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Ted & Geo. & Dick & Strom

By Tom Wicker

Three cheers for Edward Kennedy—*if* his appearance on behalf of George Wallace really does lead toward a Democratic party capable of attracting Wallace voters into a progressive national coalition. Boos and hisses for Edward Kennedy—if, instead, his gesture is prelude to another historic national surrender to racism, cynicism and myopia.

The precedents are bad. When President Rutherford B. Hayes withdrew Federal troops from the South after the election of 1876, the nation entered a 75-year period in which it tacitly permitted lily-white politics and social institutions in a quarter of the states; and when Richard Nixon bargained for the support of Strom Thurmond and other Southerners in 1968, he was signaling a substantial retreat from the Federal commitment to equal rights and opportunity that had emerged in the fifties and sixties.

The outcome of "compromise" could be even more damaging this time, since Mr. Kennedy himself acknowledged that racism in America now has shown itself to be less a Southern than a national problem. And however his position has been phrased at different times, and for whatever reasons millions of decent Americans—Southern and otherwise—have felt themselves drawn to his position, George Wallace has always fed primarily on racial fear and animosity, in all their ugly aspects. It does not change the meaning of demagoguery to refer in Alabama to the "bloc vote" rather than the "black vote."

The kind of effort Mr. Kennedy made on Independence Day was nevertheless necessary. After Mr. Wallace won the Florida primary in 1972, for a contrary example, Edmund Muskie

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said sourly that the returns "reveal to a greater extent than we have imagined some of the worst instincts of which human beings are capable." There is no way that Democrats can take that line and appeal to the better instincts of the Wallace voters, or to shared interests with them; yet, in a reasonably close election, the Democrats probably need the 10 to 15 per cent of the voting populace that are Wallaceites.

Obviously recognizing that, Mr. Kennedy told his Alabama audience: "I do not come to lecture you about that racial injustice which has proven to be as deeply imbedded and resistant in the cities of the North as in the counties of the South." And he made broad claims for his and other Democrats' opposition to some favorite Wallace targets—high taxes, high interest rates and pervasive bureaucracy.

This is not, however, a new or very promising line. It did not, for example, win the Wallace vote for Albert Gore in Tennessee. Hubert Humphrey made similar overtures to Wallace backers in the 1972 campaign, to little avail. But the Kennedy line is bound to be taken as a signal by any number of Democrats running for state and Congressional office in 1974, particularly in such battleground states as Michigan, where the Wallace vote could be decisive. Thus, the prospect is for Democrats to be making wholesale overtures next year—and in 1976, if the tactic seems to work—to George Wallace and his followers.

Mr. Wallace has never really asked for more. He already influences the Nixon Republican party. Now, as it must seem to him, he has sent his message to the Democrats, too, and the No. 1 Democrat has come to Alabama to attest personally to its receipt.

But when is George Wallace going to state his concessions to Edward Kennedy? Where is the faintest sign that Wallace followers are ready to compromise with other Democrats, rather than demand a surrender? Are they willing to meet the national party halfway in attacking unemployment, lack of education, poor housing, inadequate medical care, malnutrition?

They ought to be, if they aren't, because they are mostly white and the truth is that poor whites suffer more than blacks from these problems. There is, in fact, a stronger appeal to Wallace voters than Edward Kennedy's, and it was made a few weeks ago by Vernon Jordan of the Urban League:

"There are three times as many poor white families as there are poor black families. The majority of people on welfare are white. Of the black poor, over half don't get one single devalued dollar from welfare. Two-thirds of the families who got homes through [a major] housing subsidy program were white. Two-thirds of the trainees in [manpower] programs are white; three-fourths of on-the-job training enrollees are white, and four-fifths of the people employed in the public employment program are white. . . [black Americans] must demonstrate to white Americans that our cause is, in effect, their own, and we must be willing to cross racial lines to build the coalitions around issues of importance to both blacks and whites."

Would George Wallace be willing to share and promote that principle?