeat was a reprimand from his parents, who wanted him to learn how to earn a living before sacrificing a job for his convictions.

Hill's initiation as an activist continued with a high school debate over the Vietnam War. During his sophomore year, Hill's history teacher assigned him to prepare an argument to oppose the conflict. He found some anti-war information on a table at the Kansas University student center. The material included an excerpt from the *Congressional Record*, in which several attorneys argued that the undeclared war violated several international treaties and laws.

Then came the day of the big debate. "I said I thought we should stay and fight but that the war was illegal," Hill recalls. "Then my history teacher got up and told the rest of the class to disregard everything I had just said. That was a turning point for me."

Hill began to question not only the war, but also other institutions and values -- and his teachers. "I became a skeptic of everything and a nuisance in the back of the class," Hill says with a smile.

In 1968, his senior year, he was elected student council president. He tried to desegregate a whites-only swimming pool, unsuccessfully. In 1969, he attended Kansas University and after one semester was expelled with nearly 40 other students for an anti-war demonstration. In the following years, Hill's high-profile anti-war and social justice actions led to several arrests, and a 21-month prison sentence on marijuana charges. He was released in 1973 and settled in Kansas City, Mo.

"Prison was a turning point for me," Hill says. "It exposed me to the plight of the powerless in society and intensified my commitment to social justice. And the time I had for extensive reading helped me to develop an intellectual self-discipline that has served me well as both an activist and scholar."

In Kansas City, Hill turned from protests to blue-collar labor organizing. He organized in "sweat shops" and factories, working as a welder, machinist, printer and an asbestos worker. Hill competed with Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi recruiters for his white co-workers at a time when jobs were being lost to industrialization and racial tensions were widespread.

"There was a big long table in the welding shop," he recalls. "There were Klansmen on one side and black nationalists and Muslim sympathizers on the other side, as well as tax resisters, Libertarians, and a scattering of black and white workers with no political affiliations." During lunch, they would read the paper and argue politics. "I learned most of what I know about the subtleties of racial consciousness there," Hill says. "I learned how to intervene and argue, intellectually and emotionally, away from racism and toward more tolerant, inclusive ideas, and how to organize people to work together."

Throughout the 1970s, he read about radical right groups. He also studied social movement theories and labor history, while scrutinizing his own leftward political leanings. In 1974, he met and fell in love with Eileen San Juan, an activist who shared his political passions. As the first of nine children born to a working-class background in Mobile, Ala., to attend college, San Juan also shared his background. They eventually married and headed south.

"WE MOVED TO LOUISIANA IN 1979, specifically to do anti-Klan work and labor organizing," Hill recalls. The young family lived in Hammond for two years. Eileen stayed home with their two children while Hill took a \$4.30-an-hour welding job at a barge-building shipyard on the Northshore.

Hill's plans to organize the workers and fight the Klan met deep-rooted resistance. Working conditions at the shipyard were deplorable, he recalls. Men were forced to weld in the rain and work with few breaks. Safety violations were rampant; job protection was absent. Layoffs were based on favoritism. Blacks and whites ate separately. There were no black foremen or supervisors, and blacks were often relegated to the most undesirable and dangerous jobs. It was not uncommon for white workers to call black workers "niggers" to their faces.

The racial divide hampered Hills' labor organizing efforts. "I was trained to organize people around common ground," he says of his work in Kansas. Those lessons didn't apply in Louisiana. "You didn't have the dialogue between black and white workers needed to sustain an organization drive," he says.

Unschooling in racial customs of the South, he learned that he violated a social taboo by riding to work with a black co-worker. He also learned that his size and physical strength provided him with status and security. At 6-foot-3 and 290 lbs., he was one of the biggest men in a shipyard that

employed several hundred men. When he crossed a racial "fault line," his co-workers simply dismissed him as a "crazy Yankee."

He wasn't in Kansas anymore. "I felt overwhelmed at the shipyard," Hill says. "It was difficult to have the kinds of discussions of contemporary politics and current events like I did in the North, in part because of the low education levels here." Hill recalls that when he took the required eye test for the shipyard, there were no letters on the chart. Instead, there were pictures of bunny rabbits and frogs. A test administrator explained that many workers -- black and white -- could not read the alphabet.

