

Wallace has a fleeting opportunity to lead his backers into the GOP

To judge from comments one picks up in Alabama the feeling there is that 1) George Wallace will live, and his health will permit him to be active; 2) the state constitution having been amended, George Wallace can stay on as governor of Alabama for the rest of his life; 3) George Wallace has changed, in ways not easily perceptible, with consequences not easily predictable; 4) George Wallace's influence in the South continues to be considerable, but outside of Alabama it cannot be expected to endure indefinitely—in the absence of a Wallace Strategy.

And there is no such thing, so far as is known. The Wallace cycle is down, for reasons of health obviously, but also because Wallace tends to be quiet after a presidential election. Thus it was in 1965, and in 1969, and thus it appears it will be in 1973.

Then, as discontents with Mr. Nixon fester, as they are bound to do, Wallace would, typically, crank up. By the fall of 1975 he would be addressing the crowds and stirring them up, and the commentators would be speculating about his effect on the forthcoming presidential election; he might win some extra regional primaries. . . .

But, inevitably, attrition sets in. There is his diminished health, the beginning of that Norman Thomas public itchiness with the man who is always running for president. The routinization of the George Wallace act is something he and his followers ought to worry about more than they appear to do.

In what way has he changed? It is my guess that although he will never outlive the provenance of his fame, which has a Jim Crow feel about it, he is a true convert to biracialism. I believe that he has outgrown states' rights as a cover for the perpetual menialization of the Negro. Whether this is because the South is itself pretty serene these days about race, and therefore Wallace the politician has picked up a fresh cue; or whether the change is internal, we cannot know. But it is at least partly the latter, one guesses, because George Wal-

lace during the days that he held onto life by his fingernails, tended to by Catholic nuns, traveled something of a spiritual odyssey, as often happens to those who suffer great tragedy.

The experience is not likely to lead him to the cloister, but it may well have focused his thoughts at least partly on extratemporal matters, and even on strategic historical concerns, speaking of which it is the developing consensus among men of vision in Alabama that George Wallace has one last big opportunity.

It is to move Southern Democrats into the Republican party. It is, of course, where they belong. The coalition politics of Franklin Roosevelt, which made solid phalanxes of men as disparate as Sen. Bilbo and Walter Reuther, in order to juggernaut their party into the White House election after election, is breaking down, as we all know.

Nowadays finicky McGovernites will not work for Humphreyites, and Humphreyites will not work for McGovernites, though the differences between the two are not as marked as the difference in days gone by between Southern Democrats and Northern liberals who joined in working for Roosevelt, Truman, and Kennedy.

The Republican party has scored great successes in the South, but mostly in behalf of presidential candidates. The grass roots are still obstinately Democratic. Although, as for instance in Mississippi, there is progress towards Republicanism, the traditional resistance is still critical, resulting in the continuing anomaly of Southern conservatives voting—not for liberal Democrats for president, but for liberal Democrats for senator, congressman, and governor.

But George Wallace still has the power—to walk over, as Strom Thurmond did, into the Republican party, and to take his vast following with him. He had that power unmistakably last July, in Miami, which is when he might most dramatically have moved. But he has the power still today. It is not certain that he will have it tomorrow.