

A Virginia First
Kenneth R. “Ken” Plum

(This article appeared as “*Doug Wilder – A Virginia First*” in the August 6, 2003 edition of the ***Reston Connection***, Reston, VA)

The University of Virginia Center for Politics’ Virginia Governor’s Project has in an annual series of conferences over the past five years examined the gubernatorial administrations of Mills E. Godwin, Jr. to Gerald L. Baliles. I have found each one to be very interesting, and the recent sixth program on the administration of L. Douglas Wilder was no exception.

His election in 1989 made history. Of the 2100 persons who have been elected governors of the states of our United States of America, Doug Wilder is the only person of African American descent to have been elected. For this feat to have been accomplished in the state of Virginia, the capital of the Confederacy, makes it all the more remarkable.

The two-day conference at the Boar’s Head Inn in Charlottesville included panels of journalists, pundits and participants who discussed Wilder’s 1989 election as Governor, a topic that has produced three different books, as well as the administration and legacy of Doug Wilder. But it is difficult to capture the essence of a man who is so unique, controversial and independent regardless of the time spent discussing him.

The grandson of slaves who attended segregated public schools, college and law school, Wilder was elected to the State Senate in 1969 and was elected Lieutenant Governor in 1985. In none of his elections did he run as an African American candidate. He was never accused of playing a race card.

While there were efforts to paint him as a liberal Democrat, his record defies such a description. His administration was marked by an economic recession not unlike that of today. He got the state through the recession as one of only two states not to raise taxes to make up for lost revenue. During his tenure Virginia was named the best financially managed state in the Union. It only took two Republican governors after him to drop Virginia to fourteenth among the states in financial management.

Remarkably, he was able to get Virginia to enact a one-gun-per-month handgun purchase limit law, one of the strictest handgun control laws in the nation and one of the few gun control laws still in effect in Virginia.

Wilder announced his candidacy for President in September, 1991, but withdrew in January, 1993, when his candidacy had not caught on. While he brought many African Americans into Virginia government, there is little evidence to suggest that his remarkable election opened up elective office for minorities.

Virginia can claim many “firsts,” and the election of L. Douglas Wilder as the first African American governor of a state is one of which we can be particularly proud. It is a record that has stood too long unmatched. It is time for other states to join Virginia with the distinction of having an African American as chief executive.