

The Democratic Father of Modern Republicanism

George Wallace: Racism, repentance, and the roots of scapegoating "big government"

BY TAYLOR BRANCH

The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics

Dan T. Carter, *Simon and Schuster, \$30*

George Wallace is the most prophetic embarrassment in American political history. He is his detective Mark Fuhrman raised to colossal stature. Suppose, if you can, that the snarling tribal enforcer from the O.J. Simpson trial were to capitalize miraculously on the crudest self-indictments of his own mouth, somehow recovering enough of his blow-dried professionalism to get elected governor of Idaho four or five times. Suppose further that Governor Fuhrman quickly eclipsed Ross Perot, Jesse Jackson, and Colin Powell to become the nation's leading maverick force and along the way tore up partisan alignments that had stabilized American politics for more than a century. Then, Fuhrman would become a blinding legend, up there in Wallace country.

In 1963, the year of his debut as the new governor of Alabama, George Wallace appeared to guarantee himself a contemptible obscurity with three decisive acts. By his "Segregation forever!" inaugural address in January, he proved himself flat wrong on the seminal question of his time. In June, by "standing in the schoolhouse door" to block the enrollment of the first two black students at the last legally segregated state university, Wallace got himself shoved aside as a loser by federalized units of his own National Guard. In September, by ex-

cusing and belittling a crime of terror so pure that it galvanized a shocked nation—the bombing death during church hours of four black girls dressed in Sunday-school white—Wallace stamped himself as the Klanish symbol of unspeakable hate.

Thus spectacularly revealed as backward, ineffectual, and genocidally cruel—some of his later supporters actually wore "I Like Eich" buttons in tribute to executed Nazi war criminal Adolf Eichmann—Wallace promptly ran for president in 1964. Northern voters flocked to his shoestring campaign in numbers that amazed Wallace himself. In many respects, Wallace dominated the politics of the next two national elections, but respectable observers ever since have turned away from him as a haunting unmentionable. Brushing by what he called "a Southern populist of the meanest streak," Theodore White all but excluded Wallace from his book of reflections on postwar electoral politics.

Last year, in the first comprehensive biography, *George Wallace: American Populist*, former *Newsweek* correspondent Stephen Leshner interpreted Wallace as the harbinger of today's not-always-pretty national populist sentiments. Now comes Emory University historian Dan T. Carter with a second biography. A pleasure to read and an excellent, sweeping piece of work, *The Politics of Rage* is less forgiving of Wallace but no less cer-

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tain that there is a profound lesson hidden in his career. Meanwhile, the old governor himself hangs on to life in retirement—crippled, incoherent, and repentant, apologizing tearfully to anyone ever damaged by his cries of “nigger.” He is abandoned in the flesh even as writers ponder at last what it means that the zeitgeist is crawling to his door.

George Wallace was colorful on all sides, whether nasty, picaresque, evil, or downright funny, and his life brims with good stories for anyone who gets past the initial discomfort of race. From Carter’s account we learn that in 1963, Wallace brought to his first appearance at Harvard a strangely bifocal speech, half a thoughtful treatise on *The Federalist Papers* and half a diatribe written by a Klan leader named Ace, author of the “Segregation forever!” address. Having introduced Ace by the exploits of his Klavern, which included one infamous ritual castration of a black man plucked randomly off the street, Carter lets readers grow accustomed to Ace’s dual role over the years as Wallace’s chief speechwriter. In public, Wallace used Ace’s words to charm many of the Harvard students with his sporting treatment of hecklers. In private, Ace planned Wallace’s 1968 presidential campaign at a country club convention in Alabama, together with an assortment of tycoons, Holocaust-deniers, super-patriots, and the ideological ancestors of today’s religious right from across the nation.

Carter has a fine eye for archival detail, and he does not overlook salient issues from the complexities of state government. In one of my favorite nuggets, he explains in passing how Wallace used Alabama’s self-insurance system. For decades, the state had found it cheaper to self-insure than to buy commercial insurance against fires and other hazards to public buildings, especially rural schools. However, to quiet accusations of socialistic risk management, Alabama agreed to forfeit most of these market savings by making estimated payments to insurance companies in lieu of “lost” premiums. Wallace shrewdly turned this corporate kitty into a political one by selectively channeling payments to friendly companies, which often turned out to be the ones that shared retainers with politicians Wallace wanted to control. Rounded out and polished, this practice amounted to legal payola from the state treasury.

