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A Man of the Year

For the Outsiders

Washington

THE MAN OF THE YEAR, says Time magazine, is that strange hybrid, a Nixinger. It took no great courage to pick the men who rediscovered China, ended the arms race with Russia, announced peace in Vietnam and, in their spare time, carried Spiro Agnew to victory in 49 of the 50 states.

The gutsy choice would have been George Wallace, and it is a choice that could have been defended. If you want the man who best symbolizes America in the year 1972, Wallace has far better qualifications than Kissinger or Mr. Nixon.



The latter two are the preeminent insiders — perhaps the only two Americans who have known every one of the last 366 days what the hell was happening in the matters that affected our fate. But this was the year of the outsider, the year when most Americans felt shut off from access to the things they really wanted to know, to see, to influence or control.

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IT WAS THE YEAR of the gripe — of saying to hell with the bigshots who wage wars, raise taxes, pass laws, hand down court orders, blackout football games and lie to you that they're doing it for your own good. And George Wallace was the spokesman and symbol of the teed-off, frustrated, fed up American.

Only George McGovern felt the current of national frustration Wallace had tapped and in Wisconsin he immediately reshaped his own faltering campaign to exploit it.

Ironically, Wallace himself was unclear what to do with his opportunity. Like a lot of the frustrated citizens for whom he spoke, he had not bothered to read the fine print on the papers he had been shown. He did not understand the chance he had to pick up delegates in non-primary states under the new party rules. His confidence also wavered at this crucial point, and he delayed bringing his campaign north to Wisconsin just long enough to let McGovern win a crucial victory there, with Wallace a fast-closing second.

By the time Wallace himself grasped the strength of the tide he was riding, he was being stalked by a would-be assassin.

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AS A VICTIM OF VIOLENCE, too, he symbolizes America — a nation crippled by the weapons it cannot seem to stop using on itself or on others.

Crippled, he left the campaign — left it to McGovern and to Mr. Nixon. Of the two, the President proved far more skillful in evoking the fears and playing to the frustrations Wallace had identified — the war, big government, school busing, job quotas, higher taxes, tolerance of politically or personally deviant behavior.

So, it is Mr. Nixon who will ride in triumph down Pennsylvania avenue on January 20, back to the White House, where he and Henry Kissinger will continue to read the cables and make the decisions that shape our lives, telling us only as much as they think it wise for us to know.

And George Wallace will sit there in that wheelchair, knowing where the power is, knowing now that at one moment of history, it might have been within his grasp, had he but realized it. He will sit there, better cared for but with no more hope of complete recovery than the hundreds of thousands of other victims of violence last year in Vietnam, in Ulster, or in the gun-ridden society of America.

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