

Could Wallace Win?

In politics, they say, anything is possible. Of late we have been reading that Alabama Gov. George C. Wallace might be elected President of the United States. Politicians of both parties—Messrs. Nixon, Kennedy, Jackson, Humphrey, et al—have been trooping down to see him and David S. Broder has written that he now "is treated as a legitimate peer by every politician in the land."

That Broder's statement is true seems beyond doubt. But that Wallace could be elected is quite something else again. To me, it sounds like another case of William Jennings Bryan.

Bryan, you will remember, was three times the Democratic Party's candidate for President, the first time in 1896 at age 36 when he swept the convention with his "cross of gold" speech. He tried again, and failed again, in 1900 and 1908. In 1912 it was Bryan who made Woodrow Wilson, rather than Champ Clark, his party's nominee. He served as Wilson's first Secretary of State. But that is not the point about Bryan that relates to George Wallace.

The point of similarity between the two men is that both cast themselves as reformers in an age calling for reform. By reformer I mean a populist, one who rebels against the status quo of the time and advocates nostrums to cure the nation's ills. In Bryan's early days, populism was farm-based, representing the Midwest and West against the East, the little fellow against the bankers and the robber barons. There must be genuine grievances for populism to succeed and in 1896, at least, as one writer put it, "Bryan voiced protests that ran both wide and deep."

Bryan's populism was a mixture of nostrums—the 16 to 1 coinage slogan—old fashioned religion and traditional Democratic state's rights. In 1896 Bryan came close to defeating William McKinley, whose backer, Mark Hanna, drew forth the first great flood of corporate and banking political funds and marked the Republicans ever since as the party of big business. Bryan had only the contributions of the "little people" plus a few idealistic men of wealth.

Although Hanna and the Republicans predicted that factories would close and farms would be foreclosed if Bryan won, the Republican victors, McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt, gradually accepted and enacted many of the reforms Bryan had urged. Bryan complained that TR had stolen his program much as Socialist Norman Thomas later would complain that the second Roosevelt, FDR, had swiped his programs. In short, Bryan succeeded in "sending them a message."

George Wallace's constituency, imbued with a fervor similar to that of Bryan, today consists, in William S. White's apt phrase, not of the shoeless Americans but of "those who always have their shoes half-soled." Once again it is the have-nots, or—in the current context—the have-littles, against the have-a-lots. There is, of course, at least one major difference. In 1896 black Americans counted for nothing politically; in the South they had been largely disenfranchised and elsewhere their numbers were small. Today the blacks have political power both North and South, and those Wallace opposes—the senators who have attempted to help the blacks and other poor Americans—are the object of his contempt as the friends of "welfare chiselers."

In 1896, with few notable exceptions, white politicians of both parties agreed that blacks were inferior Americans because of their race. Today, however much Wallace may have veered away from his old defiance at the courthouse door, he has not dispelled a widespread view that he remains a racist. And racism is not absent from the "half-soled."

Bryan, however, never showed the contempt for intellectuals, as far as I know, that Wallace embodies in his attacks on the "pointy-headed bureaucrats" he has promised to throw into the Potomac, along with their briefcases.

In time Bryan moved from pure

populist nostrums to calls for nationalizing the railroads and other centers of financial power. He was an economic radical. Wallace, however, is far more conservative. He takes a limited view of the federal government's role in economics, judging by what he has recently told Broder and others. In this he shows a kinship to Mr. Nixon's dream of turning the government "back to the people." If he were to become President, however, it is doubtful that he could do so any more effectively than Mr. Nixon.

But can he become President? Wallace showed in his previous tries that he can command millions of the "half-soled" in the North both on economic and racial issues. Then he hardly knew the rules of the nominating game; this time it appears he knows them and in-



tends to in-fight as effectively as his senatorial rivals for the nomination.

Democrats know their party went too far to the left in 1972 with George McGovern; the bulk of the current leaders are trying to move back toward the center of the political spectrum. George Wallace claims he represents that center. But does he? We shall know more after this December's Democratic Party mini-convention and after all the on-going struggles over rules for the 1976 convention; and especially after Wallace, Jackson, Kennedy and the other potential candidates have told us more of their vision of a better America.

If one had to guess at this distance, it now seems possible that Wallace could influence the 1976 convention to the point of having a veto on the nominee and winning for himself the vice presidential nomination. Even a Kennedy-Wallace ticket is no longer unthinkable, as appalling as that may sound today. But stranger combinations have turned up in American politics, once a party makes up its collective mind it wants to win more that it wants ideological purity.

Public discontent and attempts to satisfy it have long been a major motivating force in our politics. Wallace, like Bryan, represents the discontented or at least a large number of them. His chances would seem to hang on whether his rivals for the nomination can meet the same challenge more effectively than he does.