

[Travels With the Right]



WALLACE

by Pete Hamill

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Illustration by Mary Morhoff

IT WAS A HALF HOUR FROM CLOSING TIME at the Brunswick Billiard Parlor, a dark, green-walled place squashed under the flaking portico of the Capital Hotel on West Markham Street in Little Rock, Arkansas. The pool tables were empty green rectangles at the back of the room. In one corner, three men in sport shirts sat at a plastic table. They were drinking Schlitz from bottles while an old Hank Williams tune drifted from the jukebox. At the bar, munching sardines and crackers, a tall, lean man named Jim Lewis stared at himself in the mirror. He was wearing a plastic boater adorned with a Wallace-For-President bumper sticker.

"Sure, I'm for Wallace," he said, washing the sardines down with a beer. "There ain't no one else but Wallace. He's the one, the only one who's really sayin' he's gonna change things in this country."

"You don't care for Humphrey or Nixon?"

"Just a couple of phonies. Couldn't change a gah-dam thing. . . ."

"What kind of change are you looking for?"

"Everythin'," said Jim Lewis, who is a carpenter. "Get these long-haired scum in the colleges straightened out. Stop the gah-dam knee-groes from riotin' an' lootin'. Stop taxin' us to pay people for not workin'. Let our boys win that war in Viet-Nam. Hell, any plain fool knows what we gotta change."

"What makes you think Wallace can change all of that?"

Jim Lewis slowly turned his head and squinted the way John Wayne has squinted in every movie he's ever been in. "George Wallace can do it," he said firmly, "because George Wallace is his own man!"

Around the corner, two blonde hookers walked past the Trailways bus station, waving at cruising automobiles. Humphrey headquarters was deserted and forlorn, and Nixon headquarters looked as if it hadn't opened at all. A green 1967 Chevrolet convertible pulled up at the corner. The two hookers went over and talked to a pair of crewcuts inside. After a minute of bargaining, they climbed in, and the car pulled away down West Markham Street. The car bumper carried three Wallace stickers. As they passed the Marion Hotel, one of the crewcuts saluted the building with a toot of the horn. Upstairs in his sixth-floor suite, George Corley Wallace slept the sleep of the just . . . or at any rate, one of the just who had pulled down a large and holy score. He was assisted in his serenity by the guns of the Secret Service.

[II. ON THE TRAIL]

AT 7:30 IN THE MORNING, the seedy, high-ceilinged lobby of the Marion Hotel was confused and noisy. Luggage spilled onto the sidewalk, while crews from the three networks checked and rechecked their precious cargo of cameras, film and cable; they received no help from the black hotel staff. Secret Service men with discreet blank shades and tiny identification pins in their lapels scrutinized every strange face. The Wallace staff, born in parochial campaigns in Alabama, struggled bravely with the problems of the Big Time. Luggage was lost; some staffers searched for it while others called ahead to Springfield, Missouri, to see what the problems would be at the next stop.

"Gah-dam, Jess," one staff member complained. "I told

you to get this straight fo' you went ta bed lass night."

"How could I, Bill? You know I did my best."

"The best ain't good enough, Jess."

The male staff wore blue college-style blazers with Wallace crests sewn onto the breast pocket. Most were middle-aged, with deep lines of erosion on their faces; a few were younger, decent looking kids from prep schools or law offices who didn't seem to care what the campaign was all about, but who acted happy to be in on it. The Wallace girls wore maroon blazers, no make-up, and a look of faintly disguised unhappiness. One of them passed out a revised schedule; there were no advance copies of speeches, because Wallace delivers the same speech everywhere. As we were about to leave, the elevator doors opened and a girl walked out. She was dressed from head to toe in a shiny silver cowboy suit. She smiled, and her capped teeth and silver blonde hair must have jolted the hangover sacs at the backs of various skulls. She looked like Candy Mosler, the great Texas lady who had beaten a murder rap in Miami a couple of years ago: a face purchased in stores and a body saved from age by tender care. She was wearing a Wallace cowboy hat.

"Who the hell is that?" I asked.

"That," said Bob Greene of Newsday, "is the girl from the Dodge Rebellion."

"The girl from the *what*?"

"You know, the Dodge Rebellion commercial on TV. She comes on and says I want *you* for the Dodge Rebellion, and then she tries to sell you a Dodge Charger. She's doing the same for ol' George."

It was truly beautiful: George Wallace had found his *La Pasionaria*, and she was wearing a silver cowboy suit. A couple of days later I realized that the girl from the Dodge Rebellion (whose name is Janeen Welch) was to be one of the pinnacles of good taste in the campaign.

