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George Wallace, Segregation Symbol, Dies at 79

By HOWELL RAINES Published: September 14, 1998

Former Gov. George C. Wallace of Alabama, who built his political career on segregation and spent a tormented retirement arguing that he was not a racist in his heart, died last night in Montgomery, Ala. He was 79 and lived in Montgomery.

Mr. Wallace died of respiratory and cardiac arrest at 9:49 P.M., said Dana Beyerly, a spokeswoman for Jackson Hospital in Montgomery. Mr. Wallace had been in declining health since being shot in his 1972 Presidential campaign by a 21-year-old drifter named Arthur Bremer.

Mr. Wallace, a Democrat who was a longtime champion of states' rights, dominated his own state for almost a generation. But his wish was to be remembered as a man who might have been President and whose campaigns for that office in 1968, 1972 and 1976 established political trends that have dominated American politics for the last quarter of the 20th century.

He believed that his underdog campaigns made it possible for two other Southerners, Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton, to be taken seriously as Presidential candidates. He also argued ceaselessly that his theme of middle-class empowerment was borrowed by Richard M. Nixon in 1968 and then grabbed by another Californian, Ronald Reagan, as the spirit of his triumphant populist conservatism.

In interviews later in his life, Mr. Wallace was always less keen to talk about his other major role in Southern history. After winning his first term as Governor in 1962, he became the foil for the huge protests in which the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. destroyed segregation in public accommodations in 1963 and secured voting rights for blacks in 1965.

As a young man, Mr. Wallace came boiling out of the sun-stricken, Rebel-haunted reaches of southeast Alabama to win the governorship on his second try. He became the only Alabamian ever sworn in for four terms as Governor, winning elections in 1962, 1970, 1974 and 1982. He retired at the end of his last term in January 1987.

So great was his sway over Alabama that by the time he had been in office only two years, other candidates literally begged him for permission to put his slogan, "Stand Up for Alabama," on their billboards. Senators John Sparkman and Lister Hill, New Deal veterans who were pillars and the national Democratic Party, feared to contradict him in public when he vowed to plunge the state into unrelenting confrontation with the Federal Government over the integration of schools, buses, restrooms and public places in Alabama.

It was a power built entirely on his promise to Alabama's white voting majority to continue the historic oppression of its disfranchised and largely impoverished black citizens. And it was snapshots of the peak moments of Mr. Wallace's campaign of racial oppression that burned him into the nation's consciousness as the Deep South's most forceful political brawler since Huey Long of Louisiana.

First, on Jan. 14, 1963, there was his inaugural address, written by a known Ku Klux Klansman, Asa Carter. In it, Mr. Wallace promised to protect the state's "Anglo-Saxon people" from "communistic amalgamation" with blacks and ended with the line that would haunt his later efforts to enter the Democratic mainstream: "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever."

Mr. Wallace's next signature moment came on June 11, 1963, when he mounted his "stand in the schoolhouse door" to block two black students, Vivian Malone and James Hood, from enrolling at the University of Alabama. Within days, it was convincingly reported that Mr. Wallace, fearing jail for defying a Federal court order, had privately promised President John F. Kennedy that he would step aside if first allowed to make a defiant speech.

Mr. Wallace's in-state critics denounced him for a "charade" that embarrassed the state. But the cold splash of reality did not dampen his plans to use Alabama as a stepping stone to the national political arena and to the anti-Big-Government speeches by which he obsessively longed to be remembered by history.

Mr. Wallace talked of running for President in 1964 as a neo-Dixiecrat candidate. But he backed off when the Republican nominee, Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, came out against the bill that later became the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Mr. Goldwater's move undercut Mr. Wallace's trademark assertion that "there's not a dime's worth of difference" between the two main parties on race.

After the election, Mr. Wallace regretted his timidity because he thought Mr. Goldwater had run a campaign of comical ineptitude, and when 1968 came around, he invented a party, drafted the eccentric retired Air Force general Curtis LeMay as his running mate, and began draining away the lunch-pail vote from Mr. Nixon.

One reason for his success was that Mr. Wallace always campaigned "with the tense urgency of a squirrel," in the memorable description of one biographer, Marshall Frady. Another reason was that his message worked among disaffected whites everywhere, not just in the South.

