

*The*  
**POLITICS**  
*of* **RAGE**

GEORGE WALLACE, THE ORIGINS  
OF THE NEW CONSERVATISM,  
AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF  
AMERICAN POLITICS

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# PREFACE

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MONDAY, JANUARY 14, 1963: Inauguration Day, Montgomery, Alabama. George Corley Wallace had reached the goal he had dreamed about since he stood on the capitol portico in 1935 as a young legislative page. State employees hastily rounded up a handful of electric heaters for the parade review stand to ward off the bitter cold, while half-frozen technicians struggled with television cameras and microphones. In the nearby Montgomery armory, the inaugural ball committee checked the powerful spotlights which would follow the new governor and his wife, Lurleen, as they led the first official dance under a giant brace of flags: the Confederate Stars and Bars and a specially made white banner emblazoned with the slogan Wallace had adopted toward the end of his campaign: "Stand Up for Alabama."

Despite the coldest temperatures in nearly eighty years, huge crowds filled the city for a four-hour parade which snaked up and down the main streets and past the capitol reviewing stand. Only the out-of-town newsmen were tasteless enough to note the absence of the black bands and floats that had been part of the inauguration parade of former Governor James E. (Big Jim) Folsom, Wallace's political mentor. And neither the national nor the local press corps mentioned that blacks—who made up thirty percent of the state's population—had abandoned the streets to a sea of white spectators, many wearing white flowers as a symbol of their new governor's devotion to "Anglo-Saxon" supremacy. Alabama politics in 1963 was still the business of white folks.<sup>1</sup>

For weeks, Wallace had teased reporters with hints about his inaugural speech. His press secretary, Bill Jones, had talked with correspondents for the national media—the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *Newsweek*, and *Time*—as well as with local reporters and stringers for the Associated Press and United Press International. He had made a special pitch to the three major networks in a successful effort to get them to send national correspondents rather than relying upon local feeds. Jones had promised a speech that would present the governor-elect's position in stark and uncompromising terms.

Members of the media were not disappointed.

Whenever Wallace had wanted to make a stir in his campaign for the governorship the previous year, he had turned to his favorite speechwriter, Asa (Ace) Carter, a onetime radio announcer, service station owner, and Ku Klux Klan organizer. "Ace," he would say, "write me something a little fiery."<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the week before the inaugural, Carter—chain-smoking one Lucky Strike after another—hacked away at an old Underwood typewriter as he sat in his cluttered room in the Jeff Davis Hotel. ("God, it was a pigsty," remembered one Wallace aide.) The governor-elect, as well as his advisers John Kohn and Grover Hall, offered suggestions, but some of the most memorable lines came directly from articles Carter had written in the mid-1950s for his race-baiting magazine, the *Southerner*. On the eve of the inauguration the speechwriter personally delivered a final version to Wallace. He proudly pointed a tobacco-stained finger to the middle of the fourth page. "Here's the lines that are gonna catch everybody," Carter said.<sup>3</sup>

The next morning Wallace, looking stiff and awkward in an unfamiliar morning coat, stood before his chilled audience. He began with the usual boilerplate rhetoric associated with inaugural addresses: a "sacred covenant" to avoid stealing and save the taxpayers money; a warning to the "big-wheeling cocktail-party boys . . . that their free whiskey and boat rides are over," promises to increase old-age pensions and to "invest in the future through education."<sup>4</sup>

But five minutes into his speech, Wallace's tone shifted. His voice took on a strident edge, halfway between a snarl and a defiant shout; his words refracted the resentments and rage he had sensed among white Alabamians as he campaigned across the state. He called forth the long, rancorous grievances of white southerners against the Yankee:

*There were no government hand-outs [after the Civil War], no Marshall Plan aid, no coddling to make sure that our people would not suffer; instead the South was set upon by the vulturous carpetbagger and federal troops. . . . There was no money, no food, and no hope of either. But our grandfathers bent their knee only in church and bowed their head only to God.*

The Supreme Court's decisions outlawing segregation and forbidding school prayer, and President Kennedy's use of federal troops at Ole Miss the previous year were only the latest installment in the long tradition of Yankee oppression, now given a new and even more sinister twist as Communists in high places created a "basically ungodly government" which fed and encouraged everything "degenerate and base" in American society. If anyone missed the implications—the naked appeal to racial fear—the new governor

reminded his listeners of the recent massacre of European settlers by African tribesmen. "The Belgian survivors of the Congo cannot present their case to the United Nations . . . nor [can] the citizens of Oxford, Mississippi!"

Through waves of applause, Wallace issued the call to arms.