On the campaign plane, Wallace sat in the front compartment with his advisers, while the press suffered in the rear. Most campaign planes have a kind of boozy familiarity to them; if the trips are long, the stewardesses serve an unlimited supply of drinks and sandwiches; reporters walk the aisles or write advance stories which are taken in hand by a representative from Western Union for filing at the next landing. There is no liquor on the Wallace campaign plane. You can bring your own on board, of course, but if you have neither the time nor foresight to make such an arrangement, you must settle for a can of Dr. Pepper or Coke, and perhaps a box of Crackerjacks.

Occasionally, Wallace walks down the aisle to visit the john or talk with reporters from Alabama. He spends much of his campaign time blasting the press, but he's friendly enough on the plane. "Yawl keep hittin' it," he'll say. "Just get the name right." And he'll stand there smiling, clutching a cigar in a horn holder, a small round-headed man with the air of a dandy about him. He wears his suits cut tight, with highly polished shoes, carefully trimmed fingernails, a handkerchief making a white arrowhead in his breast pocket. He looks a lot like a caricature, with his Vitalis-sleek hair combed straight back.

Black eyebrows dominate his small, Cagney-like features and have a way of making him look Satanic when he lowers the head and looks up from under them. The back of his neck was raw on the day I first met him, as if he had just come from a barbershop, and he reminded me of a good bantamweight named Pappy Gault who came out of South Carolina in the

early '50s. Wallace, of course, was a fairly good amateur prize-fighter in the '30s, and he won several amateur titles (people who remember him say that he lacked skill but had plenty of animal courage).

At 10:35 we touched down in Springfield, Missouri, in the middle of flat, dry country. There were about 150 people waiting at the airport for a glimpse of the candidate; overhead, a small plane flew back and forth trailing a Wallace-For-President banner. The small crowd cheered the girl from the Dodge Rebellion when she came down the ramp, and then they cheered even harder when Wallace emerged.

"Let's go right to the fence," he said, and the Secret Service men flanked him as he walked with small, precise steps over to see some of the people who hope he will be the next President of the United States.

"Sorry we late," he said, shaking hands as he moved. "Sorry we late, real sorry about that. Good to see you. Hope yawl come on downtown with us. Good to see you. How are you, son, good to see yawl. Sorry we late."

The people looked at him in the way that would become so familiar in the days that followed. There were older people with bad teeth and glazed eyes, men with hard, calloused hands, mothers with children in their arms. Some had hand-lettered Wallace-For-President posters; others had bought their emblems (hats, bumper stickers and buttons which are sold, not given away, and bring in about \$7500 a day to the Montgomery headquarters alone). "You're gonna be the next President, George, you really are. . . . We're with you, George . . . give 'em hell, George. . . ." They loved him and wanted him.

Wallace finished at the fence and walked to a waiting Ford. A group of Air National Guardsmen stood in front of a hangar housing dark khaki helicopters. Wallace threw them a snappy military salute, shook hands with the local cops, and climbed in for the trip to Springfield.

THE WALLACE CAR MOVED through flat scrubby country, past scattered billboards advertising farm equipment and into Kearney Street. The Wallace campaign does not try to arrange motorcades; they are too dangerous, they cannot be milked for contributions, and if the crowds aren't large, Wallace could be compared unfavorably with the other candidates. And yet there were small clumps of people waving at him along the way, as he went past the McDonald's hamburger place, the Colonel Sanders Southern Fried Chicken store, past the Homemade Chili Parlor, the Taste-Freez, the Safeway, past all those old white houses with swings on the front porches and the grass out front trimmed neatly, where the people who hate the 20th century continue to exist as if Tom Sawyer still lived up the street.

He stopped on West College Street, in front of Frank's Barbershop, and talked for a while to some of his local campaign managers. The reporters walked through an alley between Heer's Department Store and the Evans Drugstore. There were uniformed men from the Sheriff's Department everywhere, and Secret Service types glommed the crowd. We entered the public square, and there before us, 15,000 strong, cheering and shouting, were the Wallace people.

"Are you for Dixie, yeh yeh, are you for Dixie, oh yeah. . . ."

A country music band with electric guitars was jamming on a flag-bedecked flatbed truck while two singers named Mona and Lisa Taylor, part of Wallace's traveling crew,

shouted into the microphone. Mona and Lisa were wearing red, white and blue dresses and silvered hair, two skinny girls who seemed to be trying to remember all the moves the McGuire sisters made on the Ed Sullivan show years before; dentists and beauty shops in Alabama hadn't helped them much, but the crowd didn't care. They were there to stand up for America.