By the time he left the shipyard, Hill was losing faith "in the grand theories of socialism and the role of working class." He quit labor organizing. Yet he continued his anti-Klan activities. To learn more about right-wing extremists in Louisiana, Hill subscribed to newsletters from neo-Nazis in Kenner, as well as the Metairie-based National Association for the Advancement of White People (NAAWP), run by David Duke.

IN THE EARLY 1980s, the Hill family moved into a trailer in Marrero, then into a house in Algiers. Their son, Joel, was the only white student at L.B. Landry High School. It was a contrast to Hammond, where segregation forced Joel and his black friends to walk on separate sidewalks on certain streets.

Eileen took a job as a teacher in Orleans Parish Public Schools. Hill started a grass-cutting business and finished work on his bachelor's degree. He wrote stories for *The Nation* on Gov. Edwin Edwards' first racketeering trial and other topics, and intensified his studies of the radical right. "When I first moved here, I went out to Duke's NAAWP headquarters (in Metairie), posing as a sympathizer," Hill recalls. "He was very smooth." Duke gave Hill some literature, but "steered me away" from the pro-Nazi materials.

Hill distributed anti-Klan leaflets to young working-class whites on the West Bank and the Lakefront. He found that most were sympathetic to the Klan.

By 1987, Hill's list of causes grew to include the anti-nuclear and anti-apartheid movements. "But I was still searching to find myself, politically," he says. "So, I did what I suppose all organizers and activists do when they are confused -- I went to graduate school."

He entered Tulane's history department, receiving a tuition-free fellowship. He worked as an archivist for the Amistad Research Center for black history. Unlike most students, Hill knew his dissertation topic -- the Deacons for Defense -- when he entered graduate school.

"Lance always knew what he wanted to know," says Powell, a professor of Southern history and Hill's adviser. "He could read things with a critical eye. He was intellectually self-made."

Physically imposing in a shipyard, Hill proved intellectually challenging in a classroom. "He came out of a tradition of radical activism of the Left and his arguments tended toward the polemical," Powell says. "He had to learn how to be more balanced and objective."

At times, he could be stubborn. "I was always surprised that, on occasion, the professors knew more than I did," Hill jokes. "Seriously, though, the Tulane faculty were enormously gifted scholars and generous with their time. I learned to respect the craft of history. Graduate school taught me to be fair and balanced and to let the truth speak for itself."

In December 1988, Duke announced he would run in a special election to represent Metairie in the Louisiana House of Representatives (House District 81). Duke switched from the right-wing Populist Party to the GOP. He ran as a moderate Republican, opposed to welfare spending, affirmative action and higher taxes.

By then, Hill had amassed a disturbing file on Duke, which he disseminated to the media. Despite leaving the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan over a mailing list scandal in 1980, Duke's neo-Nazi philosophy remained intact. His NAAWP newsletter continued to advocate extremist ideas such as dividing North America into separate racial nations, using genetic engineering to create a "master race," and defending neo-Nazi terrorists.

But the media focused on Duke's more distant past with the KKK, which he had already repudiated. Meanwhile, Powell says, hard economic times and a crack cocaine epidemic in New Orleans fueled Duke's appeal.

Powell lived in House District 81 at the time and organized a grass roots campaign against Duke. Hill helped. The campaign transformed Hill and Powell's relationship from professor-and-student to political colleagues. On the campaign trail, they met two people who would play major roles in what became a four-year movement to stop Duke -- the Rev. James L. Stovall and Elizabeth Rickey.

Stovall, executive director of the Louisiana Interchurch Conference in Baton Rouge, had served as a pastor to a Methodist church in Metairie. Rickey, a graduate student in political science at Tulane and a member of the Republican State Central Committee, was campaigning for Duke's main opponent: Republican John Treen, brother of former Gov. David Treen.

"I was introduced to Lance by John Treen," Rickey recalls. "I was conducting research for the campaign. John called and said, 'There's a guy that found this map that Duke had published and it segregates the United States. You've got to get that map.'"

While Hill networked, Duke's blue-and-white signs mushroomed around Metairie. On Jan. 20, 1989, Duke placed first in the primary then beat Treen in the run-off. A *Times-Picayune* editorial the next day called Duke's election an "embarrassment," but urged that Duke "be given a chance to grow, to change, to see the error of his ways." The paper went on: "If in the coming months, Mr. Duke is not able to show that he is no longer a racist, then every effort should be made to defeat him at the next regular legislative election."

