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for request

Jeff Prugh

August 13, 1993

Dear Harold —

Appreciate, as always, receiving your communique and the snappy exchange of letters.

Attached is my latest salvo in my own war for authenticity in George Wallace's bogus "stand." I've offered the L.A. Times an op-ed piece on this (my own story of 15 years ago), but so far I've heard zero. All best to you and Lil. — Jeff

Los Angeles Times

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Chatsworth, CA 91311
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August 6, 1993

The Editor
The New York Times Book Review
229 West 43rd Street
New York, NY 10036

To the Editor:

Quick! Stop those presses! Get me rewrite! Send reinforcements of fact-checkers to Oxford University Press! Somebody tell E. Culpepper Clark, author of "The Schoolhouse Door: Segregation's Last Stand at the University of Alabama" (Aug. 1) that George Wallace could not have blocked the enrollment of two black students at the university in 1963 -- in defiance of a federal court order.

Reason: Those very students had been secretly enrolled the day before in a federal judge's chambers in Birmingham, 60 miles away -- a ploy that ultimately gave a political nudge to both sides, Mr. Wallace and the Kennedy Administration.

This wasn't so much a showdown as it was showtime. The pre-enrollment would be confirmed by the university's admissions records and by interviews with both students, Vivian Malone and James Hood, as well as Dr. Frank Rose, the university's president in 1963, for a Los Angeles Times article I would write in 1978, published on the 15th anniversary of Mr. Wallace's so-called "stand."

As Vivian Malone Jones in 1978, she said in the interview that she and Mr. Hood had been told only that they were being pre-enrolled for their personal safety. "This has bothered me a great deal....," she said. "I sometimes get the feeling that I was being used. I remember that when I registered and picked out my classes and professors, I wondered, 'Why should I have to go through it all again tomorrow?' But we were too far into it then. We were not in a position to question any plans by the Department of Justice. And my lawyers said, 'This is for your personal safety.' What was uppermost in my mind was my mental anguish, my personal safety and my ambitions of just getting into the university, as opposed to the philosophical reason for Gov. Wallace standing there, or the federal government being there."

Of the federal government's role in the pre-enrollment, Nicholas D. Katzenbach, who as chief deputy to U.S. Atty. Gen. Robert F. Kennedy confronted Wallace at the door to the registration hall on the students' behalf, said: "If I knew it, I don't now recall it."

For his part, Mr. Wallace (through a press spokesman) declined to be interviewed for my report; but when I would ask him in 1979 about the pre-enrollment for a subsequent story about him, he would say that he hadn't known about it until that very interview.

Today, most of our media, as well as historians and educators such as Mr. Clark (and, by extension, your reviewer, Barry Gewen) still foist upon us the myth that this "confrontation" between Mr. Wallace and the Kennedy Administration was for real.

Mr. Clark dismisses my report to the contrary by writing in a footnote that I "read more than justified" into confirmation by Dr. Rose that the students had pre-enrolled. Ha! That's like saying we the people "read more than justified" into Japan's surrender

✶ A Times Mirror
✶ Newspaper

at the end of World War II, or that cartographers "read more than justified" into the fact that Maine sits at the northeastern corner of the United States.

Sadly, Mr. Clark -- a professor of history, yet! -- joins those who skew history and snub logic. For what purpose? He misses, or ignores, the point that it's impossible to block someone's enrollment when enrollment has already occurred.

By not exploring in depth the enrollment on June 10 -- and by not addressing the "confrontation" on June 11 as the charade, if not sham, it was -- he writes a book that says, in effect, that the canary ate the cat, the minnow swallowed the shark and Gen. George Armstrong Custer stormed through Little Big Horn, shouting, "Take no prisoners!" Accordingly, Mr. Clark misses, or ignores, an opportunity to write a book that would have been infinitely more comprehensive and compelling.

To this day, what happened on June 11, 1963, at the University of Alabama, with the world watching on television, stands as an example of manipulation by government, of our media misled and our masses misinformed, of two plus two not quite adding up to four.

It reminds us, too, that no matter how noble the cause or enthralling the moment, what we see isn't always what we get.



JEFF PRUGH
Los Angeles Times
Los Angeles

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Gov. George Wallace confronting Federal officials at the door of a University of Alabama auditorium where student registration was under way, 1963.

By the Light of Burning Crosses

How blacks breached a wall of segregation at the University of Alabama.

THE SCHOOLHOUSE DOOR

Segregation's Last Stand at the University of Alabama.
By E. Culpepper Clark. 305 pp. New York: Oxford University Press. \$25.

