

The First Angry White Man

THE POLITICS OF RAGE:

*George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism,
and the Transformation of American Politics.*

By Dan T. Carter. Simon & Schuster. 572 pp. \$30

by Robert Dallek

In time (to paraphrase Emerson), every scoundrel becomes a hero—or at least a sympathetic figure. George Wallace, five-term governor of Alabama and four-time presidential candidate, is a case in point. As Carter, a professor of history at Emory University, admits in this fine biography, Wallace has gained historical redemption of sorts. Thirty years after he preached “Segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation forever!”, Wallace has won grudging respect as the prophet of the antigovernment, antiliberal politics of the 1980s and ’90s.

Wallace’s redemption also rests on the assassination attempt that occurred during his 1972 presidential campaign. By leaving him permanently disabled—indeed, consigned to a life of unrelenting misery—this blow encouraged public forgiveness of the mean-spirited words and actions that had animated his political career.

Wallace aided the cause by begging the pardon of those he had once attacked: African Americans and white southern moderates who had urged accommodation to the changes wrought by the civil rights movement. Many of these people have been willing to forgive, if not entirely forget. Others, such as Frank Johnson, a white federal district judge who attempted to enforce the law, cannot put aside the personal injuries he and his family suffered at the hands of Wallace, an old college friend. “I sent him a message,” Johnson told Carter, “that if he wanted forgiveness, he’d have to get it from the Lord.”

About the broader impact of Wallace on American politics, Carter leaves no doubt that this was a man who “recognized the political capital to be made in a society shaken by social upheaval and economic uncertainty.” The key question, in evaluat-



ing Wallace's political legacy, is whether the concerns and passions he exploited were in any way legitimate.

Foremost among these concerns, of course, is race. In this crucial area, Carter is unforgiving: "As the conservative revolution reached high tide, it was no accident that the groups singled out for relentless abuse and condemnation were welfare mothers and aliens, groups that are both powerless and, by virtue of color and nationality, outsiders. The politics of rage that George Wallace had made his own had moved to center stage."

Leaving aside the fact that "aliens," or immigrants, have only recently come under conservative attack, this is a difficult claim to refute. As Carter makes clear, Wallace was an up-by-the-bootstraps character whose driving political ambition was unimpeded by legal and moral principle, never mind the suffering of the disadvantaged.

Starting out as a moderate who refused to play the race card, Wallace suffered a crushing defeat in 1958—after which he embarked upon a hugely successful political career replete with racial abuse. His vow to resist "illegal" federal court orders by "standing in the schoolhouse door" won him election to the Alabama State House in 1962. Describing this dramatic change of course, he told a reporter: "I started off talking about schools and highways and prisons and taxes—and I couldn't make them listen. Then I began talking about niggers—and they stomped the floor."

For the bloodshed of the civil rights era, Wallace refused to blame his fellow segregationists. On the contrary, he blamed the federal government, which he reviled for trampling on local rights. But that doesn't make Wallace an apostle of nonviolence. On the contrary, Carter quotes his 1963 remark that "what this country needs is a few first-class funerals, and some political funerals, too." Conceding that this "off-hand comment was made in the heat of rhetorical combat," Carter nonetheless sees it as "a horrific monument to George Wallace's insensitivity to the implications of his words and deeds."

As the 1960s wore on, Wallace ham-

mered away on other, ostensibly nonracial themes: notably, traditional values and the indifference of the federal government to the concerns of ordinary Americans—the group Richard Nixon called "the Silent Majority." Today, when these themes are routinely sounded across the political spectrum, their relationship to the race issue remains cloudy.

Does this biography clear up the clouds? Not really. In some passages, such as the one quoted earlier, Carter seems to regard "the new conservatism" as nothing more than an elaborately coded white backlash. Yet elsewhere he grants more legitimacy to another dimension of Wallace's legacy: "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."

In 1965, when Wallace met with Lyndon Johnson at the White House to discuss voting rights for blacks, LBJ asked him: "What do you want left after you when you die? Do you want a . . . marble monument that reads, 'George Wallace—He Built'? . . . Or do you want a little piece of scrawny pine board lying across that harsh, caliche soil, that reads, 'George Wallace—He Hated'?"

For the 24 years of his active political career, Wallace chose the latter. Whatever his regrets at having chosen so unwisely, total absolution seems unlikely. Carter's biography will stand as the principal Wallace study for a long time: it will provide a forceful reminder of Wallace's political opportunism and disservice not only to African Americans struggling to attain equality in the 1960s but to an entire nation all too often roiled by racial divisions.

>ROBERT DALLEK is professor of history at the University of California at Los Angeles and the author of several books, including *Hail to the Chief: The Making and Unmaking of American Presidents*, to be published by Hyperion in September 1996.