This story is one of countless tangents from the career of another obsessive politician who was lit

up on stage but hollow everywhere else, using up three wives. The life of Wallace is absorbing because both Leshner and Carter claim for him an overarching legacy that applies outside Alabama and down through our time. This is the central question: how to define his influence. “If he did not create the conservative groundswell that transformed American politics in the eighties,” writes Carter, “he anticipated many of its themes.” As indicated by his pastiche of subtitles, Carter approximates a thesis from several different angles but does not state one baldly. He associates Wallace with a “new” conservatism that is reckless by temperament and hostile to authority. Wallace’s “attacks on the federal government have become the gospel of modern conservatism,” Carter incisively declares, but he does not spell out whether racial hatred has transformed a general theory of government, or vice versa.

On race, both Leshner and Carter gravitate to the dilemma of how much to forgive Wallace in his old age. Has he truly changed? Did he really mean all those horrible segregationist deeds, or was hatred merely the edge of an ambition that is being validated now by history? In politics, Carter senses the powerful, paradoxical effects of Wallace the diehard Democrat on Republican analysts such as Kevin Phillips. “In a recommendation of breath-taking cynicism,” writes Carter, “Phillips urged his party [in 1969] to work vigorously to maintain and expand black voting rights in the South, not as a moral issue, but because it would hasten the transfer of whites—North and South—to the Republican Party.”

In my own research, which has brushed over Wallace in his early years as governor, I have come across one strikingly succinct formulation of his original secret, written in 1964 by an awestruck Alabama reporter struggling to explain the success of Wallace’s first speeches outside the South: “He gave every hearer a chance to transmute a latent hostility toward the Negro into a hostility toward big government. The technique was effective.” All these phrases carried understated meaning—“every hearer,” “latent hostility,” “big government,” “technique.” The reporter recognized that Wallace’s power began in rhetorical innovation. Without harping on racial epithets, as everyone expected him to do, Wallace talked all around race by touching on the related fears of domination, coining new expressions such as “forced busing” and

"big government," which were anything but common clichés 30 years ago.

Writing about those early speeches, Leshner picks out many creations that have gained resonance, including Wallace's scornful references to "tax, tax, spend, spend" politicians, the "ultra-liberal controlled media," and of course, the "pointy-headed bureaucrats" from "central government" in Washington, who "can't even park their bicycles straight." Carter, for his part, opens a chapter with a quotation from Martin Luther King, Jr. that (I am sorry to say) had escaped me entirely. In 1963, across huge gaps of philosophy and pain, King appraised his nemesis as an "artful" fellow orator of fearful potential. "He just has four speeches," said King "but he works on them and hones them, so that they are little, minor classics."

Two main obstacles block the understanding of Wallace as a new moon above the national tides, pioneering a kind of velvet racialism in political rhetoric. First is the lingering image of his inflammatory lynch talk. Subtlety of words is not the first characteristic that jumps to mind for a governor who once vowed not to be "out-niggered" on the campaign stump. For a historian of Carter's depth, moreover, there is an abiding awareness that Wallace performed treacherous cosmetic surgery just above exposed nerves and arteries of racial politics.

A reminder of bloodcurdling reality ruined the second Wallace campaign for president in 1968. When he tried to choose a moderate for his running mate as a third-party candidate, supporters revolted against ex-governor of Kentucky "Happy" Chandler, branding him an "out-and-out integrationist," who, as baseball commissioner, had permitted Jackie Robinson to enter the major leagues. Shaken, Wallace substituted General Curtis LeMay at the last minute, but no amount of back-

room coaching could keep the champion of strategic air power from waxing fond over nuclear weapons. "For once in his life, George Wallace was speechless," writes Carter in an entertaining account of the ruinous press conference at which LeMay volunteered that "the land crabs are a little bit hot" 10 years after bomb tests on Bikini Atoll.

