

## GEORGE WALLACE, SPEECH AT SERB HALL (26 March 1976)

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### Abstract

This essay seeks to account for the persuasive appeal of George C. Wallace's campaign rally addresses. The firebrand southern governor and perennial presidential candidate drew a large national following in the late 1960s and early 1970s with speeches that defied all the rules and norms of presidential politics. Yet they invoked passionate commitment within an especially disaffected segment of the American electorate. Utilizing survey data, this essay challenges the conventional portrait of Wallace and the Wallacites, demonstrating that Wallace's appeal was rooted not so much in conservative politics as in feelings of political alienation, persecution, and pessimism. Accounting for the Wallace phenomenon in terms of a classic, Hofferian theory of social protest, the essay concludes by reflecting on the parallels between Wallace and Donald J. Trump's 2016 presidential election.

**Keywords:** George C. Wallace, presidential campaigns, campaign rallies, political disaffection, true believers.

In 1964, George Wallace became a national figure when he launched his first campaign for the presidency with little money, no campaign organization, and an impressive array of critics and adversaries in the media, the churches, the labor movement, and the political mainstream.<sup>1</sup> Surprising almost everybody, he showed remarkable strength in northern Democratic primaries and focused attention on his favorite target: the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In 1968, Wallace faced the same barriers and more. His decision to run as a third-party candidate added the challenge of a political system rigged to favor the two major-party candidates.<sup>2</sup> Despite those obstacles, Wallace tallied 10 million votes—the most popular votes ever for a third party candidate in U.S. presidential elections. In 1972, Wallace again demonstrated strong appeal, accumulating more popular votes than any other candidate in the early Democratic primaries. By the day of the assassination attempt that ended his campaign in May, Wallace had tallied 3,334,914 popular votes to 2,606,186 for Hubert Humphrey and only 2,183,533 for George McGovern.<sup>3</sup> Physical handicaps prevented him from conducting more than a token campaign in 1976. But with initial campaign coffers of \$3 million and the early lead in the polls, he again made his presence felt.<sup>4</sup>

Even more remarkable than the breadth of Wallace's support was the depth of his supporters' commitment. Wallacites loved their leader. Many simply refused to vote if Wallace was not on the ballot.<sup>5</sup> At Wallace rallies his faithful exhibited a feverish enthusiasm rarely seen in American electoral politics. The Wallace rally resembled "a country music festival or a Billy Graham revival or a New York Mets banner day more than a political rally."<sup>6</sup> Wallace himself once boasted: "All of these people love me. They don't act like that with Hubert Humphrey. You've seen him. They don't jump up and down and scream and shout. They wouldn't fight anybody over him. But look at them. They'd fight you over me. They love me."<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Wallace's followers seemed itching for a fight. As Wallace once put it: "Hell, all we'd have to do right now is march on the federal courthouse in Montgomery, lock up a few of those judges, and by sunset there's be a revolution from one corner of this nation to the other."<sup>8</sup>

Why did so many Americans rally behind this Southern governor with right-wing rhetoric but a life-long record as a New Deal Democrat? Why were his supporters so passionate in their commitment? Conventional accounts offer a simple answer: he appealed to the deep-seated racism of America's white working class. Yet the explanation for Wallace's success is more complicated than that. Survey data from the University of Michigan's Center for Political Studies (CPS) reveals a complex mixture of beliefs and attitudes underlying support for George Wallace, including feelings of political neglect, persecution, and pessimism. Put simply, Wallace supporters were united not so much by political ideas as by alienation, disaffection, resentment, and fear.

Wallace's forged his coalition of the disaffected with a rhetoric that defies explanation in conventional political terms. Particularly at the raucous, sometimes violent rallies where his supporters gathered, Wallace rhetorically shaped the communal identity of his followers by articulating their discontent, identifying scapegoats, and declaring war on a host of enemies. Wallace addressed important issues in his rally speeches; indeed, he covered a lot of political ground, reciting a litany of complaints against the *status quo*. In a rambling, sometimes incoherent style, he would jump from one issue to the next, providing little analysis and almost no evidence. According to one rhetorical scholar, he seemed to suffer from an "inability to pursue a line of reasoning with any thematic consistency" and "found evidence burdensome." According to the same critic, his speeches also manifested "stylistic deformities and symptoms of inferential disorder."<sup>9</sup> Yet to his supporters, he was the only presidential candidate who talked about what mattered and told the unvarnished truth.

