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Wallace's Wife Talks About Reports

By Myra MacPherson
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Montgomery Ala.

"All I was ever trying to do was to hold this marriage together — under very difficult circumstances," Cornelia Wallace, looking close to tears, said yesterday.

Reports that she secretly tapped the governor's night time conversations, and that he ordered surveillance of her activities have made headlines. But Mrs. Wallace said she would not clear up any of the mystifying details about the domestic discord that had been brewing for months in the governor's antebellum mansion.

Hinting that she could "clear my name" if she told all, Mrs. Wallace said: "I'm more interested in holding my marriage together than public opinion about me. I

have three children (by her first marriage) and this is their home. Whatever George and I can do to settle all this is best for all of us."

Asked if her husband was interested in saving the marriage, she stared for a moment and said, "I don't know."

It is rumored that the governor is the source of some published reports that he is seeking legal advice on divorce proceedings.

Mrs. Wallace seemed fearful that anything she would say might further antagonize her husband who, reliable sources said, had talked of divorcing his wife this summer even before the clandestine taping system was discovered in the governor's bedroom.

She also reportedly is worried that the governor's far-reaching political influence in Alabama could

spell trouble for her if she were to antagonize him by speaking about the bedroom taping.

U.S. Attorney Ira Dement said Thursday that, at the request of Governor Wallace, no further investigation of the taping would be conducted "at this time." Dement admitted that the taping "may have been a technical violation of the law."

When people in Montgomery speak of the troubled marriage of the 57-year-old governor — permanently crippled when he was shot in an assassination attempt during the 1972 presidential primary campaign — and his 37-year-old second wife, they speak of "palace intrigue," of jealousies and suspicions.

The staff is divided in its loyalties.

There is little love lost between

Mrs. Wallace and the governor's top aides and cronies, particularly his brother, Gerald Wallace.

In fact, one motive she purportedly had for taping her husband's telephone conversations involved her feeling that his confidants were saying things about her that were destructive to the marriage. She reportedly wanted to find out if this were true so that she could answer the accusations.

She would not comment yesterday on news reports that Wallace's taped calls contained "disparaging" remarks that Wallace made about his wife to female friends.

In an interview last May, Mrs. Wallace said her husband's brother, Gerald, "has spread rumors that I had slept with every state trooper around." She denied any such affairs, adding, "All that's been written (in tabloids) and rumored

has done a lot of damage to my reputation. And it has caused dissension between George and me."

Asked about Mrs. Wallace's assertion that he had talked about her, Gerald Wallace said yesterday:

"That's totally false. I don't concern myself with Cornelia. Of course she wants to put the blame on anything or anyone — she's the one who did the bugging."

The Wallaces were married on Jan. 4, 1971, before Wallace was inaugurated as governor for a second term.

After Wallace was shot, there was little privacy in their marriage and reporters asked about the most intimate details of their private life.

In her biography, "Cornelia," Mrs. Wallace confirmed stories that Wallace was given to crying spells and deep depression. In that book

and in some interviews, she went to some length to suggest that the governor's paralysis had not left him sexually impotent.

In her book she recalls her first private meeting with her husband after he was shot — at a motel near his hospital and says that as the governor was wheeled back to the hospital, "his wheelchair had a new wiggle in its roll and I had a new bounce in my walk."

In an interview in May she emphatically rebutted doctors' opinions that he could not possibly have sex.

"That's just not necessarily so," she said, adding that the two of them were helped in their private life by information received from a California rehabilitation center that deals with spinal injury patients.

The governor's first wife, Lurleen, succeeded him in office in 1966. An Alabama law then did not allow a governor to seek re-election to a consecutive term. Lurleen Wallace died of cancer in 1968.

There have been stories that Cornelia Wallace would like to run for governor herself in 1978.

She said, "People say I am ambitious but what is ambition? There is a question about my own welfare. I want to be provided for, cared for, have children, stay home, but life doesn't always allow that. I'm no more ambitious than Scarlett O'Hara was when the war hit, but what's a woman supposed to do?"

She added however that compared to others, the Wallaces were "blessed. If he were working in a sawmill and got paralyzed, where would we be? I'd be out working in a textile factory and he'd be at home. We're better off than many. In this job it's his brain that counts."