

Loud and Clear

By TOM WICKER

WASHINGTON, March 15—“Send Them a Message,” said George Wallace’s billboards in Florida, and no one can deny that his 41 per cent of the Democratic primary vote in that state had delivered the word, loud and clear, to the politicians, the press, the pointy-headed intellectuals, the bureaucrats and the liberals.

With eleven candidates running and a busing referendum on the ballot, there is almost no limit to the interpretations that can be placed on the Florida primary. For instance:

1. How is Senator Muskie to recover from such a disastrous showing? It can hardly be assumed that his voters were stolen away by the energetic Governor Wallace so that, absent the Governor, Mr. Muskie would have won; rather, it has to be assumed that even among the 59 per cent who did not vote for Mr. Wallace, Mr. Muskie had little or no appeal.

This proved true despite an arduous Muskie campaign. Nor will a victory next week in Illinois—over Eugene McCarthy in a popularity contest, or over George McGovern in actual delegate selection—much enhance Mr. Muskie’s present low status. He was supposed all along to be able to defeat either of those two. Mr. Muskie’s candidacy, therefore, appears now to hang almost solely on whether he can win in Wisconsin on April 4.

2. While Senator Hubert Humphrey’s backers proclaimed themselves de-

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often around the track. If Mr. Muskie should be knocked out of the race, Mr. Jackson might therefore inherit a substantial portion of the Muskie supporters.

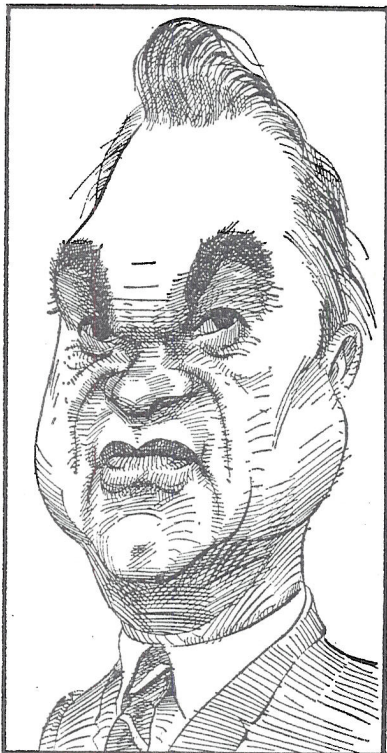
3. Despite all this, the identifiable “left” in Florida did not fare too badly. The vote totals for Mayor John Lindsay, Senator George McGovern, Representative Shirley Chisholm and Mr. McCarthy, if they could have been cast for one candidate, came to just about 200,000 votes, or something in excess of 18 per cent—good enough for a third-place finish well ahead of Mr. Jackson and close behind Mr. Humphrey. This is cold comfort, but it is a reminder that when and if the Democratic left settles on a candidate, he could be potent; and it is altogether likely that by the time the Wisconsin, Rhode Island and Massachusetts primaries are completed on April 25, either Mr. Lindsay or Mr. McGovern will have been retired from competition.

When all such exercises have been completed, nevertheless, the compelling fact of the Florida primary is the remarkable showing of George Wallace. It is all very well to say that the unsavory racial campaigns in his background, the undertones of which plainly reverberate in his candidacy today, ultimately will prevent his nomination or election; be that as it may, his achievement in Florida is formidable.

First, it comes at a time when President Nixon supposedly is making his final decision as to what antibusing measures to support; and there is no one in American politics better able to read election returns than Mr. Nixon. Moreover, the impact of the Wallace victory, as well as the overwhelming referendum vote of Floridians against busing, will not be lost on the House Judiciary Committee as it considers constitutional amendments and other matters; and the Florida outcome is bound to harden the House majority in its insistence on no compromise with the Senate on their differing approaches to the busing issue.

But beyond busing, the point the Wallace vote has most clearly made is that a large and heterogeneous group of Americans are simply fed up with the way things are going in their country. Whether because of busing, high taxes, high prices, unemployment, crime and disorder, political indifference, or frustration at all of these things and more, that group rejected Establishment politicians and conventional proposals; it opted instead for a man with no real ties to either political party or any political philosophy, no real program except opposition, and no real merit beyond a profound sense of his own constituency.

The existence of that force in American life has been no great secret in recent years; but the message from Florida is that no one has found a way to focus its energies constructively and progressively. Until that happens, George Wallace will ride high, and the nation’s political health will be shaky; and it should have been of no comfort to Mr. Muskie’s battered supporters that, instead, he unwisely said the Wallace vote had disclosed “the worst instincts of which human beings are capable.”



Robert Pryor

lighted with his second-place finish and 19 per cent of the vote, the greater gainer—after Governor Wallace—may be Senator Henry M. Jackson of Washington. This is because, in finishing ahead of Mr. Muskie, even though polling only a pallid 13 per cent of the vote, Mr. Jackson gave himself a stature he had not had—and because, unlike the case of Mr. Muskie, it can reasonably be assumed that many Wallace votes would have gone to Mr. Jackson had the Governor not been in the race. Moreover, whatever else may be said of him, Mr. Jackson does not have to bear Mr. Humphrey’s burden of having been too