"I been a Democrat all my life," said Ed Higgins, a florid, heavy-set plumber, "but this last year I begin to wonder if I been making a mistake. We had Roosevelt, we had Truman, we had President Kennedy. Now we got Johnson. And it still hasn't made a darn bit of difference. Nobody respects anybody anymore. These goddam protesters don't respect nobody. They want people just to give them things. They don't want to earn anything. People around the world, they don't respect us anymore either. We been suckers too long and I think this man can stop that and make people respect us again."

High up behind Ed Higgins, a cop with field glasses stood on the roof of the Betty Day clothing store, watching for people whose lack of respect for George Wallace might lead to murder. In one section, fenced in by Wallace supporters, a group from the Black Students Association carried signs reading: "Wallace Is A Racist"; "One Hitler Was Enough"; "Don't Let George Do His Thing To Everybody Else"; "Support Wallace And Help The Black Revolution."

"Look at those animals," said Mary Hearne, a fortyish housewife wearing rimless glasses and a flowered dress. "They always talk about free speech and civil rights, and then they come in here to try to spoil this."

"Are you for Wallace?" she was asked.

"Of course I'm for Wallace. You can't even walk the streets of this country without some black animal robbing or raping you or some of these students with their hair and all causing some kind of trouble. That has to stop."

Such talk was general in this crowd and common to all the crowds Wallace attracted in the next few days. I wanted to find out something about the Wallace people, and discovered, of course, that there was little mystery to them. They were my own people, lower middle-class people who worked with their backs and their hands, who paid dues to a union that was remote to them, people who drove a cab or tended bar one night a week to make ends meet, people who went hunting with the boys on vacations, people who handed their infant children to their wives while they applauded the candidate. Most of them seemed to make about \$125 a week and were struggling to pay off GI loans on their homes. They told you about a world filled with enemies: Walter Cronkite and Huntley and Brinkley; long-haired protesters and Chinese communists; The New York Times, Fidel Castro, Russjans, people with beards, New York, pot smokers, anarchists, pinkos. It's a strange world, filled more with fear than with hate, but containing enough hate to make it dangerous. Most of them say, for example, that they do not hate Negroes; they just wish that Negroes would shut up and go away.

They want change; the America they thought was theirs has become something else in their own lifetime, and they want to go back. Some of them have even been supporters of Robert Kennedy (a phenomenon first noted by Paul Cowan in *The Village Voice*), because they saw him as an agent of change; whatever America is in 1968, they want to change it, and their instincts are true enough to tell them that Humphrey

and Nixon will change nothing. So they have rallied to George Wallace, mainly because he says to them that change is simple. Just change the man at the top and we can all return to a year like 1910, when there were harvests in the fall and feasts in the spring, when kids went swimming in the old swimming hole and played baseball and football and respected God, Flag and Country. Most of all they want to return to a time in America when you lived in the same house all of your life and knew everybody you would ever care to know on the street where you were born. Dismiss these people as racists and bigots if you will, but you would be a bit too glib. A lot of the people attracted to George Wallace are just people who think America has passed them by, leaving them confused and screwed-up and unhappy.

"There's some days when I get up and read the paper and feel like I'm gonna go out of my goddam mind," a farm implement salesman named James Quigg told me in Springfield, Missouri. "When is all of this gonna end?"

I didn't know, and he didn't know, and poor Mrs. Hearne in her flowered dress and rimless glasses standing in the public square didn't know either. Mrs. Hearne just seemed certain that if her candidate were elected President it would all go away.

"This is the greatest country in the world," she was saying. "People used to be happy here. I'm telling you. Maybe in the Depression we didn't have much money, but nobody starved. And we made our own fun. We read books to each other or played Monopoly at night and once a month we all went to a show. Kids today got too much. They don't do anything for themselves. And ever since this civil rights business started people have been unhappy."

She turned from me suddenly, and started jumping clumsily and waving her small red hands in the air. Wallace had climbed to the speaker's stand and the square exploded with a huge, somewhat terrifying roar. Wallace placards bobbed in the air, clenched fists shot out at the sky, the band played "Dixie."

And we were awash in defiance and an oddly touching and pathetic kind of hope.

