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# The Wallace Spirit

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By James Reston

MONTGOMERY, Ala., Feb. 25—Gov. George Wallace sits at his desk here in the gleaming white capitol of Alabama these days and proclaims his fitness to run again for President of the United States in 1976.

He seems more composed now. He talks philosophically about life and death, and discusses with the utmost candor the problem of living as "a paraplegic"; but the old combative ambition is still alive, and whatever you think of his politics, his spirit is magnificent.

Some people are crippled at one end, he says, referring to himself, but others around Washington seem to be crippled at the top, so, he insists, "I'm not ruling myself out of anything." Not out of the primaries, not out of the Democratic nomination, not even out of running on an independent ticket. No decision yet, no commitments but no resignations either.

No question seems to embarrass him. The American people were deceived by Franklin Roosevelt's private doctors about the condition of Roosevelt's health before the 1944 Presidential election, but they will want an independent judgment on the health of their candidates in 1976. Would he be willing to submit to the examination of an outside panel of doctors if the other candidates did the same?

"I'd be happy to do that," he replies, though doctors, he adds, give you as many different answers as economists. Look, he says, if he ran when he wasn't able to do the job, he'd be "a fraud." It wouldn't be fair to the country or to "my family." And besides, doctors love America like everybody else and they wouldn't encourage him to run unless he could.

A lot of people ruled him out for the Presidency in the past, he said, on the ground that he was a "racist." Then even many people who believed in his policies didn't vote for him because they thought he couldn't win. Now other candidates were running on the tax and law-and-order programs he put forward in 1968 and 1972, but the new argument against him was that he was crippled and couldn't stand the strain.

He expected this, he said, but it wasn't true. Actually, he insisted, he was doing more executive work for the state of Alabama than before he was shot. He didn't have to do so many unnecessary ceremonial duties now. He worked all morning at home, exercising, doing work by telephone, and then stayed at his desk from about one in the afternoon until seven.

He has worried sometimes in the past, he said, when his operations didn't go quite right, and there was

some bleeding that had to be cauterized; but he was not in pain now, and he had never really been depressed mentally. He had been sustained by his family, his friends and tens of thousands of people who had stuck with him and prayed for him.

He was asked about his religion. Did he feel that he had been "spared" for some larger purpose? No, he said, he didn't think about himself that way. We were all put into the world for some purpose, he added, and often didn't fulfill it. Everybody had his own individual purposes, and his purpose was to serve his own people.

On the 1976 campaign, he said he thought he had more support now than he did in the last Presidential election, in the North as well as in the South. He couldn't go into all primaries, but he mentioned New Hampshire, Florida, Michigan and Pennsylvania as possibilities, and besides, he added, he had done well in 1972 in some states where he scarcely campaigned.

He was asked about his recent appearances at Negro churches and his forthcoming meeting at a rally in Alabama with former Gov. Ronald Reagan of California. Reporters read too much into all this, he said. He had talked in the Negro churches because he was invited, and didn't say anything about it in advance because he didn't want people to think he was "using" the black preachers. He was merely going to introduce Mr. Reagan, had never discussed a third party campaign with him and has no plans to do so.

The "message" he had for Washington this time, however, was that it had better begin to pay more attention to the middle-class people who were in trouble. They were paying most of the freight for the very rich and the very poor, and they were sick of it and needed somebody to look after their interests.

He would not say what he would do, or whom he would support, if the Democratic convention were deadlocked in 1976 and had to try to reach a compromise among the leaders of the party. Nor would he identify any Democratic candidate he would oppose. He clearly did not like this line of questioning, for it assumed that maybe he wouldn't make it himself, but he left no doubt that he expected to be in on the final decision.

In short, he was canny. The Democrats could win in 1976, he said, and carry the South too, if they'd get back in the middle and forget those "pseudo-intellectuals" that ruined things in 1972.

After almost two hours of what was mainly a monologue, always dynamic, shrewd and often poignant, he still seemed strong and vigorous. "You'll be hearing from me," he said. And we surely will.