

Wallace Wins Fight for Respectability

By David S. Broder
Special to The Washington Post

MONROETERRY, Ala.—George Corley Wallace has won his fight for respectability. And because he has, Wallace and his backers believe he has a better chance than ever to become President of the United States.

The doughty governor, who by his stand in the schoolhouse door more than a decade ago, etched his face and name on the national consciousness as a symbol of resistance to authority, now is treated as a legitimate peer by every politician in the land.

After years of building a constituency by battling the powers in Washington and in both national parties, Wallace has consented to be coaxed into the club. He is at peace with the Democratic Party, both within Alabama and nationally, and is courted by the Republican President who only four years ago was secretly plotting his political destruction.

And Wallace is loving it. On Friday morning, when he announced his candidacy for a third term as governor—a prize he is almost certain to become the first Alabama to win—he regaled his followers with a little tongue-in-cheek reminder of how much things have changed.

"I can remember a few years ago," he said, "when



By Jim Tuten for The Washington Post

Wallace on party chiefs: "They've learned their lesson."

candidates for the office of President might not have had kind words to say about Alabama. But now folks in both parties . . . are beginning to make speeches that sound like they were written in Alabama."

Wallace called off the names of some of the recent visitors—Ted Kennedy, Scoop Jackson, Hubert Humphrey and, just last Monday, Richard Nixon. All of them, he told his laughing audience, have had but

one message: "How great thou art in Alabama!"

Since nothing enhances the power and reputation of a local politician more than the deference of the chiefs of alien lands, the role Wallace now enjoys in national politics is a key ingredient of his seemingly invulnerable position at home.

There are those in Alabama who say the foundations of his power are not that firm. A scandal in the state highway department has so far touched only minor officials, but there are published reports that it could reach close to the governor's brother Gerald. The last session of the legislature balked Wallace so freely that his critics thought the governor was surely losing his grip.

But when it came time to file for office this month, Wallace's strongest potential challengers—former Gov. Albert Brewer, who came within a whisker of beating him in 1970, Lt. Gov. Jere Beasley and Attorney General Bill Baxley—all backed off. That leaves the opposition in the May Democratic primary to Eugene McLain, a state senator from Huntsville with little statewide fame, who is battling to prove that Wallace's 10-year quest for the presidency has meant "a decade of neglect of Alabama's needs."

Republicans so far do not have a candidate, perhaps because, as former Postmaster General Winton Blount,

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an Alabama GOP power, has said, "Anybody would be a nut to run against Wallace this year."

State Republican Chairman Richard Bennett says it was the near-fatal assassination attempt in May, 1972, that softened some of the "opposition" to Wallace within the state. "People feel he's fought the good fight for them and bears the wounds of battle," Bennett said.

Both physically and emotionally, Wallace appears remarkably recovered from the shooting. He is, matter-of-factly resigned to the permanent paralysis of his legs. But on Friday he stood erect for over an hour, strapped to the podium, to make his announcement speech, answer questions and greet his supporters, without visible discomfort or fatigue.

"I'm physically able to make any kind of campaign that is necessary," he said.

Wallace has made his peace with the national Democratic Party and with the Alabama Democratic "loyalists" who fought him for years. Or, as he would say, they have come to terms with him.

"They've learned their lesson," Wallace said, speaking of national party leaders in an interview this week. "Except for the New Left crowd, who will never learn anything, the Democrats who are sensible and reasonable know they have to move back to the middle, where the great mass of average citizens are."

Wallace says he has been treated "respectfully and objectively" by the Democratic Party since 1972. He has representatives on all the party's governing agencies and says he is consulted "as often as I want or need to be" by party chairman Robert S. Strauss.

And yet, for all that he welcomes the legitimacy accorded him by the party whose nominees he has either actively opposed or refused to endorse in the past three presidential contests, Wallace is very guarded about his status as a Democrat.

Asked if he now sees himself as "part of the National Democratic party," Wallace replied: "I see myself as representing a very significant constituency, who in the main, in the past, belonged to the national Dem-

ocratic Party . . . who are natural Democrats and who want to go back to their party. But if the New Left continues to control the Democratic Party, in my judgment, they won't go back."

Wallace says it will not be possible to gauge the control of the national party until its mid-term conference in Kansas City this December. Denying reports that he wants to "take over" that meeting, he says, "I'm not going to make any strenuous effort" to get delegates elected to the mini-convention.