*Today I have stood, where once Jefferson Davis stood, and took an oath to my people. It is very appropriate then that from this Cradle of the Confederacy, this very Heart of the Great Anglo-Saxon Southland . . . we sound the drum for freedom. . . . In the name of the greatest people that have ever trod this earth, I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny . . . and I say . . . segregation now . . . segregation tomorrow . . . segregation forever.<sup>5</sup>*

Ace Carter had been right: "Segregation now . . . segregation tomorrow . . . segregation forever." That was the line everyone would remember. And it launched George Wallace into one of the most remarkable political careers of the twentieth century. Over the next twenty-five years, the Alabamian captured the governorship three more times—four, counting his wife's stand-in candidacy in 1966. Even more remarkably, his own shrewd political judgment and single-minded lust for power allowed him to step beyond the southern stage that had trapped most Dixie demagogues and to mount four whirlwind campaigns for the presidency, in 1964, 1968, 1972, and 1976.

White fear and hatred had never been the exclusive property of southerners. The mobbing of abolitionists in the Midwest in the 1830s and the New York City draft riots of 1863 were only part of the historical fabric of racial bigotry north of the old Confederacy. And as a trickle, then a flood, of southern blacks migrated and settled uneasily into the ethnic patchwork of the urban North, racial tensions exploded in dozens of race riots between 1916 and 1944. Whites outside the South came to reject the cruder trappings of white supremacy: the obsession with maintaining the racial purity of city buses and lunch counters and the denial of the vote to qualified citizens. But once past the racial boundaries of public accommodations and voting rights, whites North and South shared the same deep and visceral apprehensions. In the tight-knit ethnic and working-class neighborhoods of the inner cities and in the middle-class suburbs that ringed them lay the foundations for a white backlash.

Without using the cruder vocabulary of traditional racism, George Wallace began his national career by skillfully exploiting those fears and hatreds. For the age-old southern cry of "Nigger, nigger," he substituted the political equivalents of apple pie and motherhood: the rights to private property, community control, neighborhood schools, union seniority.

And as the civil rights movement expanded in the 1960s to inspire the

women's rights movement, the antiwar movement, and the politics of sexual liberation, George Wallace adroitly broadened his message. Journalists might greet this growing counterculture with curiosity, even approval. But Wallace knew—instinctively, intuitively—that tens of millions of Americans despised the civil rights agitators, the antiwar demonstrators, the sexual exhibitionists as symbols of a fundamental decline in the traditional cultural compass of God, family, and country.

Barry Goldwater's conservative Republican candidacy in 1964 (and his landslide loss) marked the failure of a twenty-year effort by conservatives to roll back the hated New Deal of Franklin Roosevelt and to build a national majority on the twin shoulders of muscular anticommunism and hostility to the welfare state. George Wallace shared their obsessions with Communists, and he proved to be no slouch at fanning the flames of Americans' traditional uneasiness over taxes and welfare spending. But Goldwater and his generation of right-wing Republicans parroted the comfortable platitudes of the country club locker room. The genius of George Wallace lay in his ability to link traditional conservatism to an earthy language that voiced powerful cultural beliefs and symbols with a much broader appeal to millions of Americans: the sanctity of the traditional family, the centrality of overt religious beliefs, the importance of hard work and self-restraint, the celebration of the autonomy of the local community. On the flickering television screen and in giant political rallies, he evoked images of a nation in crisis, a country in which thugs roamed the streets with impunity, antiwar demonstrators embraced the hated Communist Vietcong, and brazen youth flaunted their taste for "dirty" books and movies. And while America disintegrated, cowardly politicians, bureaucrats, and distant federal judges capitulated to these loathsome forces.

George Wallace was not the first postwar political figure to call for a return to "traditional" American values. But the Alabama governor—more than any other political leader of his generation—was the alchemist of the new social conservatism as he compounded racial fear, anticommunism, cultural nostalgia, and traditional right-wing economics into a movement that laid the foundation for the conservative counterrevolution that reshaped American politics in the 1970s and 1980s.

It is difficult to imagine what might have happened if Wallace had not been gunned down by Arthur Bremer in the spring of 1972. What seems clear is that his near martyrdom softened the hearts of all but his most unforgiving enemies. As the Catholic writer Michael Novak put it: "To all Governor Wallace's other accomplishments was added the symbol of his own blood: by it he was now purified."<sup>6</sup>

When the Alabamian finally left public life in 1986, he was deaf, riddled

with arthritis, and tormented by never-ending pain. "Won't be long before I'm gone," he repeatedly whispered to visitors as he pled for understanding, for forgiveness. "Won't be long a'tall."<sup>7</sup>

John Cashin, a black politician who had run for the governorship against Wallace in 1970, never concealed his hatred for the man he believed had brought such suffering and pain to the black people of his state. "But then I saw him in a wheelchair," said Cashin. "It was like the hatred was just *gone*. How can you hate a man who's been brought so low?"<sup>8</sup>

As Wallace embraced black voters in the 1970s—whether from an authentic change of heart or for self-serving political reasons—and awkwardly apologized and acknowledged his remorse, the stage was set for a remarkable transformation.

