

AS SOON AS I heard the news about George Wallace, a prayer formed in my mind. It was a prayer that it hadn't been done by a black.

For despite all the talk about change and populism, the Wallace candidacy has been inextricably tied up with rage. And the latest developments only underline anew the bitter and divisive nature of race as an issue in American politics.

The most direct piece of evidence on the racial component in the Wallace protest comes from a poll of Democratic voters in the Indiana primary taken by Oliver Quayle for the National Broadcasting Company just a month ago.

In that poll, 20 per cent of the Wallace voters said they were for him because "he's against busing." Another 23 per cent were for him for a set of reasons that add up to a code phrase for race: namely, because he's "honest," tells the truth, will do what he says."

Ten per cent of the Wallace voters volunteered an outright racist answer for their support. They were for him because he has a "good strong civil rights platform—would keep a firm hand with the blacks."

"A good Wallace showing," Quayle wrote in analyzing the poll before the primary "would mean that a solid percentage of these voters approve of his racist stance and admire him as a law-and-order candidate." In fact, Wallace made an excellent showing—42 per cent of the vote, and a solid second place.

A SECOND PIECE of impressive evidence emerged from the Wallace performance in the states where he campaigned slightly or not at all. He carried Tennessee and won 33 per cent of the vote in West Virginia without putting in an appearance at all. He came in second in Pennsylvania and Wisconsin with only brief campaign efforts.

These strong showings were not expressions of confidence in a new Wallace, trusted as the friend of ordi-

nary people. On the contrary, they were based on memory of the old Wallace—the Wallace who fought school integration and the mixing of neighborhoods.

Then there was the evidence of specific places. Gov. Wallace's strongest showings have come in North Carolina and Florida—two states with acute and active busing problems. In North Carolina he ended his victorious campaign by charging that his chief opponent, former Gov. Terry Sanford, had contributed funds to support busing.

Indiana offered another example. Wallace carried Lake County, whose biggest city, Gary, has a black majority and a black mayor. But he lost Marion County, whose seat, Indianapolis, has a metropolitan plan that will keep the whites in a permanent majority.

FINALLY there was the evidence of Wallace's political rivals. Some of them talked about populism and alienation and the struggle of the individual against the system. But when it came to fighting George Wallace, they didn't act that way.

Thus President Nixon introduced his proposal for a moratorium on court orders of school busing two days after Wallace won in Florida. Running in Michigan against Wallace, Hubert Humphrey emphasized his opposition to busing from "good schools to poor schools." And George McGovern said of one landmark busing case: "It's entirely possible that that decision may have gone too far."

The full political meaning of all this is not clear. But in the light of the assassination attempt two points are evident. For one thing, the temper of American politics has not been wound down sufficiently. Bitterness, frustration and hatred remain.

The destructive self-assertion that has been running so strong in the American body politic continues to run strong. All of us have once more to place a check on ourselves, to learn anew

the difficult lesson of renunciation, of live and let live.

Secondly, civil rights in this country remains in doubt. There is a solid block of popular opposition, north and South, to the changes in housing, schools, job patterns, federal payments and life styles incident to the gains the blacks have recently been making.

The immediate need for the civil rights movement is to avoid a clash with that bloc of opinion. The requirement is a strategy for non-confrontation that will allow, during a difficult time, at least some forward movement.

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Post 5-16-72
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The Wallace

Message