Mr. Wallace's political radar had picked up signals that Rust Belt workers and urban white ethnic Americans from Boston to Baltimore felt disgruntled about black students in their neighborhood schools and black competitors in the workplace. He cleaned up his language, but he used an expurgated list of demons -- liberals, Communists, the Eastern press, Federal judges, "pointy-headed intellectuals" -- to tap out in code words an updated version of his fire-hardened message from the Heart of Dixie. It was race and rage.

This blend of color prejudice and economic grievance appealed to enough voters to win him more than 13 percent of the popular vote and five states in the 1968 Presidential election.

Tormented by Thorn In Flesh and Psyche

In the 1972 race, he was running even stronger in the Democratic Presidential primaries. He rattled the party's establishment with a second-place finish in Wisconsin and a rapid ascent in the polls. He also won primaries in Maryland and Michigan on May 16, but got the news in a hospital bed, having been shot and paralyzed on the day before the balloting.

The injury from Mr. Bremer's bullet became a "thorn in my flesh," Mr. Wallace later said, and the truncated campaign became a thorn in his psyche. He died believing that had he not been shot, popular appeal would have forced the Democratic Party to put him on the ticket in 1972 to keep Mr. Nixon from sweeping the Sun Belt and blue-collar enclaves in the Middle West and Northeast.

Mr. Wallace ran again in 1976. From the start, aides noticed that the applause dwindled once crowds saw his shiny wheelchair. Mr. Wallace noticed it, too, and in private he disputed friends who reminded him that Franklin D. Roosevelt had won despite crutches and wheelchair.

"Yeah," Mr. Wallace told his confidant Oscar Adams, "they elected Roosevelt, but they didn't watch him on television every night getting hauled on a plane like he was half-dead."

The death of Mr. Wallace's Presidential dream came just before the Illinois primary, when he dropped out and endorsed a more modern Southerner with no segregationist baggage, Gov. Jimmy Carter of Georgia.

Mr. Wallace wanted to be remembered for his shining moment in 1972 and the Main Street themes he brought to prominence. Dan Carter, a professor of history at Emory University and author of the most detailed Wallace biography, "The Politics of Rage," supports the claim.

"It is difficult to conceive of what American politics of the 1960's, 70's and 80's would be like without George Wallace," Mr. Carter said in a 1994 interview. "I don't think there's a single issue that Nixon and Reagan talk of in terms of social issues that he doesn't get to first."

In this view, Mr. Wallace's Presidential campaigns prefigured, in an especially abrasive way, a large portion of the country's politics of later years. Mr. Wallace was the first major political figure in his generation to exploit the antipathy toward Washington that went on to be a prime force in politics from coast to coast.

He was also surely the first in his generation to galvanize the white, working-class voters later labeled as Reagan Democrats. And he was the first nationally known politician of that generation to put such raucous emphasis on race, crime, welfare and other issues that still loom large, if less crudely, on the political landscape.

After he retired as Governor, Mr. Wallace used interviews to push relentlessly at the theme that he was the real inventor of Reaganism. Starting in 1979, he also undertook a campaign of apology and revisionist explanation intended to erase the word "racist" from his epitaph.

He argued that his early devotion to segregation was based on his reading of the Constitution and the Bible and was misinterpreted as a racist hatred of black people.

"I made a mistake in the sense that I should have clarified my position more," he said in his last term as Governor. "I was never saying anything that reflected upon black people, and I'm very sorry it was taken that way."

That Mr. Wallace died haunted by race is appropriate to his life story -- one of Faulknerian perversity embodying the old themes of guilt and a steady, if clumsy, Snopsian aspiration.

Whetting a Taste For Underdog Politics

George Corley Wallace Jr. was born on Aug. 25, 1919, in Clio, Ala., a cotton town in Barbour County, where mule-drawn wagons were local custom as cars on the unpaved main street. His father was the wastrel son of a beloved local doctor. His mother, Mozelle Smith Wallace, had survived abandonment by her mother and a depressing girlhood in an Episcopal orphanage at Mobile.

Like his father, George Jr. was quick with his fists and drawn to politics. Calling himself the "Barbour Bantam," he won two Golden Gloves titles while in high school.

As a 15-year-old legislative page at the Capitol in Montgomery, he stood on the gold star marking the spot where Jefferson Davis was sworn in as president of the Confederacy and where, by tradition, Alabama governors have taken the oath of office ever since. It was the seminal moment of his youth. Man and boy, George Wallace echoed that spot, so much so that as Governor he ordered state troopers to encircle it so that a visitor, Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, could not put a desecrating Yankee foot atop it.