For black Alabamians, his journey of supplication evoked the echoes of a thousand altar calls, a thousand hymns of decision, a thousand walks down the aisle:

*There is a fountain filled with blood  
Drawn from Emmanuel's veins  
And sinners plunged beneath that flood  
Lose all their guilty stains*

*The dying thief rejoiced to see  
That fountain in his day;  
And there may I, though vile as he,  
Wash all my sins away. . . .<sup>9</sup>*

Like Saul, said one Selma sharecropper who had marched with Martin Luther King, George Wallace "was struck down and then got up to do good."<sup>10</sup> One by one, the black men and women he had trampled on the way up reached out to grasp his hand as he tumbled downward.

In the flurry of television and news coverage that followed his retirement in 1986, the nation's newspaper of record, the *New York Times*, weighed the delicate balance of historical importance and moral memory. George Wallace had "sniffed out early the changes America came to know by many names: white backlash . . . the silent majority . . . the alienated voters . . . the emerging Republican majority." He had foreseen the tide on which Ronald Reagan sailed into the White House. The *Times's* editorial represented the rough consensus among scholars and journalists about the Alabama governor's place in American politics. There had never been any likelihood that he would be elected President of the United States; he was too raw, too crude, too southern. But he had been one of the great transitional figures: poltergeist and weathervane in the America of the 1960s and 1970s.

The stain of race could not be washed completely away; the *Times* felt obliged to refer to Wallace's distasteful early career as the symbol of segregation. But that was not his final legacy, argued the editorial. "Years ago, he abandoned hateful race-baiting for racial harmony and black support in Alabama," with a precocious insight which offered a "nobler message" for the American people.<sup>11</sup> As one of the nation's newsmagazines had concluded four years earlier, the "tragedy of race was secondary in the drama of George Wallace." In the end, his career offered "forgiveness and redemptive possibilities" for America.<sup>12</sup>

"They rehabilitated Lyndon Johnson and he filibustered against civil rights," Wallace had once complained. "They rehabilitated Sam Ervin, and he said integration laws were unconstitutional. . . . Why won't they rehabilitate me?" His longing was reflected in his authorized biography, which begins and ends with an account of a visit from black civil rights activist and presidential candidate Jesse Jackson in July 1987.<sup>13</sup> As Wallace announced his retirement from politics, he seemed to have his wish.

Or did he?

In the fall of 1993, Wil Haygood, a young black reporter for the *Boston Globe* who had grown up in Birmingham, returned to his native state to write a gentle but probing profile, which captured the pathos of the aging Wallace. As he waited in the former governor's small Montgomery office, he glanced around the walls: "no photos of Bull Connor . . . , no photos of a bombed Birmingham church in which four black girls were killed. No photos of Wallace standing in the schoolhouse door to deny blacks the right to enter."<sup>14</sup> Haygood needed no photographs to jog his memory; neither do we.

As a historian, I have been drawn to the sheer incongruity of the story. How, in the end, could a man like George Wallace, provincial to the core, bereft of any of the traditional bases of national power, capture such a place in a time of change? My editor, Alice Mayhew, has constantly reminded me: this is not simply a biography, but a story of how one man's life illuminates what writer John Egerton so aptly called the "Americanization of Dixie and the Southernization of America."

In the six years since I began research, however, I have discovered that most people ask a quite different question: "Did he change?" Did the man who rose to power and national prominence on the wings of racial hatred in the 1950s and 1960s mean it when he grasped hands with black constituents and asked them to support him, to vote for him, to pray for him? George Wallace's success was possible only because he convinced his listeners that he would not stoop to the polite euphemisms of traditional politicians; he would tell the truth no matter what. Did he really mean it?

To the extent that I have wrestled with his motivation, I have been drawn

to the cynically simple-minded explanation passed on to me when I first began this book.

"If George had parachuted into the Albanian countryside in the spring of 1962," said his former adviser John Kohn, "he would have been head of a collective farm by the fall, a member of the Communist Party by mid-winter, on his way to the district party meeting as a delegate by the following year, and a member of the Comintern in two or three years."

"Hell," he concluded, "George could believe whatever he needed to believe."<sup>15</sup>

But I have come to realize that the refrain, "Did he change," is more than simply a question about sincerity or authenticity. Evangelicals, particularly black evangelicals, were able to forgive George Wallace because the act of redemption sprang from the core faith of an oppressed people. For many of the rest of us, there is the promise: if George Wallace could wipe clean the slate of his past and reach across the divide of race, his is a story with an uplifting ending which offers hope for us all.

It is easy to tilt the scales from condemnation to forgiveness, particularly when we see in our mind's eye a broken and penitent George Wallace. After all, in succumbing to ambition, he was not alone. In the last angry days of segregation, southern politicians—as well as others threatened by the backlash of white racism—often confronted a choice somewhere between principled martyrdom and a surrender to demagoguery. If we refuse to distinguish among these choices, however, we dishonor those men and women who compromised and compromised again, and retreated from what they believed was right—until they reached a point at which they recoiled: "No more. This I will not do."

We can never weigh with certainty the mix of calculation and contrition that have marked the last years of George Wallace's life. "Men's hearts are concealed," the English biographer Boswell wrote to his friend Samuel Johnson. "But their actions are open to scrutiny."