Hill and Powell's group did not want to wait that long. Duke clearly had greater ambitions and his breakthrough to political legitimacy soon became apparent. Schoolteachers were taking children to the Legislature to see Rep. Duke in action.

After the election, Stovall took the lead in building the ad hoc No Dukes group into the Louisiana Coalition. Hill and Rickey teamed up to prove Duke had not forsaken his neo-Nazi past. Rickey followed Duke to Chicago where he addressed his old Populist Party followers, including neo-Nazis and skinheads. A month later, Hill and Rickey revealed Duke was selling Nazi and racist literature from his legislative office in Metairie. Duke defended the practice but agreed to stop selling the pro-Nazi material.

"Lance came up with the idea for me to buy the Nazi books at the NAAWP bookstore," Rickey recalls, laughing. "Lance was the brains behind everything." The disclosure revived the issue of Duke's duplicity and extremism, especially among other legislators.

In the fall of 1989, The Louisiana Coalition Against Racism and Nazism was formally organized. "It was a very odd little coalition of very conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats," Hill recalls. Stovall was named chair, and Powell became vice-chair. Emmet Bashful, chancellor of historically black Southern University at New Orleans, became secretary. Jane Buchsbaum, executive director of the Jewish Federation of New Orleans, served as treasurer. Hill was named director.

In November, Duke announced his candidacy for the U.S. Senate. The next month, the Coalition released a taped interview from the previous month in which Duke opined that the United States should not have entered World War II and that he still supported a racially divided America. In December, Hill ghostwrote a motion for the censure of Duke, which Rickey introduced at a meeting of the state GOP party leadership. Her motion failed 126-8. Rickey wanted to quit the GOP.

"But Lance convinced me to stay in," Rickey says. "He said I would be more effective holding this office than if I quit. He was absolutely right."

The campaigns were emotionally harder on Rickey, Hill says. "She paid a very dear price for her stand. It was easier for people like me whose friends supported and encouraged their work. But Beth was out on the plank by herself."

The first half of 1990 proved especially frustrating for the Coalition. Members often heard the argument that public opposition to Duke would win support for him. With few exceptions, and for reasons the Coalition could not fathom, there was a virtual media embargo of Duke during the first six months of 1990. "And polls showed this was the period when his support grew most," Hill says. "He was like a mushroom; he grew in the dark. Once the media began to cover him, his political support stopped increasing."

Journalists poured into Louisiana from around the world, using Hill's strategic research as the main source of revelations about Duke. "Lance was really the driving force behind the 'Stop Dukes' movement," Powell says. "He was like a man of the hour. He saw the big picture. He could also think strategically and tactically. And he would give great spin."

When a reporter asked Hill what he would do if Duke won the Louisiana governor's race, Hill cheerfully replied he would "seek political asylum in Mississippi."

Duke captured 60 percent of the white vote in his losing bid for the Senate in 1990 and 55 percent of the white vote in his unsuccessful bid for governor in 1991. With the world looking on, Edwin Edwards trounced Duke, 61 to 39 percent of the overall vote. The Coalition closed the following year. Duke tried to mount a comeback in the 1996 governor's race, but dropped out after polling only 3 percent in the primary. "The key to defeating Duke was to break the illusion of the white consensus," Hill says.

HILL SAID HE LEARNED A NUMBER OF LESSONS from the No Dukes movement. "You have to have ordinary people step out of their ordinary lives and do extraordinary things, because that convinces the racists that there will be a high price to pay if they win," he says. "That's why I said during the governor's race that Duke could win, but he couldn't govern. The state would have become ungovernable."

Second, "Being right and smart is not enough to win."

Third, people are attracted to "moral absolutes, not political platitudes." Says Hill: "It was important for us to organize the campaign against Duke to give people a feeling that they were part of a movement -- not a political campaign. Our goal was a movement to stop all Dukes."

Fourth, distinguish between "conservatives" and "fascists." During the Duke campaigns, conservative and liberals put aside differences on social and fiscal issues to defeat Duke, Hill notes.

