

Wallace Rebounds From Despair

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MONTGOMERY, Ala., May 13—One year after he was shot in a Maryland parking lot, Gov. George C. Wallace of Alabama has apparently overcome the despair that marked much of his convalescence.

"I don't have any plans for 1976 at the moment, but if my health then is like it is now I could mount a national campaign," Mr. Wallace said in an interview the other day.

The Governor was struck down last May 15, at the height of his power and on the eve of his sweep of the Maryland and Michigan Democratic Presidential primaries. Up to that point he had collected more votes than any other candidate. He had blitzed Florida and had upset all predictions, including his own, by finishing a strong second in Wisconsin.

From that high point of strength and success Mr. Wallace was reduced by his wounds to a shadow of his former self. Even after his life was out of danger he seemed to lack will to summon a new start.

Now, the paralysis of his



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Governor George Wallace in a Montgomery TV studio

Wallace, One Year After Being Shot, Rebounds From Despair at Paralysis

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lower body and legs seems irreversible. But in the last few months, Mr. Wallace has escaped from the mental lassitude and depression that had roused great concern among his closest supporters.

"You're here," Mr. Wallace told a visitor to his office. "You see me. You can see how good I look, how I got my color and strength back."

Sitting in his wheel chair, he knocked some cigar ash into a waste basket. "With 12 bullet holes in me [entrance and exit wounds] I can't exactly run upstairs or jump over fences and holler hurray," he continued. "But I can run this office, and I can campaign for re-election next year, and I feel I still represent a lot of folks across this nation and I can still be an influence in the Democratic national party."

"It's true that at times over the past year I had to concentrate on recovering," Mr. Wallace said. "I came to the realization in the first week after I was shot that I had to live with my physical impairment. But I was fighting to live for a much longer time. I thought I was going to make it after I came out of the Maryland hospital [last July] but I got concerned again when they had to cut me open again."

A Fight for Life.

There were moments, especially in the Roman Catholic hospital in Silver Spring, Md., where Mr. Wallace, the eldest son of a poor Methodist farm family, attended by nuns, fought for survival and experienced the deepest agony of his life.

He said he believed he would die after infection invaded his body and made more surgery necessary. The experience, he said, made him more reflective about life's mysteries.

"Anyone snatched from the jaws of death naturally reflects somewhat on how uncertain human life is and its frailties," he said.

Perhaps the most dramatic and telltale sign of his progress toward recovery came earlier this month when Mr. Wallace, now 53 years old, convened the Alabama Legislature before a statewide television audience. With the help of aides, he moved from his wheel chair into a specially constructed "standing box" installed at the podium of the House of Representatives chamber.

The device, combining straps

and braces to support his hips and legs, allowed the Governor the full use of his hands, and gave the illusion to those in the chamber and at home that he was standing unaided.

The doubts about his condition seemed to evaporate at that moment, and applause and some tears flowed from even his most hardened opponents.

And then for a fleeting moment a smile crossed Mr. Wallace's face, curling his lips in an amalgam of contempt and triumph that signaled his supporters in an electrifying way that George Wallace was back in form.

Legs Wouldn't Move

Mr. Wallace's physical recovery was complicated by several operations to clean up abdominal abscesses. He had eaten lunch before the May 15 campaign appearance at a shopping center at Laurel, Md., and the ingested food was dispersed in his abdominal cavity when he was struck by bullets fired from the pistol of Arthur H. Bremer as the candidate moved into the crowd to shake hands. One bullet also penetrated the Governor's spinal column at the small of the back, severing his spinal cord and causing the paralysis.

"I thought I was going to die," Mr. Wallace said, recalling details of how he had slumped to the pavement of the parking lot under the hot Maryland sun. "I thought I was going to die on the ground that day. I couldn't move my legs and I told my wife I thought I was paralyzed. I didn't actually feel the bullets go into me, but I felt that one was in my spine. "My life seemed to flash by me, and I was sad that I wouldn't get a chance to do some of the things that I had wanted to do."

Perhaps his lowest moment came at the inauguration last January of Richard Nixon. Locked in his famous steel wheel chair, he was pushed into the background of the inaugural stand where he watched the swearing-in ceremony, looking dark and brooding and small.

"The thought crossed my mind that if I had not been shot it could have been me standing there," he said.

Shortly after the inauguration Governor Wallace re-entered a Birmingham hospital for minor surgery to remove his prostate gland, but when his stay extended for nearly six weeks rumors circulated that he was unfit to run the state. There were those who suggested that his long hospital stay

was necessary to wean him from pain-killing medication that had made him listless and groggy—allegations of a drug-dependency that were hotly denied by his staff and physicians.

During this period, the Pulitzer Prize-winning editor of the Montgomery newspapers, Harold E. Martin, publicly called for the Governor to turn his duties over to others while he coped with his illness.

Mr. Wallace soon returned to Montgomery and almost immediately plunged into a schedule of public appearances that seemed designed to silence his critics. Mr. Martin's newspapers conducted a poll late last month that found that a majority of Alabamians approved of the Governor's performance in office and wanted him to stay on. However, an equal number felt that Mr. Wallace should not make another attempt for the Presidency.

'Completely Different Man'

"He appears to be a completely different man now than he was last winter," Mr. Martin conceded in an interview. "When I saw him in November he didn't seem aware of where he was and didn't respond to people he had known for years. Even three months ago no one could have guessed there would have been this remarkable change."

Some staff members attributed the turnaround to acupuncture treatment that Mr. Wallace has undergone since February in an effort to reduce the pain that radiated from his spinal injury. If the treatments actually helped, or merely coincided with natural healing processes, is not certain, but clearly the absence of acute pain has helped restore the governor's mental alertness and brightened his mood. Others have suggested that Mr. Martin's "needling" was all that was necessary to reawaken the Governor's old combativeness.

"The pain certainly distracted me," Mr. Wallace said, indicating his side above the right hip where the pain had seared his consciousness for nearly a year. "I still have a little now and then, but it's tolerable and bearable now. I don't think about it while I'm busy."

Discussing his governorship and his political role, Mr. Wallace said:

"That's my challenge. That's the one thing that keeps me happy—that I'm in a position to perform in a useful way despite what's happened to me. That's what keeps me going."