Shooting Throws 1972

Issue of Violence Again on Center Stage

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Once again a gunman's bullet has disrupted the American political process and thrown a critical presidential campaign into disarray.

Like the earlier shots that felled the Kennedys and Martin Luther King Jr., the bullets that struck George Corley Wallace of Alabama yesterday in Maryland have irrevocably altered the politics of this presidential year.

His shooting will overshadow the actions of every other candidate from now until the November election. And once again it forces forward onto the center stage the most disturbing of all American issues—violence.

After more than a decade of prominence on the American scene, George Wallace yesterday stood on the verge of gaining one of his greatest political triumphs....

He was favored to win presidential primaries in both Maryland and Michigan today in states that have gone Democratic in the last three presidential elections.

Now no one will ever know to what extent the ballots to be cast are affected by this new American tragedy.

If Wallace survives, as did Theodore Roosevelt when he was shot during a campaign speech in 1912, he is likely to receive an outpouring of sympathy from the voters.

His death would leave his followers leaderless and have a profound impact on the kinds of support given to every other candidate.

Beyond the specific, if unmeasurable, effects of the Wallace shooting, this latest assassination attempt of a major American figure throws the entire political process into serious fragmentation.

The immediate reaction of men of all parties underscored that sense of a national tragedy, compounded because it has happened so often in the recent political past.

When word of the shooting reached George McGovern, campaigning in Kalamazoo, Mich., he asked his audience to of Gov. Wallace and say a prayer for our own country.

McGovern added: "I must say I'm shocked by this savage act. If we've got to the point in this country where a political figure can't express his views on the issues of the day, that he can't seek the presidency of this country without being shot, then I tremble for the future of our nation."

See IMPACT, A13, Col. 1
In Washington, former Attorney General John N. Mitchell struck the same theme:

"This sad and frightening occurrence raises again the strange sense of having witnessed this all before, of having seen blind and irrational hatred strike out in this barbaric manner.

"It is a shock to all of us, I believe, that the American political process now subjects political leaders to such personal danger that it deprives the American people of direct access to those leaders."

And from Russell Long of Louisiana, whose father Huey was cut down by an assassin, came a similar thought.

"Gov. Wallace," he said, "is another victim of those who do not understand that human beings must learn to live together peacefully. It is the ballot rather than the bullet which should determine America's destiny."

As in other moments of national horror, there was a clear drawing together of those who represent widely divergent views. "There's a time for political discussion" but I don't think the time is when Gov. Wallace is in the hospital fighting for his life," said a spokesman for the Democratic National Committee.

And a black congressman, Charles C. Diggs Jr. of Detroit, spoke for many others when he said: "This is a frightening incident that should be the object of concern of anyone who believes in free speech. Regardless of our differences, we should close ranks for the protection of freedom of speech on the part of public figures."

Transcending all the words was an inarticulate sense of shock and a sad recognition that Americans have lived through all this before.

Just last weekend a Washington politician was reflecting on the sudden changes that can affect a political figure. "Twenty-four hours," he said to a friend, "is a long time in the life of a politician."

It also can be a long time in the life of a country.

The 1972 political year began with hopes that it would be unlike the bitter, divisive past. The war that had so dominated the nation's political debates four years ago seemed to be diminishing. The riots that had scarred the country had subsided or disappeared. The demonstrations that made political life unpleasant if not untenable were a thing of the past. So, it seemed, were the scenes of screaming crowds surrounding a fallen political leader.

But in less than a week all that has passed.

The shooting of George Wallace of Alabama came exactly a week after President Nixon somberly announced the mining of
North Vietnamese ports and increased bombing raids, which raised the spectre of a direct confrontation with the Soviet Union. Protests, demonstrations and emotional debates have followed in the wake of those steps.

Now, a nation already uncertain and fearful has been subjected to another act of violence that tears at the fundamental stability of the land.

In purely political terms, the Wallace shooting raises a number of imponderables. What will happen to the legions that have followed him so loyally? If he survives, will his shooting lead to a large sympathy write-in vote in pivotal California? Which, of the other two leading Democratic candidates—McGovern and Hubert Humphrey—will stand to pick up the most support from the Wallace constituency? Already, the politicians are going through their inevitable—and private—speculations of the impact on their futures.

In the McGovern camp, for instance, there is fear that the shooting somehow might be held irrationally against their candidate. One of the McGovern strategists noted that a radio report of the shooting said McGovern supporters were present at the rally, and a wire service story made the same point.

A Humphrey aide speculated that the shooting could have one of two results—sympathy flowing to Wallace or a recoiling by the public against a candidacy that is associated with intense controversy.

All of the politicians immediately began raising questions about violence affecting the remainder of the campaign, and adding to the move for stricter security and gun control legislation.

And the shooting inevitably brought fresh attention on the last of the Kennedy brothers. The private consensus of those interviewed was that Sen. Edward M. (Ted) Kennedy now definitely would be removed from speculation as a possible compromise nominee when the Democrats convene at Miami Beach in July.

Kennedy himself issued this statement: “My heart and prayers go out to Gov. Wallace and to the members of his grief-stricken family. Once again, democracy in America has been scarred by senseless and unforgivable violence. I am saddened beyond measure that tragedy has again stained and darkened the process we use to select our political leaders.”

The nation was reminded anew of other scenes of trauma and memories of grieving widows when Ethel Kennedy, widow of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy, called Mrs. Wallace at the hospital as soon as she heard about the shooting.

Then there were questions about what might happen to the delegates Wallace already has won in his campaign this year. Before the shooting yesterday, it appeared Wallace would go to Miami Beach in command of some 325 to 350 delegates. That represents a vital 10 per cent of the 3,016 delegates whose support may be essential for anyone to win the nomination.

These were among the political questions raised by the latest act of a man with a gun.

But of all those speaking out, publicly and privately, perhaps no one expressed a more basic concern—and basic question—than a woman who called this newspaper moments after hearing news of Wallace’s shooting yesterday. “Please don’t just say, in bold, black headlines, that Wallace has been shot,” she said quietly. “I am not a supporter of Gov. Wallace, but what I want to know, what we all want to know, is why this happens?”

Hers is the central American question. As in the past, no one has an answer to it.