By Barry Gewen

WHEN integrationists stood up to segregationists in the American South during the 1950's and 60's, right confronted wrong, virtue challenged evil, good guys battled bad. E. Culpepper Clark, assistant to the president of the University of Alabama, has a taste for drama — as well as for moral principle — and with the desegregation of his own university he had at hand a subject ideally suited to his inclinations and talents. "The Schoolhouse Door: Segregation's Last Stand at the University of Alabama" is old-fashioned narrative history, readable, involving, immediate and propelled by a motley cast of characters, each of whom had to make ethical choices that would affect not only his or her own future but also that of the nation as a whole.

Mr. Clark builds his story around two set pieces: Autherine Lucy's abortive attempt to integrate the university in the mid-1950's and Gov. George C. Wallace's last-gasp "stand in the schoolhouse door" before the institution was finally forced to accept black students in 1963. Appropriately, the book begins with a description of one person, Pollie Anne Myers, a feisty 20-year-old black woman who decided in 1952 to try to enter the University of Alabama and who persuaded her more reserved friend Autherine Juanita Lucy to join her. One of the author's key points, against accusations and myths to the contrary, is that the two young women acted on their own, without the support of organizations like the N.A.A.C.P., though of course that support was forthcoming once the university and the state government opted for a strategy of resistance. Following a long court fight, and after Ms. Myers was denied admission because she had become pregnant while unmarried, Ms. Lucy was obliged in February 1956 to face angry mobs, burning crosses and death threats on her own. Mr. Clark's portrait of her during this ordeal is one of steadfast courage and muted dignity.

This contrasts sharply with the picture of the university's president, Oliver Cromwell Carmichael, a man, as Mr. Clark presents him, whose credentials greatly outweighed his convictions. A mild segregationist who had once been chairman of the board of trustees of the New York State University system, Carmichael took the wrong turn at every crossroad, ultimately yielding leadership to the hidebound and uncompromising Alabama board of trustees. The board succeeded in expelling Ms. Lucy less than a month after her arrival

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on the Tuscaloosa campus. (Among the virtues of "The Schoolhouse Door" is that it offhandedly reminds us just how close we are to the Dark Ages. In 1952 the president of the university threatened not to allow the football team, with Bart Starr as quarterback, to compete in the Orange Bowl if its opponent, Syracuse University, fielded any of its black players. A decade later the state's governor commissioned a study from a North Carolina professor of embryology that concluded blacks were mentally 200,000 years behind whites.)

It wasn't until 1963 that blacks were able to breach the university's wall of obstruction and intimidation. That year James Hood and Vivian Malone came to Alabama's main campus at Tuscaloosa and Dave McGlathery enrolled at the Huntsville extension center. Yet if Autherine Lucy and the hapless Oliver Carmichael are the major actors in the first part of "The Schoolhouse Door," the dominant role in the second part belongs to none of the campus figures but to the man who physically tried to block the path of the Tuscaloosa students: George Corley Wallace. Indeed, as Mr. Clark makes clear, the show was Governor Wallace's from beginning to end.

Integration could not be averted in 1963. The courts, the Kennedy Administration, even leading elements of Alabamian society were behind it. The university itself was resigned to the change. Mr. Wallace, however, needed to make a public display of resistance. He was, in Mr. Clark's words, "as thoroughgoing a racist as the civil rights movement could have invented." He was also extraordinarily ambitious, with his eyes on the White House, a person who "lived politics with an intensity that made the Kennedys appear diffident." Mr. Wallace had been elected Governor the previous year on a pledge to reject integration, "even to the point of standing in the schoolhouse door, if necessary," and he meant to be as good as his word. Though he knew his confrontation with the Federal Government was nothing more than an exercise in symbolism, theater pure and simple, he was determined to follow his script through to the end.

In the short run, this story has a happy ending. After reading a statement of defiance, Governor Wallace stepped aside and the University of Alabama was integrated without violence. In 1965 it graduated its first black, Vivian Malone, and by 1966 it had 400 black students. (Last year Autherine Lucy Foster, the wife of the Rev. Hugh Lawrence Foster and the mother of four, received a master's degree in education from the university and had an endowed scholarship named in her honor.) But from a different, and larger, perspective, the results have not been so fortunate. Governor Wallace's stand catapulted him into nationwide prominence and enabled him to run for President three times. He introduced Southern racial politics (usually encoded) into the national mainstream, helping to poison public debate, redirect party strategies and exacerbate social tensions. As Mr. Clark says, "Of those who went through the university's ordeal of desegregation, none profited more than George Wallace." Sadly, we are still living with his legacy.

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