

The Stage Is Set for a National Campaign

George Wallace's

By James Wooten
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Montgomery, Ala.

IT IS NOTHING more than a predictably Southern trick, of course, a magical mix of history and climate—yet somehow, in the hours just before dawn this old town invariably wraps itself in a steamy shroud of mist and fog, a tantalizing veil that hints at more secrets than it hides, dimming the lights and dampening the air and curling the corners of its cloudy coverlet around man and beast, shutting in one world, locking out the other — and caught in the folds of this marvelously mysterious mantle, it is devilishly difficult to distinguish between prescience and *deja vu*, or even to recognize the realities of today.

There is, for instance, a tattered billboard on the edge of the city, the faded letters of which seem, incredibly enough, to urge the impeachment of Earl Warren; and in one of the more fashionable residential enclaves, what appears to be a ragged, old Confederate battle-flag hangs limply from a broomstick staff implanted rakishly in a newly seeded lawn; and a few blocks away, where the driveway from a glass and steel, contemporary mansion meets the street, there stands what looks for all the world like a little, black jockey, waiting patiently at the brass ring at the end of his outstretched hand.

They are real all right but they seem more like apparitions, these signs and flags and statues, induced by and conjured up by the eeriness of the predawn, no more real than any or all of the other ghosts who tend to inhabit this town in the early, early mornings — Jeff Davis and Zelda Sayre, for instance, or Martin King and Hank Williams — having no more substance to them than, say, the bumper sticker pasted to the car parked on a downtown sidestreet. Still while the light does play impossible tricks, its lumenescent letters seem unmistakably to spell:

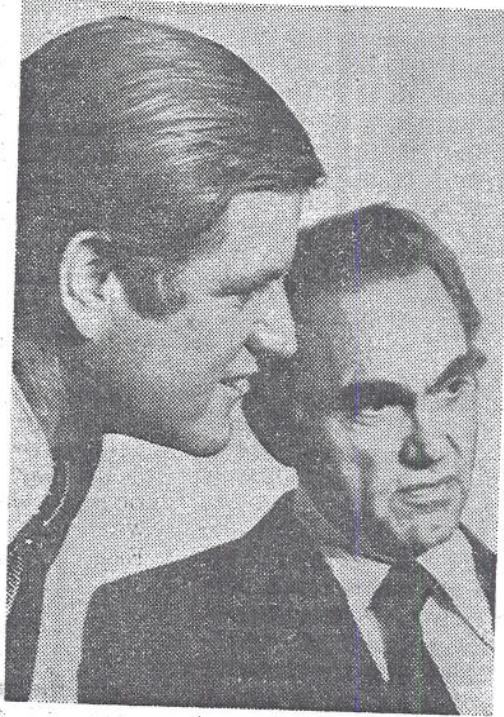
WALLACE FOR PRESIDENT: 1976.

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HE IS 53 now, a survivor of political violence, and he has just announced his candidacy for an unprecedented third term as Governor of Alabama.

"But nobody wants to talk about that," he complains. "No, everybody wants to talk about 1976 and what I'm aimin' to do. Hell, that's just downright silly. I ain't even figured out what I'm gonna have for supper tonight."

Although he may sound bored with questions about his national aspirations, most of his out of town visitors inevitably get around to them in one way or another, and the rest of the country has



KENNEDY AND WALLACE
A procession of courtiers . . .

never been more fascinated with the subject.

Most of the polls show him to be among the early front runners for the next Democratic presidential nomination, and a recent study by the University of Michigan disclosed a growing fondness for him as an independent candidate who would answer the widespread, nonpartisan distrust of established parties and political institutions.

A vast majority of his constituents more or less anticipate that he will run in 1976, his confidantes are sure he will, his wife is discussing it with her mother, his children openly concede that they fully expect it, and if Wallace himself says it's too soon to say anything about tonight's supper or the 1976 candidacy, there are unmistakable signs that he has, at least, looked at the menu — and the calendar.

