William Raspberry  

George Wallace: New Realities

“Everybody keeps saying 'Wallace has changed, Wallace has changed.' Everybody, that is, except Wallace. George ain't said a damn thing about changing.”

That’s Ed Brown, long-time civil rights activist, political theorist and student of race relations.

The subject was the startlingly cordial reception given Alabama Governor Wallace at the meeting of the Southern Conference of Black Mayors last month in Tuskegee. Wallace, who addressed the session after first stopping off in Tuscaloosa to crown a black homecoming queen at the University of Alabama, got a standing ovation from that assemblage of black politicians.

And not just a standing ovation, but a key to the city as well; and, according to news reports, some of the delegates and wives trooped up to the platform to get the governor’s autograph.

Clearly some of the participants thought the tableau represented major racial and political progress for the Deep South. Mayor Charles Evers of Fayette, Miss., said he would not rule out supporting a national ticket that included George Corley Wallace. “I could see going with him if he were on the ticket with, say, Teddy Kennedy and the Republicans didn’t offer a good alternative like Ed Brooks or Nelson Rockefeller,” Evers told The New York Times.

Others thought the Wallace lovefest represented a new sort of black pragmatism. “You’ve got to deal here in Alabama with Alabamians in power,” is how Mayor Jay Cooper of Prichard put it. “Wallace is in power.”

Some who were not there don’t know just what the devil was going on. And still others are afraid they do know.

That last group includes Mississippi’s Fannie Lou Hamer, who was outraged at the spectacle.

“I just think it was ridiculous—the most ridiculous thing I ever heard of,” she said last week. “I remember when he said if someone got in front of his car—that’s when we were struggling for civil rights—he would run right over them. I think it’s a disgrace on the things we’ve been fighting for to give him a standing ovation.

“I remember being on that (Selma) bridge, marching for black folks’ freedom, and Wallace sending in the guard, the highway patrol, horses, dogs, everything, to stop us. I remember John Lewis almost had his skull crushed as a direct result of George Wallace’s actions. How can they forget things like that?”

Well, there are some new political realities that have to be taken into consideration—realities that include a weakening of Wallace’s position among white Alabamians, which has increased his need for black support, which has served to strengthen the black position there.

It shouldn’t be too surprising that some of these new realities can dictate black awkward-looking alliances with former enemies. No permanent friends or permanent enemies, says Charlie Evers, just permanent interests.

We saw during the Nixon campaign that some black pragmatists were willing to make political deals for their personal benefit. Their rationale: Black folk have as much right to look to their self-interest as anyone else.

For Ed Brown, that is sheer heresy. These are extremely dangerous times for black people to put their selfish interests above the collective interest, he said.

He sees it as particularly dangerous for black people to be snagging up to Wallace in the name of political pragmatism. The whole thing is predicated on the notion that Wallace has changed, he said. But the white bigots who have been the heart of his support don’t believe that he has changed. They still support him. Wallace hasn’t said he has changed. So why should black people be saying it for him?

“Just think it was ridiculous,” Brown replies. “A black man addressing a white audience in Tuscaloosa, getting a standing ovation, and outraged last July 4 when the Massachusetts Democrat appeared on a Decatur, Ala., platform with Governor Wallace and made a conciliatory speech. They thought it was a signal to their self-interest as anyone else.

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“If you say to the black people: ‘I’m changing, you change your line,’ you’re using them as pawns.”

There remains the question of why Southern black politicians, particularly those outside Alabama, see it advantageous—individually or collectively—to pay public homage to Wallace.

The answers are hard to come by. One guess—which I confess I make on the basis of no information whatsoever—is that it may be a way of clearing the good name of Sen. Edward Kennedy, who is still popular among black politicians all over the country. Many black Kennedy supporters were incredulous and outraged last July 4 when the Massachusetts Democrat appeared on a platform with Governor Wallace and made a conciliatory speech.

They thought it was a signal that Kennedy was taking black support for granted.

Whether it was intended for that purpose or not, the Tuskegee lovefest with the black mayors has the effect of saying: It’s okay, Teddy; he’s all right with us, too.”