It was in 1937, on the oak-shaded Tuscaloosa campus of the University of Alabama, that George Wallace began to define what would become politically. He arrived in the same shiny suit he had worn as a page in Montgomery, but Tuscaloosa was a congenial place for poor, ambitious country boys. And by tradition, it was a virtual boot camp for future governors and senators. Young Wallace won election as president of the freshman class.

He never won another student office, but his campaign to beat the fraternity taste for a coalition of independents and out-of-state students whetted his permanent taste for underdog politics.

The other leitmotifs of his Alabama career -- cronismy and betrayal -- emerged at the university. He acquired the hangers-on who staffed his later efforts, and he made an unlikely, but ill-fated friendship with Frank Johnson, a handsome law student from Winston County, a Unionist stronghold in northern Alabama that seceded from Alabama when Alabama left the Union. Mr. Johnson was a Republican, Mr. Wallace an ardent New Deal Democrat. Mr. Johnson joked about someday being a Federal judge and Mr. Wallace about being governor. But the big wheels on campus tended to dismiss Mr. Wallace's ambitions as comical.

For in those days, too, Mr. Wallace impressed people by his frenetic energy and tireless pugnacity rather than by any inherent attractiveness. He waited tables and drove taxis and slid through law school, cramming from borrowed books. Frank Johnson's wife, Ruth, was worried by Mr. Wallace's habit of chasing innocent high school girls, although she thought him more interested in the adoration than sexual conquest. Finally in 1943, at the age of 23, he decided to marry one of his naive admirers, a 16-year-old dime store clerk named Lurleen Burns.

It was wartime and Mrs. Wallace and their baby daughter, Bobbi Joe, born in 1944, followed wherever Mr. Wallace's flight training in the Army Air Forces took him. He shipped to the Mariana Islands as a flight engineer in the spring of 1945, assigned to fly bombing missions over Japan.

The biographer Dan Carter found fellow crew members who remembered Mr. Wallace's barracks lectures defending segregation in Barbour County. "I don't hate them," Mr. Wallace was reported to have said. "The colored are fine in their place. But they're just like children, and it's not something that's going to change. It's written in stone."

Mr. Wallace had been through nine combat missions by the time he was ended. He was discharged with a 10 percent disability for combat-induced "psychoneurosis," diagnosed after he refused orders to fly dangerous training missions when his unit returned to California after the Japanese surrender. Years later, Senator Wayne Morse, Democrat of Oregon, disclosed Mr. Wallace's wartime psychiatric history. Mr. Wallace responded that unlike his liberal attacker, he could prove that he was 90 percent sane.

After the war, Mr. Wallace began climbing up the political ladder with remarkable speed. Using his Barbour County connections, he was named an assistant to Alabama's Attorney General in 1946. The next year he won election to the Alabama Legislature. He allied himself with the racially moderate populist Gov. James E. Folsom and prevailed on Mr. Folsom to appoint him as a trustee of all-black Tuskegee Institute.

As a delegate to the Democratic National Convention in 1948, Mr. Wallace refused to join the walkout by segregationist "Dixiecrats," a move that placed him firmly in the progressive, racially moderate wing of a state Democratic Party that still had "White Supremacy" emblazoned on its ballot emblem.

After this blooding in state and national politics, Mr. Wallace settled in as an elected district judge in his home county, serving from 1953 to 1958 and all the while laying plans to run for governor in 1958.

It was in the preparation of that race and its aftermath that Mr. Wallace committed two betrayals -- one personal and one political -- that blenished his reputation for life, but also gave him a generationlong stranglehold on Alabama politics.

The first came after 1958, when Mr. Wallace's surprisingly strong dark-horse candidacy failed. He had followed the tolerant racial line laid down by Governor Folsom and lost to John Patterson, whose devotion to massive resistance to court-ordered integration won him the following of the Ku Klux Klan. There were only about 5,000 Klan members, Mr. Patterson later recalled, but they helped him paper the state with campaign literature.

Later, Mr. Wallace, in a quotation whose authenticity he long disputed, was recorded as saying that no one "will ever out out-nigger me again."

Race Issue Is Played For All It Is Worth

Even if not literally true, the remark defined the strategy Mr. Wallace would use to ride to power. He started the very next year when his law school friend Frank Johnson, now a Federal judge with a strong civil rights record, ordered Mr. Wallace's court to surrender voter-registration records to the United States Civil Rights Commission. Mr. Wallace denounced Judge Johnson in public as a Federal dictator, but conspired secretly to avoid being jailed on Federal contempt charges by having a local grand jury surrender the records on his behalf.