"But none of that means anything,"

Waiting Game

he says, modestly discounting all such evidence. "All you doin' is speculatin' — plain old guessin.' That's all you folks good for anyway: speculatin' and guessin', guessin' and speculatin.' What would you do if you had to come right out'n say somethin' some time?"

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WHILE NO ONE would be surprised or shocked if he does seek the Presidency again (he is after all, a rather chronic campaigner for some office or another since he was discharged from the Air Force in 1945), it does seem quite remarkable that there is still any speculating and guessing about him at all.

In the first 15 months or so after Arthur Bremer's bullets crippled him, he spent more than 140 days in several hospitals, was diagnosed and treated by some of the best doctors in the country, underwent surgery a dozen times, called in an acupuncturist from New York City, cried from his pain and prayed for some surcease, swallowed gallons and pounds of various medications and drugs, and briefly consulted a Southern faith healer.

None of it seemed to work. Once so gregarious, he would sit alone for hours in a shuttered, darkened study. Once so loquacious, he seldom spoke at all and when he did, his familiar growl was little more than a whispery rasp. Once so indefatigable, he took to retiring early and once so eager for the next day, he would loll in bed until mid-morning. He snapped at his children, stared at his friends, stopped reading the newspapers and seldom appeared in his office.

"I don't know what we're going to do with him," his young wife, Cornelia, confided to a friend. "It's like dealing with an old, old man."

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NOTHING SEEMED to help—not vacations in Florida or quick trips to Washington or appearances at governor's conferences or speaking engagements here and there or interview-arguments with old journalist foes. His weight fell

steadily, along with some of his hair, and he seemed to sink deeper and deeper into his private misery.

Then, suddenly — almost as suddenly as the gunfire had erupted that May afternoon — Wallace changed. "Seemed like a miracle to me," recalls Oscar Harper, one of Wallace's oldest and saltiest cronies. "I don't recollect exactly when it was — sometime back in the summer I think — but I was over there one day and he was lower'n a well digger's butt, chewing' on his bottom lip and starin' at the wall like he didn't have a friend in the world, and then the very next day I went to the mansion, and there he was, sittin' up straight and tall in that wheelchair, like it was some kinda goddam throne, makin' phone calls and givin' orders right'n left and hollerin' at everybody and laughin' and making' jokes and shakin' newspapers in my nose. I swear, I b'lieve it was some sort of miracle."

Perhaps it was, but for those less inclined to metaphysics, another explanation is available: In the hours between Mr. Harper's visits, George Corley Wallace decided to become a candidate (for governor) again.

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ON ONE recent morning, as the sun began to burn away the mist, Charles S. Snider, the executive director of the Wallace campaign, was sitting down at his desk in a downtown office building, sipping coffee and studying a preliminary report on his latest direct-mail fund-raising project. He is a double-knitted, supremely confident, young man, secure in the knowledge that the 1972 debts have all been paid and that his books are in the black and building.

His computerized mailing-lists, perfected over a dozen years, now include the names and addresses of hundreds of thousands of Americans who, he knows, can be counted on to contribute a dollar or two now and then when asked. Even as he was finishing his coffee, the clerks in the nearby U.S. Post Office were pull-



AGNEW AND WALLACE
... from 1972 to today

ing the cords on a dozen bags of mail addressed to his office (Box 1976), and inside the bags were hundreds of personal checks.

"I don't think we'll ever have any trouble again running a national campaign," Snider says.

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UPSTAIRS, in the same building, in an incredibly dishevelled hideaway, Joe Azbel was gulping down a pineapple danish before getting started on the next edition of "The Wallace Stand," a periodic newsletter he compiles and edits.

He seems to be a bumbler, a man perpetually searching for the glasses he is wearing — but as he plods through middle-age, he carries with him the credentials of a master propagandist. It was Azbel who gave the 1972 campaign its effective theme, "Send Them A Message," and as he chuckled over the latest Watergate fiasco and the energy crisis, he tripped his latest slogan over his tongue.

"How about 'Trust The People'?" he suggested, licking his fingers. "I can just hear the Guv'nuh now with that one. 'In 1976, the important thing for both parties is to trust the people —.' Oh, yeah, I b'leve he could take that thing and go with it."