

# George Wallace's Third Party Threat

MONTGOMERY, Ala.—Having easily won renomination for another term as governor of Alabama, George C. Wallace is about to send a new message to the national Democratic Party: He is fully prepared to lead a third-party movement if he feels new Democratic rules discriminate against him.

"If it looks like they're going to ignore the average citizen again, there will be a new party in '76," Gov. Wallace told us in an interview at the executive mansion here. "Then the Democrats will have to get along with just the left-wing theoreticians."

Indeed, some key Wallace financial supporters are deeply suspicious of national Democratic leaders and would prefer a third-party route. Although Wallace's fulltime political lieutenants disagree and are beginning the long search for 1976 Democratic delegates, they nevertheless are also making secret alternative plans for a third party.

All Wallaceites are agreed that the decision must be made by January 1975, and that it hinges on this question: Will the 1976 rules take away delegates that should have been Wallace's as did the 1972 rules? Since a Wallace third party could hurt the Democrats in 1976 instead of helping them as it did in 1968 and would have done in 1972, the threat from Mont-

gomery poses the most muscular and significant pressure against the party's still-ascendant reformers.

Superficially, Wallace has been co-opted into the Democratic Party since 1972. Whereas his predecessors shunned Wallace as an outlaw politician, canny Democratic National Chairman Robert Strauss has courted him. Wallace operative Mickey Griffin has been made privy to the party's internal affairs as a member of its national executive committee. Strauss has developed an amiable relationship with Charles Snider, Wallace's national political manager.

But there are few illusions among the Wallaceites. They feel, with good reason, that Strauss wants to keep Wallace happy but also keep him off the ticket and is determined to minimize Wallace's national influence in the party.

Thus, there is no long-term commitment to the Democratic Party by Wallace, who habitually refers to Democrats as "them" rather than "us." "I sent them a message in 1972 at great personal cost to myself," he told us. "If they ignore it, they ignore it at their own peril."

Specifically, Wallace is unhappy with procedural decisions hailed by

Strauss as compromises—particularly the Compliance Review Commission (CRC). The commission's left-loaded membership, it is feared here, might arbitrarily unseat Wallace delegates. Strauss' private assurance, that he controls 15 of the commission's 25 members, has not assuaged that fear. The Wallaceites doubt Strauss' control and don't trust Strauss that much anyway.

William France of Daytona Beach, Fla., the auto-racing impresario and an increasingly important Wallace insider, believes that if the commission does exert absolute power over party affairs "we should get the American Independent Party rolled out again and this time get 25 million votes instead of 10 million."

For now, however, France and Democratic national committeeman Hall Timanus of Texas are spearheading a national drive to elect Wallace delegates to the midterm convention at Kansas City in December. That could prove Wallace's watershed for 1976. Whether his delegates are seated there, what decisions are made there and the personal treatment given him if he attends may well shape Wallace's course.

A Wallace third party in 1976 would not faintly resemble the right-wing American Independent Party of 1968.

John Birch Society leaders and other extremists who headed the party outside the South have been alienated by Wallace's more moderate tone and his black and labor allies in this year's election for governor. On the other hand, his miraculous recovery from the brink of death has contributed to a new respectability and credibility among rank-and-file voters.

Consequently, a third-party run might take away far more blue-collar Democrats than it did in 1968. Wallace today characteristically seems to bet on articulate workingmen's issues than most liberals. He totally ignores Watergate and ties inflation to foreign aid and welfare spending. Unlike almost all liberal Democrats, Wallace knows that forced school busing is not a dead issue. "The people are still waiting for somebody they believe would do something about it," he told us.

Given Wallace's revived physical vitality and his new aura as a wheelchair campaigner, he is capable of doing substantial damage to the Democratic Party. Certainly, he cannot be taken for granted as a loyal party soldier. For Strauss and other national party leaders to ignore this threat would be a dangerously high-risk game.