



*William Raspberry*

# Wallace and Humanity

AS WITH most tragedies, there are some things to be grateful for following Monday's assassination attempt on Alabama's Gov. Wallace. Among them:

- Wallace didn't die.
- His presumed assailant was caught at the scene and taken alive.
- Black people had nothing to do with it.

That last is not said facetiously. For no matter how much he has learned the gentler language of national politics, Wallace is, for most blacks, at least, symbolic not of any new populism or disenchantment with big government or anything else. For most of us he symbolizes racism.

The implications of incipient race war would have been obvious (whether valid or not) if the gunman had been black, or even if he had escaped identification. Wallace has the capacity to provoke irrationality among both his supporters and his detractors.

But if Wallace is symbolic of so hateful a strain in America, how can the attempt on his life be considered a tragedy?

WELL, FOR OPENERS, because his political rivals will have to refrain a while from saying, as Sen. Muskie said after the Florida primary, that Wallace is bad for America, "a demagogue of the worst possible kind" whose political success reveals "some of the worst instincts of which human beings are capable."

(The pundits never said it wasn't true, just that it was

bad politics for Muskie to say it. The point here is that Wallace's martyrdom will make it hard for anyone to say it now, at least for a while.)

The assassination attempt must be counted a tragedy for deeper reasons than that, however. It is tragic because it follows too many successful attempts in recent years on the lives of men who have established themselves as leaders of significant groups of people: Evers, the Kennedys, Malcolm, King.

The alarming thought is that murder is becoming almost a routine (by frequency if not by acceptability) way of settling political differences. Political murder is a frightening thing, whether the person who is killed for his opinions is your hero or your villain.

It is particularly frightening because no one knows how to stop it. There was nothing about Oswald or Srehan or Ray or Arthur Herman Bremer that would

have led us to lock them up or pay any particular attention to them as prospective assassins.

It's hard to prevent what you can't predict. But to say that assassination is unpredictable is not to say that a handful of political murderers won't lead to others.

THERE APPEARS to be something about spectacular crimes no matter how irrational they may be, that inspires imitation.

It would be not just tragic

but catastrophic if it turned out that we are approaching a time when all our politicians will be forced into hiding out in television studios, fearing to move freely among the electorate, because political judgments are based on firepower.

Fortunately, there is little evidence that we are coming to that, although it surely seems so in the aftermath of each new assassination attempt.

Perfectly reasonable and responsible men are worrying publicly about "what America is coming to." Well, just what is it that America is coming to? All we really know is that in a nation of a couple hundred million there are a few madmen who will kill you if they disagree with you. We don't know whether they number in the thousands or in the dozens. We don't even know if their number (as opposed to their mobility) is growing.

It would be nice if we could disarm these madmen, even at the cost of disarming the rest of us. I'm not sure anyone has yet figured out how to do it, though.

But there is no necessity to demonstrate that Wallace will benefit from his new martyrdom, or that he has stopped being a racist, or that America is becoming increasingly violence-prone.

There is tragedy enough in the fact that a human being came very close to being killed Monday afternoon.