Judge Johnson ruled that Mr. Wallace had used "devious means," but had nonetheless obeyed the Federal court order. Never one to be embarrassed by the facts, Mr. Wallace labeled Judge Johnson a "carpet-bagging, scalavagging liar" who would mount "a second Sherman's March to the Sea."

Mr. Wallace had lost a friend but gained a nickname, "The Fighting Judge," that would help make him Governor in 1962 as an all-out segregationist with Klan backing. As Judge Johnson later told the Alabama writer Frank Sikora, Mr. Wallace had also established the tactical blueprint of his career: "misleading the people of Alabama for the purpose of pursuing his political career."

Mr. Wallace, of course, did not see it that way. He described himself as devoted to the economic development of his state and to advancing the causes of limited government and middle-class values in national politics. The reality was both uglier and more complicated.

In his four terms as Governor, Mr. Wallace saw an era of unparalleled corruption that operated through a crony system centered on his brother Gerald, a lawyer who died in 1993. With the Governor's approval, Gerald Wallace and his close associate, Oscar Harper, went into business selling the state office supplies, printing, vending machines and building leases. Gerald Wallace and Mr. Harper established an asphalt company with \$1,000 in capital. In a year and half, the infant company garnered more than a million dollars in state contracts.

It is one of the paradoxes of Southern history that Alabama's "Fighting Judge," by trying to revive the antebellum doctrine of states' rights, instead enabled the civil rights movement to reach its high-water mark. The Birmingham demonstrations in 1963 led to the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Two years later the Selma march led to the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

Despite these triumphs, it was a dangerous time for blacks and whites who supported the civil rights movement. During the Wallace years, at least 10 people died in racially motivated killings in Alabama. Governor Wallace and his flamboyantly inept and drug-addled public safety director, Al Lingo, responded mainly by disrupting the Federal investigations into crimes like the bombing that killed four little girls at the 16th Street Baptist Church on Sept. 15, 1963.

Leaders of Alabama's business and educational establishment, always sensitive to the state's image, came to regard Mr. Wallace as an embarrassment.

But George Wallace was a creature of the storm who always had wind beneath his wings, and that wind was the adoration of the white farmers and factory workers and rural courthouse bosses who counted the votes and doled out patronage.

They loved it when Mr. Wallace waved his cigar, flooded his food with ketchup and said that the guy pumping gas at an Alabama crossroads knew more about Communism than the State Department.

When a surprisingly strong anti-Wallace faction in the Legislature refused to alter the state Constitution to allow him a second term, Mr. Wallace put his aging wife Lurleen on the ballot in 1966. She won easily in a heart-rending campaign that demonstrated the scope of his ambition. Only a few weeks before her husband announced her candidacy, Mrs. Wallace had surgery and radiation treatment for the aggressive intestinal cancer that would kill her in 1968.

Political writers predicted that Alabamians would punish Mr. Wallace for his cynical use of a sick woman. But he was only shifting gears. He reclaimed the governorship in 1970 with the most flagrantly racist campaign of his career, warning that his progressive opponent, Albert Brewer, was using a black "block vote" to install a regime of Federal oppression. With Mr. Wallace's clear approval, the Klan circulated fliers falsely accusing the clean-living Mr. Brewer and his wife and daughters of sexual perversions and miscegenation.

It was a historic election for Alabama in two ways. First, Alabama was resisting the epochal progressive wave that swept the region in 1970 and installed New South governors like Jimmy Carter in Georgia and Reubin Askew in Florida. Secondly, Mr. Wallace was openly committing himself to the Presidential race track.

By Mr. Wallace's reckoning, his appeal to blue-collar voters outside the South had "shaken the eyeteeth" of both major parties in 1968. Indeed, President Nixon so feared Mr. Wallace's disruptive potential in 1972 that he supplied \$400,000 to Mr. Wallace's opponent in the 1970 campaign for governor. But Mr. Wallace won with his racist attacks and his invitation to Alabamians to "send them a message" by launching him toward the 1972 Presidential race.

For a few months, Mr. Wallace was the hottest thing going. Gone were the pomaded hair and the bargain-store threads. His stylish new wife, Cornelia Ellis Snively, a niece of former Governor Folsom, decked out Mr. Wallace in modish, wide-lapel suits and taught him to use a blow dryer. Mr. Wallace talked less about race because he could afford to. His attacks on school busing let conservative whites know where he stood.

