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Southern Strategy Nixon's Tar Baby

WASHINGTON—"The first thing they did," George Wallace explained the other day, "was to get rid of Finch, and the second thing they'll do is to fool around with the electoral college. All because of a tired little fellow from Alabama." This explanation of the Robert Finch demotion has at least the virtue of political common sense. It is more sensible than the White House explanation that Finch had to resign as secretary of HEW in order to counsel the President. Atty. Gen. John Mitchell has had no such problem.

In other words, the Wallace explanation may not be true in fact, but it is true in logic. His election will bring about an intensified Nixon Southern strategy because that is the only way in which the President can win in 1972.

The Wallace victory means that the President has certainly lost some states he hoped to win — Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia and Arkansas—the five Wallace states of 1968.

It also means that the President will have to work very hard to carry North and South Carolina, Tennessee, Florida, Texas and Virginia, states where Wallace was strong in 1968 and could win. In short, the Southern and Border States which Mitchell has made the keystone of the Southern strategy are now in jeopardy again.

Too many bridges have been burned to permit a change in course. By pursuing the Southern strategy into 1970, the President has already lost the Northern states.

After Spiro Agnew, after the angry resignation of civil rights assistant Leon Panetta, after Justice Department support for segregated private schools, after Finch, it is too late to try to win back the East. Mayor John Lindsay may as well forget about a model cities program.

What we can expect then for the next two years is more of Agnew, more tough talk on the war, more intervention in the courts to encourage segregation and increasing polarization in the country. The eventual embarrassment of Finch's successor, Elliot Richardson, will be incidental.

A change in the electoral college seems unlikely, partly because there is not much time for the constitutional process between now and 1972 and partly because Republicans on the

Hill are having second thoughts about the wisdom of changing. In the 1968 campaign, Hubert Humphrey made a "No Deal With Wallace" pledge, but Mr. Nixon was less sure, and nothing in the record since would suggest that he would find a deal impossible.

"We learned something important the last time around," a key Wallace aide remarked over the weekend. "That is that the governor can't be a national candidate. No Southerner can." Which suggests that Wallace, too, will have a Southern strategy in 1972 and will concentrate on those states where he has a chance to win.

And this, in turn, is good news for the Democrats who may not have to fight Wallace in such states as Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, Pennsylvania and New Jersey where Wallace has strength among blue-collar workers otherwise likely to vote Democratic.

It is not too hard to imagine even hard-hat construction workers, confronted with rising unemployment, marching under the banner of a liberal antiwar Democrat.

Had Wallace lost in Alabama, Mr. Nixon could have turned — his Southern flank secure — to the left (or at least to the North). Indeed, many White House staffers have been predicting to reporters that this would happen. Now it is the Democrats who have a secure flank, and one can anticipate that political wisdom will bring them closer to the middle on the issues of law and order and permissiveness which concern Middle America.

The President's Southern strategy has cost him hostility in the Senate and an erosion of confidence among his countrymen. But when George Wallace turned up the winner in Alabama, he was stuck with it. The strategy is now his tar baby.