

# Morial Lists Another First: New Orleans' Black Mayor

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NEW ORLEANS — Dutch Morial is a black man by choice. His skin is lighter than a moderately tanned Floridian and he could have moved north years ago to live comfortably as a white man.

Instead, he sought dangerous work as a civil rights activist and became Louisiana's first black everything: state university law graduate, assistant U.S. attorney, juvenile court judge, state legislator, bank founder and appeals court judge.

Two weeks ago he was elected New Orleans' first black mayor.

Morial is 48, a short, aggressive man, given to poking people in the chest when he thinks he is making an important point, which is often.

He possesses the kind of confidence — some call it arrogance — to say without

smiling that he was elected mayor because "the voters in New Orleans are of a higher quality now and they recognize quality."

**PUBLICLY** Morial said he doesn't think that race was the most important factor in the elections.

"I believe the people who voted for my opponent thought he would do a better job than me," Morial said. "I don't think they necessarily voted against me."

In one office of Morial's campaign headquarters, however, a color-coded map ranks black voter registration in New Orleans neighborhoods, with a different color indicating each 10 per cent shift in racial composition.

A voter-registration poster in the next room reads, "Hands that picked cotton can



Mayor-Elect Ernest (Dutch) Morial  
... hugs daughter Monique

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# Dutch Morial Tallies Another Black First: New Orleans' Mayor

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now pick our public officials."

Melodramatic, perhaps, but that is exactly what happened.

An NAACP drive to register black voters and an unprecedented 80 per cent black turnout on election day carried Morial into office.

**HE TOOK** 95 per cent of the black vote, despite the surprising resistance of several prominent black political groups in New Orleans.

And Morial won with those votes, despite the opposition of four of every five white voters in the city.

He couldn't have overcome those odds four years ago. He tried eight years ago, losing an at-large city council seat to the same man he defeated for mayor, Joe DiRosa, a 60-year-old lawyer and accountant and a 12-year council veteran.

New Orleans is a different city today.

Some 18,000 white registered voters left New Orleans between

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1970 and the last election. Black registration rose to 43 per cent of the total.

Morial coupled a sweep of the black precincts with 21 per cent of the white vote, which strategists said he drew from "the class of New Orleans' enlightened conservatives," and from younger, well-educated whites.

**DISCUSSING** the issues of white flight to the suburbs, Morial said young, progressive residents are returning to the city.

"The statistics show there actually has been a move back to the city in the last five years," Morial said.

He is wrong. New Orleans lost 5.3 per cent of its population between 1970 and 1976, almost 34,000 people, according to reports from the U.S. Interim Census and from Louisiana Technical Institute.

At the same time parishes surrounding New Orleans were the fastest growing areas of the state.

The census figures weren't broken down by race, but earlier data showed blacks moving out as well as whites, although not in such large numbers.

In any case, the exodus has slowed in the last two years, holding New Orleans' population at 560,000.

**THE SELDOM-SPOKEN** implication in the DiRosa campaign was that a black mayor would symbolize black take-over of New Orleans and would frighten more whites into the parishes.

"When you look at the statistics, it shows a lot of people moving out of the city," DiRosa said at an election forum. "If that's peddling fear, well . . ."

Most of New Orleans' seven tax assessors joined the scare campaign against Morial, warning in a letter to their white constituents that election of a black mayor would drive property values down 20 per cent.

Then Andy Young came to town. The U.N. ambassador is a New Orleans native and was the senior prom date of Morial's wife Sybil, daughter of a wealthy black surgeon.

Young threw New Orleans in his bag with South Africa, Sweden, England, Richard Nixon and Lyndon Johnson when he announced the city would be "racist" if it didn't elect Morial.

**SOME OF** Morial's supporters believe Young blew some white votes for them but Morial responded calmly to racial talk in the campaign.

"What causes white flight to the suburbs is exactly that kind of talk and that kind of fear," he said, referring to DiRosa's statements. "The greatest white flight occurred in the '60s under white mayors. I think the intelligent voters here saw through that kind of rhetoric."

Articulate intelligence was one of the mayor advantages Morial brought to the mayoral race.

He scored so many points in debate with his opponent that DiRosa backed down from a final, late campaign confrontation.

"Never thought I'd support a nigger," one young white voter said, "but I watched the television debate and that Morial made DiRosa look dumb."

Morial talks fast and thinks faster. He is a serious, almost humorless man who often leaves the impression that if he ever had a doubt it was many years ago.

**ASK HIM WHAT** he does for kicks and he replies — again with a straight face — "I work. I'm a workaholic."

The study in Morial's spacious home is lined with political books, mostly biographies of presidents and black leaders, but also including a slim volume entitled the *Black Leadership Class*. Morial can't remember the last book he read.

"The newspapers and newsmagazines and things I read in my work are about all I have time for lately," he said.

Morial's six-year-old daughter Monique sprints into the room and dives into Daddy's lap. She wears an oversized crimson Harvard sweatshirt, a souvenir of Morial's trip last week to a conference for newly elected mayors.

On his return, Morial asked the city council for \$141,000 to pay a transition staff through his May inauguration. He is specially eager to research new ways to finance the city budget, which depends on federal and state revenue-sharing for 44 per cent of its income.

**MORIAL'S** business education, experience as a co-founder of a New Orleans bank and political conservatism in money matters apparently balance his civil right activism in the minds of some establishment whites, especially businessmen.

Labeling himself a fiscal conservative, Morial preaches the nationally popular theme of decreasing expectations from government.

Instead of new social programs he promises a Carteresque plan for government reorganization and tax reform, possibly including an earnings tax on commuters who work in the city.

Morial opposes rent control in a city where 62 per cent of the residents rent their housing. He promises to seek businessmen as aides and advisers.

In the weeks after the election, business reaction to Morial's election generally has been positive.

"I don't think it will have a negative effect from a real estate point of view, particularly since he didn't favor rent controls," said Jeff Haynes, comptroller of one of New Orleans' largest real estate brokerage firms.

**"MY PERSONAL** view is that it's good for business and for the community," said Tom Gaskill, manager of the new Hyatt Regency Hotel. "We project a 20 per cent increase in profits next year."

During the campaign some businessmen seemed reassured by some of Morial's most bitter enemies — found among black political groups. Some blacks felt Morial's politics like his skin were too white.

One organization calling itself **ROOTS** disliked Morial so strongly that it endorsed DiRosa, who was quoted in local newspapers as joking that Morial hired Idi Amin to "register all the jungle bunnies to vote."