The cleansing elevation above racial politics did not always go smoothly for Wallace, who lapsed again after being humiliated back home in a 1970 primary. His brother Gerald prescribed a fallback strategy for the runoff campaign against the incumbent governor—"We'll just throw the niggers around his neck"—and Wallace himself denounced Governor Albert Brewer as a "tool of black militants," in "spotted alliance" with dogooders and liberal reporters. Wallace doctored photographs to show Brewer's daughters with black boyfriends, and hit the airwaves with the following announcement: "Suppose your wife is driving home at 11 o'clock at night. She is stopped by a highway patrolman. He turns out to be black. Think about it.... Elect George C. Wallace." He squeezed out an ugly victory at some cost to his national dignity.

A second factor obscures the trajectory of Wallace's influence: He was the father of a new, white man's anti-government, anti-Washington Republican Party even though he still hated Republicans. From redneck to Republican and from raw to Reagan, he was a transitional figure for the partisan structure as well as the texture of American politics. To appreciate these sweeping changes, we must remember that when Wallace first ran for president in 1964, there were no Southern Republicans in the House of Representatives. Not one. Of 172 Republicans in the House, 138 supported the landmark civil rights bill that outlawed segregation that year. The GOP was still the Party of

Wallace Redux

George Wallace deeply regretted his failure to enter the California primary in 1964. Had he anticipated the thunderous reception for him there, he might have followed Strom Thurmond into the Republican Party during the sixties, as Richard Nixon had feared.

"California will not submit its destiny to faceless federal bureaucrats or even congressional barons!" the governor roared. "We declare to Washington that California is a proud and sovereign state, not a colony

of the federal government."

Surprise. Although, this language is vintage George Wallace from 1964 these are actually the biggest applause lines from Governor Pete Wilson's inaugural address early this year. Wilson has since entered GOP presidential primaries on a platform aimed against the most powerless elements of society—immigrants and minority applicants for affirmative action.

-T.B.

Lincoln, but the first seven Southern Republicans were elected to the House that year, five of them Wallace supporters from Alabama. Now, 30 years later, white Southern candidates are completing their evacuation of the Democratic Party. The congressional delegation from Georgia consists of eight white Republicans and three black Democrats—a lineup scarcely imaginable in the sixties.

George Wallace laid the groundwork for the partisan revolution by campaigning against *both* national parties as agents of federal tyranny. Republicans and Democrats were identical partners—“Tweedledum and Tweedledee,” he called them—“seizing control” of local schools, businesses, and courts to carry out the integrationist agenda. Oddly enough, Wallace’s scathing attacks mirrored the rhetoric of Malcolm X, who saw integration as a sham and not a “dime’s worth” of difference between Democrats and Republicans. Wallace and Malcolm X ridiculed white liberals in almost identical language, gleefully describing the bulging private schools and panic bridges thrown up to new suburbs. By skewering the stiff compromise between the two parties, Wallace helped make the word “liberal” a general epithet.

Carter is at his best in describing the contest between Wallace and Richard Nixon. After winning the White House in 1968, Nixon was consumed by political threats to his reelection. But not from Democrats. “My concern was about Wallace,” he wrote privately. Unlike the rest of the world, which tried to dismiss Wallace after his second national failure, Nixon focused on the growing menace of a third-party candidate who, in spite of the LeMay fiasco, had won 58 electoral votes and carried only one less state than GOP nominee Barry Goldwater in 1964. The slightest improvement in the Wallace vote in 1968 would have elected Hubert Humphrey.

Therefore, Nixon set out to destroy or seduce Wallace before 1972. Carter’s account of the skullduggery is captivating and newsworthy; it reads like a real-life preview of Watergate—which it was. Nixon sent a clandestine \$400,000 to finance Albert Brewer, Wallace’s opponent in 1970. When Wallace won anyway, Nixon wrote “Need to Handle Wallace” at the top of his strategy pad for 1972. His minions spent all of 1971 trying to indict Wallace for something. In a transparent settlement, the Justice Department publicly dropped its cor-

ruption investigation of brother Gerald Wallace one day before Governor Wallace announced that he would run for president as a Democrat this time, not as an independent. Much to Nixon’s relief, Wallace carved up Democrats instead of him. His “non-racial” attacks on school busing paralyzed presidential rivals “like so many deer frozen by the bright lights of an oncoming car,” says Carter. In the early Florida primary, Wallace placed far ahead of Humphrey, McGovern, Muskie, and eight other Democrats. He rolled up victories until May, winning Michigan and Maryland in the same week that Wallace himself was paralyzed by the bullets of a would-be assassin.