[III. THE SPEECH]

EVERYWHERE THAT WALLACE WENT The Speech was sure to go. In Little Rock and Milwaukee, in Springfield, Illinois, and Springfield, Missouri, in Cincinnati and Charleston. Only a phrase or two would change, and only the audiences were different. Wallace would stand before a cluster of microphones and cameras, his hands shifting from one pocket to another or stabbing the air for emphasis, and The Speech would come rolling out—cocky, defiant, loaded with innuendo, sarcasm and country humor. The audiences were almost always filled with His People, and they would sing the national anthem and recite the Lord's Prayer and fill the plastic boaters with dollar bills when the Wallace girls came around, and some even signed the automated pledges for larger amounts which would be billed to them long after the candidate had left town, even after his campaign had been settled forever at the ballot boxes. But they were willing to give, because they were true believers and because when that was settled they could hear The Speech.

"I want to talk to yawl about dissent," Wallace says. "I believe in dissent. I myself am a dissenter. I agree with the

right to oppose the war in Viet-Nam and the right of dissent." The audience is quiet, unsure of what's coming. "But I do not agree with your right to advocate and work for a communist victory in Viet-Nam! There's a difference between dissent and treason! [Roar From The Crowd] And any good cabdriver here in Springfield [Milwaukee, Columbia, Charleston] knows that! [Big Roar] So I promise you when I'm elected President and someone waves a Viet Cong flag or raises blood, money or other things for the enemy, we're gonna throw him under a good jail someplace!"

To visitors freshly arrived, his views on Viet-Nam seem surprising; the popular image of Wallace, at least in the east, would lead one to believe that he is a Super-Hawk who is fully prepared to unload the hydrogen bomb on the yellow vermin of Southeast Asia. But he actually says something quite different.

"Now about Viet-Nam," he says, "I don't think we should have gone in there alone in the first place. We should have gone to our Western European allies and the noncommunist nations of Southeast Asia, and if we decided to go in there at all, we should have told them we would not carry the military and economic burden alone. That they would have to share equally, and if they were still not interested, I would cut off every dime of foreign aid and make them pay back every cent they owe us datin' back to World War One. [Big Applause] So I would go to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and I would ask them, 'Can we win this war with conventional weapons?' And if they said yes, I would make full use of this country's conventional weapons to quickly end this war and bring our boys home." This always brings a roar from the crowd. Wallace never says what he would do if the Joint Chiefs told him the war was not winnable with conventional weapons. Some of his aides say that he would pull out "and the hell with it."

A lot of what he says on other issues is reasonably mild. Even on law and order (or as he says it, "Lawn Awduh"): "The other two candidates—before the conventions I used to say they wasn't a dime' worth a difference between 'em, especially on Lawn Awduh. Now I say they's not a dime' worth a difference between them and me . . . and I'm the original!" Wallace is against increased welfare spending and poverty programs which he feels are essentially used to bribe slum dwellers. But he is also against creating a national police force. "I said facetiously that we oughta turn the country over to the police for two years," he will say. "Well, you all know what I mean. I mean that we should give the police and firemen just two years of being able to enforce the law, without the Supreme Court standin' on their necks, and we could straighten this country out. We don't need new laws. All y'have to do is enforce the laws you got and if they [Read Blacks] don't obey them then throw them under a good jail someplace." This always brings a roar, and he follows it this way: "You know, if you were to be mugged or beaten or molested on the way home from heah tonight, the person that did it to you would be free before you got to the hospital. [Laughter] And on Monday they'd be charging some policeman with a crime!"

Wallace reserves his most withering scorn for those members of the federal bureaucracy who are charged with enforcing federal guidelines on desegregation, open housing and equal opportunities. These are the guideline writers, a contemptuous breed of Americans who are only slightly worse than their allies in perfidy, the pointed heads Who Can't Park A Bicycle Straight.

These people have clogged the country's laws with so much bureaucratic verbiage that "the anarchists and seditionists" have been running amok on the streets of America.

"Ramsey Clark doesn't have enough time to weed out the anarchists and the seditionists," Wallace says, "because he's too busy running around the country enforcing these guidelines. They got guidelines that tell you when to get up in the mornin' and when to go to bed at night. [Laughter] We're stranglin' on guidelines. And you know who writes the guidelines? Some pointy-head who can't park a bicycle straight. They all come from the multimillion-dollar tax-exempt foundations. I'm talkin' about Rockefeller, Ford, Carnegie and Mellon Foundations who are making fortunes on tax loopholes, while the little man is bangin' his head against the wall tryin' to pay his taxes. When I'm elected President, we're gonna close those loopholes and we're gonna ask the Congress to raise the individual tax exemption from \$600 to \$1000." This brings a big round of applause, especially from the tired inhabitants of the not-very-posh suburbs who might literally be going crazy trying to pay taxes. Wallace follows up with the fate awaiting the guideline writers under the Wallace Administration:

"You know, these guideline writers go around the country with their briefcases filled with guidelines havin' themselves a good ol' time. But when I'm elected President, I'm gonna recall all them guideline writers and take their briefcases and throw them in the Potomac! [Big Roar of Laughter and Applause] And then I'm going to send them all out to private industry and have them do some honest work for a change!"