Wallace organizers are meeting this weekend in Houston, but Wallace aide Mickey Griffin said the main goal is to use the 1974 mini-convention to familiarize our organization" with the procedures for electing Wallace delegates in 1976.

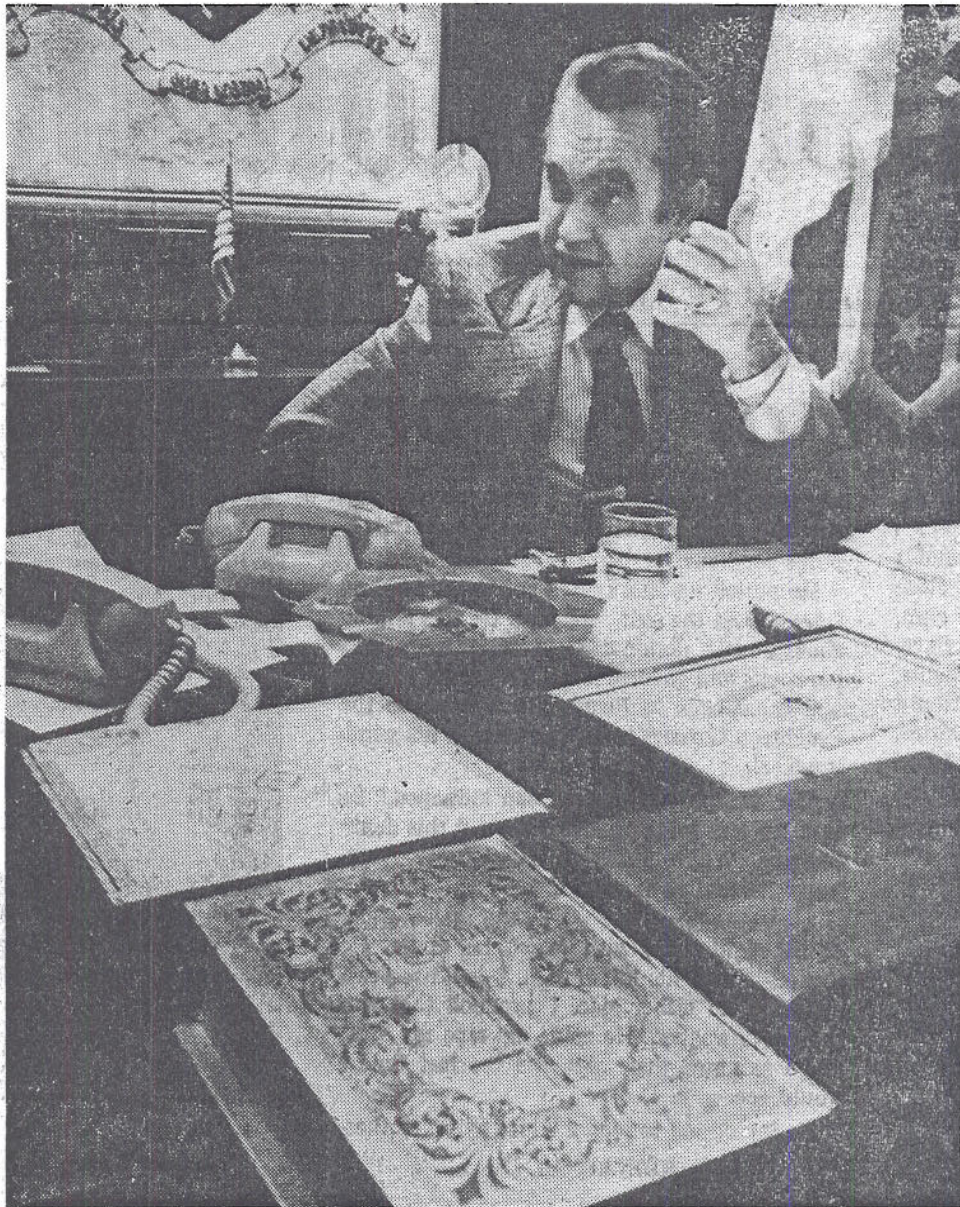
In 1972, Wallace lost uncounted opportunities to gain delegates by his unfamiliarity with the rules. This time, said Griffin, "we will know what we are doing."

