

WXPost  
The George Wallace of '76

MONTGOMERY, Ala.—The unobtrusive arrival here of a ghostwriter commissioned by Doubleday and Co. to write the definitive autobiography of Gov. George Wallace for pre-1976 publication is the latest sign that Wallace's confinement to a wheelchair may be no greater political hazard than it was to Franklin D. Roosevelt. Wallace told us in his office. "But it doesn't stop me from being governor."

That was late one evening last week, following a two-hour meeting of the state building commission presided over by the governor. As we left at 7 p.m., Wallace's legislative leaders arrived for another hour's conference.

Having recovered from his internal wounds and suffering only minor periods of light pain, Wallace is beginning to think like a presidential candidate again. His mind is as sharp as it was before he was nearly assassinated 16 months ago. Indeed, the talk in Wallace's office of yet another presidential campaign in 1976, with the Democratic party's vice presidential nomination the real goal, cannot be dismissed as nonsense.

When we last visited a fatigued and pain-ridden Wallace a year ago, he could not stop reminiscing about his phenomenal 1972 primary victories, particularly his sweep in the liberal Democratic bastion of Michigan.

In contrast, Wallace's five 1972 winning primaries plus the five states he won in his third-party presidential campaign of 1968 are mentioned today only in passing. Wallace is now looking ahead, smacking his lips with anticipation and plotting a powerful role in

what he calls the "rejuvenation" of the shattered Democratic Party.

He has been holding quiet talks with former aides who long ago left him. While avoiding hard offers of political employment, Wallace is making it clear that he wants and needs serious professional help from these old presidential hands. The goal: to rebuild a competent staff of Alabamans for 1976. Among them is the astute Bill Jones, Wallace's oldest political adviser who left shortly after managing Wallace's 1968 third-party campaign; his talents were sorely missed in the inadequately organized 1972 campaign.

Jones and other old Wallaceites are impressed by the miraculous physical improvement of the governor, which has restored his psychological health and ended long periods of deep depression. To them, 1976 looks more promising than the governor's passes at the presidency in 1964, 1968 and 1972.

Wallace is dealing today with a shattered Democratic Party which, with the sole exception of Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, (D-Mass.), has no recognizable center of power. Moreover, he is dealing with it from a position of complete dominance at home and wearing what his idolators perceive as the mystical mantle of a hero miraculously immune from death by assassination.

That perception is so strong in Alabama that Republican state chairman Richard Bennett is advising his party not to field any candidate for governor next year when Wallace runs for re-election.

Thus, with only token Democratic opposition in next spring's primary election, Wallace could well sweep to

his third term as Alabama's governor with an astounding 70 to 75 per cent of the vote.

One possible contender, former Gov. Albert Brewer, was barely defeated by Wallace in the 1970 primary. But today Brewer confronts a dismal statewide poll which the Wallace camp says was conducted for Brewer by national pollster Oliver Quayle. It shows Wallace ahead of Brewer by over 40 percentage points, according to Wallaceites.

Wallace, in short, appears stronger than ever after his near-assassination, a political fact the National Democratic Party cannot ignore as it staggers out of the quicksands of 1972.

Although his old political power was built on a pledge of total racial segregation, Wallace today talks not about race but about the rights of "little people." The populist has eclipsed the segregationist.

Kennedy's speech for Wallace at Decatur, Ala., last July illustrated that no Northern Democrat can afford to ignore Wallace's huge following in the South or his populist appeal everywhere. Thus, unlikely though it sounds today, Wallace may well find himself powerful enough in 1976 either to exercise a veto over the Democratic Party's presidential nominee or compel that nominee to take him on the ticket.

Such a turn of political events since his attempted murder in 1972 would be astonishing and incongruous. But over the last decade, the astonishing and incongruous have become the hallmark of American politics, as Richard Nixon—and now George Wallace—are discovering.