As Mr. Wallace moved toward victory in the Florida primary, President Nixon himself made an anti-busing speech that was regarded as a tribute to Mr. Wallace's growing appeal. Mr. Wallace finished second behind Senator George McGovern in the Wisconsin primary and second to former Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey in Indiana. Having established himself as a force in the Democratic Party, he was topping the polls in the primary campaigns of Maryland and Michigan.

But on the afternoon of May 15, at an unnecessary campaign rally in Laurel, Md., Mr. Wallace overruled the Secret Service and moved into a crowd for a final round of handshaking. "Hey, George, let me shake hands with you," shouted Arthur Bremer. Frustrated in an heir ambition to kill Mr. Nixon, Mr. Bremer, had been stalking the Governor for weeks. From a range of three feet, the gunman shot Mr. Wallace three times, severing his spine and paralyzing him for life. Mr. Bremer is now in prison in Maryland, serving the 63-year sentence given him in June 1972.

Never-Ending Pain And Marital Trouble

Although his Presidential hopes ended, Mr. Wallace won two more terms as Governor by appealing to white loyalty and catering to the thousands of new black voters. But Mr. Wallace now behaved more like a pensioner than a chief executive. The constant pain from his wound -- "the thorn in my flesh" -- limited his concentration and resulted in a dependence on methadone and other painkillers. He went through a messy divorce from his wife, Cornelia, in 1978. Then she encountered her own problems with substance abuse.

Mr. Wallace's hope to found a dynasty fountered when his son, George Jr., could not progress beyond minor state offices. Mr. Wallace married again to a failed country singer named Lisa Taylor. That marriage, too, generated sour publicity before they divorced in 1987.

He is survived by his sister, Marianne Dauphin Montgomery; four children from his first marriage: his son, of Montgomery; three daughters, Lee Dye of Greenville, Ala., Bobbie Jo Parsons of Birmingham and Peggy Sue Kennedy of Montgomery; a brother, Jack, of Clayton, Ala.; and several grandchildren.

Mr. Wallace won his last election as Governor in 1982, but it was historical revision that occupied his last years. Starting in 1977, he began giving interviews in which he said that political philosophy rather than racism drove his career.

In a typical interview, he said: "The New York Times, the Eastern establishment newspapers never did understand that segregation wasn't about hate. I didn't hate anybody. I don't hate the man who shot me. When I was young, I used to swim and play with blacks all the time. You find more hate in New York, Chicago and Washington, D.C., than in all the Southern states put together."

As part of his rehabilitation effort, Mr. Wallace sought meetings with civil rights figures like the Rev. Ralph D. Abernathy, the Rev. Jesse Jackson and Representative John Lewis, whose beating on "Bible Sunday" at Selma galvanized the voting-rights crusade. Sometimes he even managed to use the magic words "I'm sorry."

After Mr. Wallace left office in 1987, Alabamians continued to support him through a firebrand position at Troy State University. By the time he died, Republicans had taken over the governorship, and Mr. Wallace's main legacy, a statewide system of trade schools, junior colleges, and small four-year institutions, was regarded as a monument to educational waste and redundancy that a poor state could ill afford.

One of his last public appearances was in the Spike Lee documentary "Four Little Girls," which tells the story of the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing. In his interview, Mr. Wallace insists that his best friend was a black orderly. He keeps tugging the obviously uncomfortable orderly into the frame. In public showings, that passage usually drew laughter.