Nixon remained terrified of Wallace even as a paraplegic. His “greatest nightmare,” writes Carter, was that Wallace would miss the Democratic primaries but recover enough to run as an independent again in the general election. Accordingly, the White House provided Wallace with comfort money in the hospital, and Nixon sent both Billy Graham and John Connolly to beg Wallace to stay out of the race. They succeeded. Two years later, on his own political deathbed, Nixon himself begged Wallace to speak up against impeachment. “Well, Al, there goes the presidency,” he sighed to Al Haig when Wallace refused.

Nixon knew that Wallace voters were becoming natural Republicans. With revenue sharing—his version of today’s block grants—Nixon moved from Lincoln Republicanism toward a posture compatible with Wallace’s version of states’ rights. From his sickbed, Wallace watched the white South follow the path he had marked toward an anti-government ideology that the Republican party adopted. For more than a century, his Democrats had straddled a core identity that upheld both the common people and the segregated South. Now segregation was being lost, formally, and at the same time Wallace’s racial alchemy was eating away at the party’s distinctive bond with ordinary citizens. Today Wallace’s legacy is clear. He enticed the children of FDR Democrats to think of government not as savior, refuge, compact of fellow citizens—or even as their problem—but as the enemy. As an old populist Democrat who still loves to disdain bigshots for “sipping their martinis with their little fingers up in the air,” Wallace nurses some misgivings. Carter quotes his brooding farewell from office: “I hope the rich and

Irving Kristol's Life— and Mine

*Beyond a dislike for mushy liberalism, our
experiences have taken us in different directions*

BY CHARLES PETERS

Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of An Idea

Irving Kristol, *The Free Press*, \$25

Although this is mostly a collection of previously published essays, it is notable because of the new “autobiographical memoir” that begins the book. I was especially interested in the memoir because Kristol is trying to use a life story to explain how ideas grow out of experience. I had made a similar attempt in my autobiography, *Tilting at Windmills*. Kristol and I have much else in common. We have both been accused of being “godfathers” of related movements: neoconservatism in his case, neoliberalism in mine. We have both founded publications that have as one of their purposes exposing the mushiness in liberal thought—his, *The Public Interest*, did it with essays and social science research; mine, *The Washington Monthly*, with journalism. Both of us have been called to this mission in considerable part by the influence of my teacher and his friend, Lionel Trilling. Both of us had contempt for the kind of liberal who thought it McCarthyite to suggest that Stalinism was evil or even to call a communist a communist. (That in expressing this contempt Kristol sometimes betrayed too little respect for the First Amendment was pointed out in cogent letters to *Commentary* from Alan Westin and Joseph Rauh in response to Kristol’s famous—or infamous to many on the left—“Civil Liberties 1952—A Study in Confusion.”)

We each had childhood experiences with reli-

gion that, in Kristol’s words, which are equally applicable to me, “made it impossible for me to become anti-religious even though my subsequent intellectual commitment kept trying to steer me in that direction.” Like so many other young people in the thirties and forties, we had adolescent flirtations with socialism. We also went through a period of intellectual snobbery that was characterized in both our cases by an avoidance of any movie that wasn’t foreign. In fact, we almost certainly went to the same movie theater, the Thalia off Broadway on 95th Street. In the late forties, Kristol lived in an apartment above the 96th and Broadway Bickford’s where I often had coffee because I lived a block or two away and they kept the price at a nickel long after most other restaurants had raised it.

But there our similarities end and the differences begin. Irving Kristol has come to stand for many things I think are wrong in today’s politics. The contrast in our life experiences—and in the way we remember and think about those experiences—helps explain the way our ideas differ today. “Bohemia,” Kristol writes of himself and his young wife, Bea, “had no attractions for us.” It had immense allure for me. I devoted much of my energy to the pursuit of young women, and spent a lot of evenings in the jazz clubs of 52nd Street and in the neighborhood bars around Broadway and 96th—my devotion to these establishments is