

Despite a Big Constituency Across the Country, Wallace

By CHRISTOPHER LYDON
Special to The New York Times

MONTGOMERY, Ala., Feb. 8 — Gov. George C. Wallace went on statewide television for 10 minutes Wednesday evening to voice his sympathy for striking truck drivers and to urge Washington to solve the problems of diesel fuel price and supply in a hurry.

Nevertheless, the Alabama Governor is still the most powerful voice of popular discontent that the country has not been hearing from on the overall energy crisis. Or on Watergate. Or on Presidential impeachment. Or, most important perhaps, on the multiple strains on conventional politics that have created, to many minds, a fertile opportunity for this most unconventional of American politicians.

Reticence, which is something new for Governor Wallace, is the most striking feature of the interviews he freely grants here. For a man who reshaped Presidential politics with his third-party candidacy of 1968, there is also a surprisingly mild-mannered, two-party traditionalism in his view of national campaigns ahead.

Watergate and Inflation

"Watergate has been on people's minds," he mused in the course of an hour's conversation last evening. "It bothers them. They want it disposed of one way or the other. But if this Administration could solve the energy crisis, if it could do something about inflation and unemployment and other things that affect people's livelihood, the Republicans would be in good shape in 1976."

"Otherwise, the Democratic party would be in good shape," he added, toying with the plastic holder of a long cigar, "if they come back to the middle. I picture the Democratic party having intelligence enough in its leadership to come back to the middle."

By "the middle," he referred to his own views on such things as military strength and school busing for racial integration — views that won him resounding support in the Democratic Presidential primaries of 1972.

"The country's economic situation being low — in a recession," he speculated about 1976, "and the Democratic party still being controlled by the exotic left-wing element that controlled it in 1972 — in that event the third-party movement might be highly successful. But I don't contemplate that happening."

Appears to Be Better

Hunched in a wheelchair behind a cluttered desk in the Capitol here, crippled below the waist by bullet wounds but evidently recovered from the infection and depression that followed the attempt on his life in May, 1972, George Wallace is a cheerfully mellow figure. Beyond his extraordinary

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Keeps a Low Profile on Current

physical revival, he has many reasons for contentment. By all accounts he will win an overwhelming renomination and an uncontested re-election to an unprecedented third term in the Alabama Governor's office this year. Former Gov. Albert P. Brewer, who nearly beat Mr. Wallace in 1970, is pondering a fresh race in the May primary, but his challenge is not taken seriously.

"If Jesus Christ and Robert E. Lee were running for Governor," says one jaded former

Wallace ally, "they couldn't get into a runoff against George Wallace."

Mr. Wallace remains the undisputed captain of a vast national constituency that includes Republicans and independents but, in the Democratic party alone, places him second only to Senator Edward M. Kennedy as the popular choice for the next Presidential nomination.

"My role?" Governor Wallace mused, cocking bright beetle-crowed eyes at a visitor, "My role is being still in office, in a prestigious position and still ex-

pressing the viewpoint of these people. The fact that I'm here and I have a big constituency means that they will play a part."

He is also, for the first time since his segregationist stand in the "schoolhouse door" at the University of Alabama a decade ago, being treated as a Democratic leader in good standing. Senator Kennedy, among others followed the "sawdust trail" to Alabama to honor the Governor in a speech that Mr. Wallace delights in repeating, could have been written by Alabamians.

building, officers of the Wallace campaign are charting another race through the Democratic primaries — experimenting already with "Trust the People" as a sequel to his 1972 slogan, "Send them a message."

But on the Presidential campaign, as on many things, Mr. Wallace himself is noncommittal, and probably unsure. "It may be there won't be any necessity of that," he said. "The message has already been carried."

For the moment at least, he has no urgent new messages. "Everybody's talking about

important issues, Governor Wallace says, but his targets—as in his 1972 speeches — are "the multimillion-dollar foundations" and the commercial ventures of tax-free schools and churches. He is not outwardly aroused by the tax advantages for the international oil companies.

There are several plausible political explanations for Mr. Wallace's low national profile—starting with the obvious priority of his re-election in Alabama. Watergate, furthermore, is a potentially treacherous issue for Governor Wallace when his onetime finance di-

Governor Wallace's political staff is in constant touch with Robert S. Strauss, chairman of the Democratic National Committee, and the Wallace faction has been intimately involved in the counter-reformation of party rules. Once ostracized from Democratic dinners even in Southern states, Governor Wallace is now a star attraction.

Perhaps, some friendly Wallace watchers believe, acceptance and the glory of recognition are all he wants now. Half a mile from the Capitol

Watergate," he said in explanation of his near silence on that subject. "I'd be lost in the shuffle. Watergate speaks for itself."

The energy crisis, as he reads his own constituents, is not a reflection on the oil industry but rather another item in the long indictment of big Government. "They don't feel there's any need for an energy crisis," Governor Wallace said last night, "when we've got all those bureaucrats and experts supposedly working on it."

Tax reform for the "average citizen" is one of his most im-

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