Wallace's national organization has stayed in business continuously since 1968. The 12-person Montgomery headquarters raised over \$1 million from its computerized list of small contributors last year.

With that kind of grass roots support, Wallace expects to benefit from the party's new rules, guaranteeing that presidential contenders will receive delegates in direct proportion to their voting strength in the 1976 primaries, caucuses and conventions.

The governor seems assured of home state support, thanks to a recent truce with the national party loyalists who have kept control of the state Democratic committee throughout his tenure. Wallace said the agreement—symbolized by his going on the state Democratic executive committee along with Griffin—came about because "the ones who sort of ostracized me recognize I do represent a constituency that's pretty big in this country and certainly is a majority of the people of this state. Good common sense prevailed, and now we're closer than we've ever been."

State Democratic Chairman Robert Vance, long a Wallace critic, confirmed that "to the degree he has



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Wallace: "I see myself as representing a very significant constituency."

national credibility, Wallace has greater strength here. He is participating responsibly in the national Democratic Party, which eases feelings here."

In Vance's view, Wallace has "shifted his position to the center and has reconciled forces he'd antagonized. His speeches are completely void of racist-type statements now."

The degree to which Wallace actually has shed his old segregationist sentiments is a matter of some dispute. Certainly, his speeches now contain no echoes of the old defiance of court desegregation orders; instead, they are replete with references to cooperation and progress for "all the people."

Wallace has crowned a black homecoming queen at the University of Alabama and last December paid a highly publicized visit to a meeting of black elected officials, where he was praised for his aid to local communities and schools.

But Joe Reed, chairman of the Alabama Democratic conference, the black caucus on the state Democratic committee is skeptical.

"Wallace is cranking up to run for President and he knows he has to change his racist image," Reed said in an interview. Referring to

the black mayors' praise of Wallace, Reed said, "I don't blame those who are trying to get to the trough and say they can deal with the fellow. But when some people try to say the governor has changed, my question is: Where?"

"The first thing he did when he succeeded Brewer was to remove the one black Brewer had appointed to the commission on higher education, and he hasn't replaced him," Reed said. "He refused last month to appoint a black to the parole board, even though he was highly recommended and half the prison population is black. He has refused to appoint a black circuit judge. I believe the man, and he has said time and again, 'I haven't changed. The others are coming to me.'"

Wallace counters this criticism with references to the increase in black state employees and appointments of blacks to draft boards and other local bodies.

But it was notable that the one flash of anger he permitted himself at his press conference Friday concerned a federal court reapportionment plan which, by creating single-member districts splitting county lines, will allow blacks to elect more members to the state house of representatives.

with Wallace these days. On most issues, he is cautious to an extreme. Here are some modern-day Wallaceisms:

On the rival Nixon and Kennedy health care plans: "I'm in favor of health care programs for catastrophic illness, but I don't want the federal government to take over administration of all health care in this country."

On gas rationing: "I don't know the overall picture from here, but I hope we don't have to resort to rationing. I don't like rationing."

On inflation: "It doesn't look like the controls are working to me. It's best not to have any type of controls, unless it's absolutely necessary."

On impeachment: "I would say most of the people in Alabama are prayerful that no situation would arise that would require the impeachment of the President, no matter who he is, because that's not in the interest of the country. But that doesn't mean they wouldn't want anybody impeached if he was impeachable. I just don't like to comment . . . until all the investigations are finished. It's most unfortunate."

That Wallace sounds almost like the old establishment politicians he liked to parody in his speeches, when he was playing the rebellious iconoclast. Now, George Wallace sounds like a respectable statesman himself, the kind who is pompous enough to be President.

Which he may be.

where they now hold only three of 100 seats.

Wallace told an interviewer, "I'm not against blacks in the legislature," and said he opposed the plan only because it "tears up" traditional political units. Nonetheless, he assailed the plan, drawn up by a Columbia University professor using a computer printout of census data, in terms reminiscent of the Old Wallace.

It was foisted on Alabama, he said, by "one of our pseudo-intellectual friends from New York City" as part of "a conspiracy on the part of the ultra-liberals . . . to do away with people saying 'I'm from Alabama' or Barber County. They want them to say they're citizens of the world."

But that kind of free-winged rhetoric is rare