That's pretty much it. On the surface, at least, Wallace is just another descendant of the old Southern populist tradition: anti-big government, anti-establishment. It is a position that has always had its touch of paranoia, and in Wallace's case the paranoia comes out in deep suspicion about the press (especially the Washington Post, The New York Times, and the Baltimore Sun) and a severe case of anti-intellectualism. But this should not be very surprising; at this point in 1968, George Wallace probably expresses the deepest sentiments of the majority of Americans a hell of a lot more than does Eugene McCarthy, or for that matter, Humphrey and Nixon. Wallace and the black and radical militants also share some common ground: local control of schools and institutions, a desire to radically change America, a violent distrust of the power structure and the establishment. In this year's election, the only one of the three major candidates who is a true radical is George Wallace. "There's more of us," he tells every audience, "than there are of them." And, of course he's right.

The only problem, of course, is that the masses, those cabdrivers, beauticians, steelworkers, ironworkers and construction men so beautifully romanticized by generations of dreamy socialists, are really an ugly bunch of people. If the campaign of George Wallace has its ugly and racist aspects, it is because George Wallace is the creation of the people.

[IV. ENVOI]

THERE WAS A NIGHT IN MILWAUKEE when the good white lower middle-class burghers came out by the thousands to see ol' George at the auditorium. They came as if it were a church social: well-scrubbed, smelling of underarm spray, the girls wearing their skirts longer than in

any other town in America. There were children and old people among them, but there were also a lot of the urban young. These were not the kids who worked for Kennedy and McCarthy, and they certainly weren't the kind of kids who become hippies. They were street kids, tough street kids, who drink beer every Friday and Saturday nights and get their muscles off in lieu of their rocks by beating each other senseless on the sidewalks or in the cafeterias when the saloons close. They were carrying Confederate flags and Wallace hats, and if you are given to writing sonnets about how youth will save us all, I wish you had seen them there that night.

Just before Wallace arrived, while the band was playing "Your Cheatin' Heart," a group of Father James Groppi's NAACP commandos and their followers came into the hall. The place shook with boos and jeers.

"Out, you black bastards, out," some of the finer young Wallace men shouted. A few white girls from Marquette University were with the commandos and the Wallace men yelled, "Can't you get any white cock, baby? Those boogies must do you real fine." About ten of the commando girls started dancing on chairs, while the rest stomped the wooden floors and clapped their hands, and one beery Wallace kid started slamming his folding chair, groaning: "Niggers! These goddam niggers!" He looked like he would cry.

The MC asked everybody to stand up, and they all started singing the national anthem. The commandos kept clapping. Then the MC called for the Lord's Prayer before the pitch for funds, but the commandos stayed on the attack.

"Oh Jesus, those black bastards," one of the young Wallace men said. "They don't even have no respect for God."

Still it went on, and you hoped that Wallace would soften The Speech, that he wouldn't talk much about Lawn Awduh or running over an anarchist with your car; you thought, if he did that, if he eased off, then there might be some secret place in his character where responsibility still lived. If he made The Speech intact, there could be dead people in the auditorium before the evening was over.

But Wallace was implacable.

". . . I tell you that when I'm elected President, and some anarchist lies down in front of my car . . . it'll be the last car he'll ever lie down in front of. . . ." The place roared. The young Wallace thugs started moving towards the commandos and down from the side mezzanines, and then suddenly it was over. Father Groppi led his group out, calmly and orderly. "We made our point," he said. "We wanted to make the point that everyone in America doesn't buy Wallace's racist garbage. It was a useful evening."

And as Groppi and his people marched out, the audience stood and booed and cursed and yelled about niggers and tramps and other things. You wished that Groppi was right about America, but after all we've gone through these past few years it is more likely that the people shouting filth and abuse were the real America. Ladies with flowered dresses, confused salesmen, men eating sardines and crackers late at night in bad saloons: all of them lusting for some terrible vengeance, some bloody catharsis that would make everything the way they think it once was in this country. George Wallace is not the cause of the disease; he is only a symptom. And before this year is out, we might discover just how much company we have in the cages of the damned.

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by Peter Collier

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