On a personal level, Hill says, the campaigns taught him that he had to work with people from all political perspectives. "The Duke campaigns also made me less concerned with transforming society than simply defending the basic rights and liberties of people. I think Beth (Rickey) was trying to do the same thing, from the conservative side."

Stovall, the "moral compass" of the Louisiana Coalition, died several years after the campaign. Hill grieved his loss: "Without question, he is the human being I respected most in my life. In my eyes, he is the most important political figure in 20th Century Louisiana politics. The problem is that people don't write books about wars that didn't happen, or waters that don't breach the levees." It was Stovall, Hill says, who prevented the rise of fascism in Louisiana.

Hill eulogized Stovall at his funeral: "Jimmy saw the good in everyone, even when it wasn't there."

AFTER THE CAMPAIGNS, Hill and Powell took steps to address long-term issues that the Duke era had revealed. "The Duke phenomenon alerted people to the level of racial and religious bigotry in Louisiana," Hill says. "The problem was not Duke, it was the public's indifference to Duke's scapegoating of minorities."

In 1993, seeing a need to promote critical thinking and "inclusive values," Hill and Powell co-founded the Southern Institute for Education and Research at Tulane. The Institute has two major free programs, serving Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and the Florida panhandle. The tolerance-education program for K-12 teachers and students uses case studies of the Nazi Holocaust and the civil rights movement to teach the causes and consequences of bigotry. More than 3,000 teachers, who every year teach half a million students, have attended the workshops. Designed and directed by Plater Robinson (grandson of renowned civic activist Martha Robinson), the tolerance program also teaches the "moral imperative" of speaking out against the suffering of others, Hill says.

The second program, cross-cultural communication training, serves churches, community groups, and government and law enforcement agencies. "The goal is to help people work more effectively across racial and ethnic lines," Hill says. "It is an educational, not a political agenda. We don't tell people what to think, we just help them to think."

In *Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement*, Hill deepens his analysis of race and class conflicts in Louisiana. *Deacons* recounts the history of a political organization of armed, working-class black men in Bogalusa and other areas of rural Louisiana and Mississippi who successfully confronted the Klan. In the book, Hill challenges liberal "myths" that non-violence and the Rev. Martin Luther King alone persuaded the nation to abandon racial segregation. "Moral appeals to the conscience of the white majority only went so far," Hill says. The threat of force and coercion by groups like the Deacons was vital to the success of the civil rights movement, he argues.

Hill clearly champions the political and organizational skills of the Deacons, men with little formal education, who fought the "terrorist" KKK for basic constitutional rights and liberties -- including the Second Amendment rights to bear firearms. That might unnerve liberals. But Hill also reminds conservatives that the National Rifle Association refused to come to the aid of armed blacks trying to defend their homes.

Writing in the *Chicago Tribune*, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian David J. Garrow gave qualified praise to Hill's account of the Deacons. "His thorough and original history of the Deacons for Defense is more than an impressive account of a now-obscure group that left no written records," Garrow writes. "*The Deacons for Defense* is also a forceful, though sometimes overstated, challenge to the shelfful of civil rights histories that tell a story in which nonviolence was indeed an essential and defining quality of the Southern movement's success."

Hill says he wrote about the Deacons because they've been omitted from the "official narrative" of the civil rights movement. "It was a story of courage in the face of bloody and savage violence and it was a story that had to be told because it hadn't been told," he says. "How could a people who played such an important role in history be left out of the history? These men succeeded where others had failed and I thought there had to be important lessons for similar movements today."

Hill says the 10-year book project was an extension of his work as a life-long activist. "Ideas and memory are important for social movements to be successful," he says.

Politically, Hill confesses that he is still an enigma to himself. "Lance is a small Œd' Democrat from the tradition of philosopher John Dewey and he can understand where both blacks and whites are coming from," Powell says.

Rickey suggests that Hill will continue to challenge liberal and conservative thinkers alike. "He is a person of character, moral courage and a fighter for the rights of those that can't speak for themselves," Rickey says.

"He still wants to change the world," says Powell.

Yet the lines are drawn differently now. The remnants of the Far Right should always be monitored as a threat, Hill says, but Duke no longer merits media attention. "He's had his 15 minutes of infamy," Hill says. "Today, hate is not the problem; it's indifference. I think indifference to the public education of African-American youth is a moral crime. The indifference to suffering is the new form of racism."