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Trouble: Assassin's Gun Made It Way Of Life For George Wallace

By Saul Kohler

MONTGOMERY, Ala. — He rubbed away the pain and shifted in his wheelchair, and on the second anniversary of the assassination attempt which left him paralyzed for life, Gov. George C. Wallace of Alabama made Martha Mitchell cry.

The estranged wife of former Atty. Gen. John Mitchell was visiting the executive mansion here, and was telling George Wallace her troubles.

That's Not Bad

"Honey, you may have your troubles," the governor said with a half-smile on his face. "But so long as you can kick off your shoes and wiggle your toes, you aren't too bad off.

"Fellow came in the other day and told me he needed a job to keep his son in college. I told him I'd exchange pieces with him if I could. I'd be a tenant farmer if only I could get up from this chair and walk out of the room."

And Martha Mitchell, the blonde belle of so many balls, wept.

The governor also shed a tear. He pointed to a bullet wound in his arm — and his wife, Cornelia, leaned over his wheelchair to whisper to him.

And George Corley Wallace, the tough politician, pulled out his handkerchief and wiped his eyes.

It was two years ago on May 15 at a shopping center in Laurel, Md., that the governor was struck down by a would-be assassin's bullets.

One of the home-bored slugs lodged near his spine, and it wasn't too long before the man who was sending a message to America got a message of his own — that he'd never walk again.

May 15 always will be a hard day for

Wallace to take. On the second anniversary, he woke early and worked out with the weights and the parallel bars and that electric exercise bicycle in a bedroom which has been converted to a physical therapy center for the governor.

Two telephones kept him busy between exercises and for an hour afterward — and then he went down stairs for lunch.

He spent the afternoon receiving an honorary degree from Alabama State University, an almost all-black college whose accreditation he helped during his first administration.

He's a candidate for an unprecedented third term here and there is no way he can lose. He may even be a candidate for president again, but he talked about Laurel, Md., and the shooting.

"I worry about him a lot when he's speaking at a rally," Cornelia Wallace said. "Once in a while, I see someone who doesn't look just right to me and I mention it to a security man. I know it's hard for him, but it's hard for me too."

The governor has asked his wife and children to stay off that platform when he is speaking, because "I couldn't take losing any of my family, the people I love."

"One time not too long ago, I was speaking in Scottsboro and a truck backfired," Wallace continued. "I was afraid for an instant. I stopped my talk and told the people I was a little gun-shy."

They laughed in Scottsboro, but Wallace doesn't laugh about it, even in private.

Risk Their Cross

"As long as I am in public life, there will be a risk," he said. "That risk is a cross people in public life will have to bear, a burden which will be with all of

us—the Nixons, and the McGoverns and the Wallaces — will carry.

"Yes, I sent a message to the American people, and to the Democratic Party through the American people, but I paid a high price for that message."

And then George Wallace's eyes became hard, and he became the tough guy once again for just a moment.

"The chickens have come home to roost as a result of the permissive society we have allowed to happen in this country," he snapped. "The court system has to be reorganized."

He was asked whether he has communicated with, or heard from, Arthur Bremer, the would-be assassin now serving 50 years in prison for the shooting in Laurel.

"No, I haven't, but I wouldn't mind if he wanted to talk to me," Wallace said. "I don't hate him. I hope the Lord helps him."

I hope that young man repents. But I can't forget him. Even the simple act of getting out of a car — I used to jump out a n d move, move, move — now is a major production."

Talk Off Record

Mrs. Wallace's mother, Mrs. Ruby Austin, and the governor's son, George Jr., joined the governor, Mrs. Mitchell and a reporter for lunch.

The conversation was off the record, at Wallace's request, because it involved the shooting and the similarity in the diaries kept by Bremer, Sirhan Sirhan and Lee Harvey Oswald — the men who killed Robert Kennedy and John F. Kennedy.

"I don't want to talk about connections in public," Wallace said. "I have my ideas, but I'll never say it to anyone."

Wallace doesn't need anniversaries to remind him of that day in Laurel. He thinks of it all the time, when he has to be helped from place to place, and when he sees the bullet holes in his abdomen as he exercises muscled shoulders to make up for useless legs.

He recalled that he and his wife were interviewed separately on the same day recently.

"They asked me which single thing was the worst that happened to me in my lifetime," he said. "I told them it was losing Lurien, my first wife."

"Then they asked Cornelia the same question. We didn't talk it over, but she said it was her divorce from her first husband."

"Because after all, this shooting was a horrible thing — but I didn't lose anyone I love. And speaking selfishly, I still have my life.

"Anniversary or any other day, I thank God for that."

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