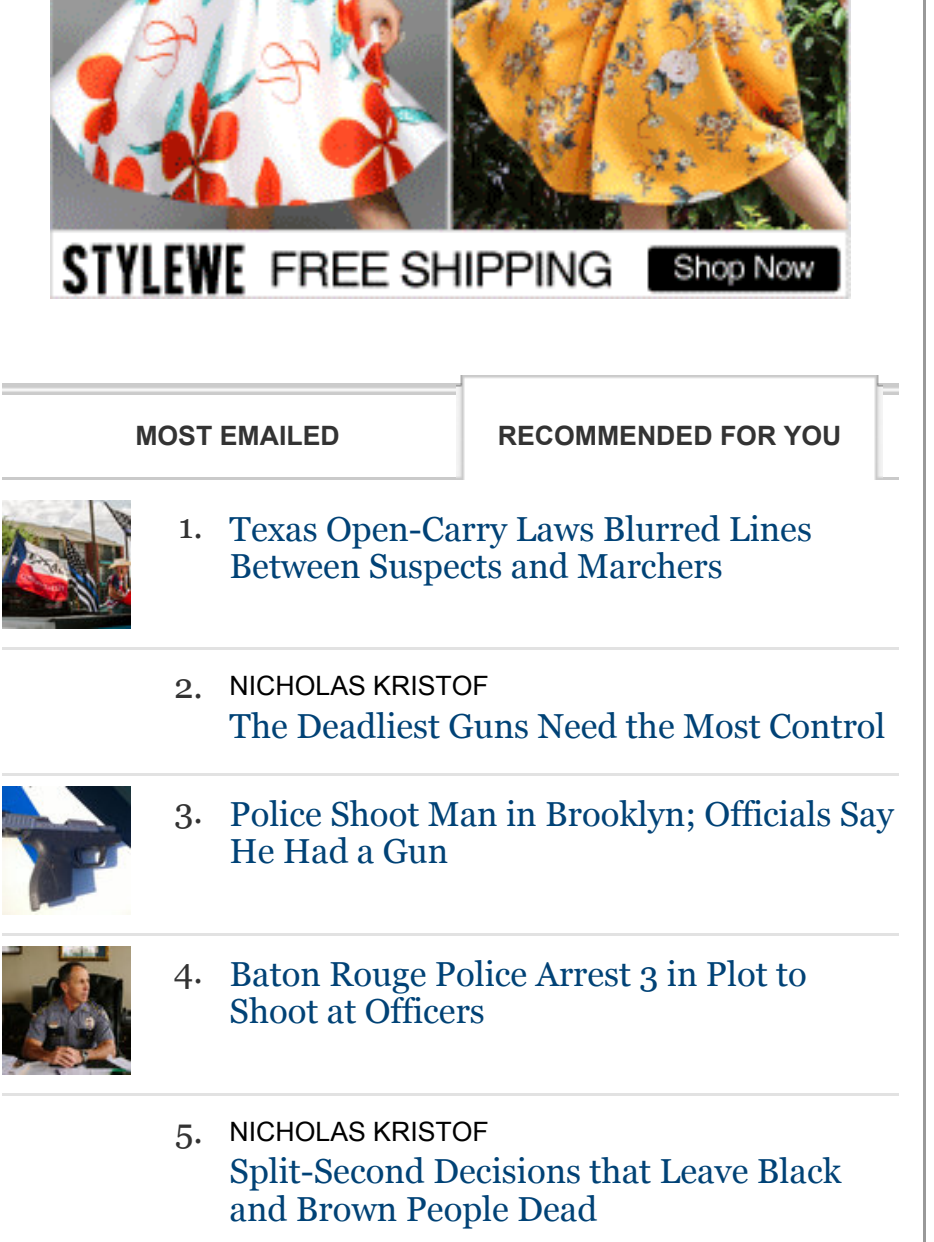
So ended the public career that saw Mr. Wallace move from being the most feared politician of his era to a pitiable relic. It is a career whose moral arc seemed, in retrospect, utterly predictable and utterly a piece of the Faulknerian idea of racism's ineradicable curse. At the height of his powers, George Wallace denied moral responsibility for the violence in his state. And in his Bible-haunted state, many said a terrible judgment had been visited upon him.

Brandt Myers, the liberal editor of The Star newspaper in Anniston, put it this way: "The Governor we Alabamians knew was a man of primal passion; sincere champion of the working class, cynical manipulator of their resentments, a sorcerer summoning the beast in our nature, a man of deep insecurities, tenderness, and finally, humility."

He added, "When he came to my office in 1974 campaigning for governor, I told him: 'George, you always claimed to stand up for the little man, but everybody knows that the real underdog is the black man. We stood up for him. You didn't. Why?' He did not answer. He just looked down at his legs for what seemed a very long time."

Photos: IN THE SCHOOLHOUSE DOOR -- Gov. George C. Wallace stopped a government official who tried to enroll two black students at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. (Associated Press, 1963); IN SHOOTING'S AFTERMATH Cornelia Wallace knelt over her husband after he was shot while campaigning for President in Laurel, Md. The incident left him disabled. (United Press International, 1972)(pg. B13); George C. Wallace (Gary Settle/The New York Times, 1972)(pg. A1)

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