The 2016 presidential campaign of Donald J. Trump inspired frequent comparisons to George Wallace and his rallies. Writing in the *New York Times*, for example, historian Dan T. Carter wrote of the "striking similarities between Mr. Trump and Wallace, particularly with regard to "their rhetoric and their ability to fire up crowds."<sup>10</sup> In the *National Review*, Rich Lowry likewise wrote of Trump's "striking resemblance to Wallace," calling him "another entertaining, anti-establishment bomb-thrower who became—to the shock of respectable people—a kind of tribune of the American working class."<sup>11</sup> At first glance, of course, Trump and Wallace could not be more different. Boasting of his wealth and privilege, Trump cultivated

a very different *ethos* than Wallace; he certainly did not embody the “common man.” Yet, *rhetorically*, Trump and Wallace followed the same playbook. As Carter suggested, both defied the rules of civil discourse, rejecting the “euphemisms of polite political rhetoric.” Both had “the demagogue’s instinctive ability to tap into the fear and anger that regularly erupts in American politics,” and both were “part of a long national history of scapegoating minorities” in American politics.<sup>12</sup> Above all, both were *performers*, feeding off the fears and resentments of their devoted supporters by excoriating their enemies, including the protestors who predictably showed up to provide evidence of how America had gone wrong.

I begin this essay by recalling the life and career of George Corley Wallace. Born of modest circumstances but ambitious and well-educated, Wallace aspired to a political career at a young age and rose rapidly in the ranks of Democratic politics in Alabama. Like Huey Long and a handful of other Southern politicians before him, Wallace eventually attracted a national following by downplaying his segregationist views and articulating a broader rhetoric of grievances against the federal government, privileged elites, and various other enemies of the common folk. In the second section of the essay, I turn to an examination of the Wallace supporter, using data to demonstrate how strong supporters of the former Alabama governor constituted a coalition of the disaffected that defies explanation in conventional political terms. Turning to social movement theory for insight, I show how strong Wallace supporters held widely divergent views on political issues but shared feelings of neglect, persecution, and pessimism about the future. In the third section of the essay, I analyze how the rhetoric of the Wallace rally coalesced this coalition of the disaffected, drawing from his speech at Serb Hall in Milwaukee in 1976 (the text featured on *Voices of Democracy*) along with other rally addresses from all four of his presidential campaigns. Although it came after the assassination attempt that confined him to a wheelchair, the speech at Serb Hall typified the rally speech that Wallace delivered hundreds of times over the course of his four presidential campaigns. Although his physical disabilities muted his delivery, the speech’s defiant message and rambling style remained the rhetorical trademarks of the Wallace rally speech. Defying explanation in conventional terms, the Wallace rally speech represented a classic example of what rhetorical scholar Roderick P. Hart dubbed the “rhetoric of the true believer.”<sup>13</sup> Finally, I reflect on the legacy of Wallace’s brand of the politics of disaffection, illuminating its roots in a long tradition of populist demagoguery. I conclude with some reflections on the parallels between Wallace’s rallies and those of Donald Trump’s 2016 presidential campaign.

### **The Life and Career of George Corley Wallace**

George Corley Wallace was born in 1919 into a middle-class family in Clio, Alabama.<sup>14</sup> He spent the majority of his childhood at school, on the family farm, or in the boxing ring. At fifteen, Wallace’s father, George Wallace Sr., arranged for George to be nominated for a position as a page in the state senate. Displaying some of the political ambition that would distinguish his later career, the teenaged Wallace personally canvassed state senators and won one of four

openings for new pages in January 1935.<sup>15</sup> After high school, Wallace took a job as a traveling magazine salesman, but he soon quit to study law at the University of Alabama.<sup>16</sup> Enrolling in a fast-track program, he earned a pre-law certificate in two years and his law degree in three. Although he had begun to take part in state and local political campaigns during this time, he put his political ambitions on hold following graduation to serve in the Pacific during World War II. Like many other young men and women at the time, Wallace married shortly before leaving for the war, taking sixteen year-old Lurleen Burns as his bride.<sup>17</sup>

When Wallace returned from his wartime job as a flight engineer on bombing missions over Japan, he wasted little time in entering state politics. As a law student in 1942, Wallace had worked for Chauncey Sparks' successful gubernatorial campaign, and Governor Sparks rewarded him by helping him secure a job as an assistant to the state's attorney general after the war.<sup>18</sup> From this position Wallace ran for and won a spot in the Alabama House of Representatives in 1946.<sup>19</sup> This was the first of many successful campaigns for the young politician from Clio. After working in the statehouse for six years, Wallace resumed his ascent in Alabama politics by winning a judgeship in the Third District Circuit Court. During his campaign for the post, Wallace stressed his military background and characterized himself as the underdog. Yet he ended up winning 75 percent of the vote.<sup>20</sup>

After five years on the bench, Wallace launched his first campaign for the governorship of Alabama. The 1958 gubernatorial election attracted a field of fourteen candidates, all competing for the Democratic nomination. The 1958 election also saw the emergence of race as a major issue in wake of the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.<sup>21</sup> Although Wallace ran as a staunch supporter of segregation in the schools, his opponent, John M. Patterson, espoused a more radical opposition toward desegregation and beat Wallace convincingly in a runoff election.<sup>22</sup> During the campaign, Wallace actually spoke out against the Ku Klux Klan, arguing that segregation could be preserved through legalistic means.<sup>23</sup> George Wallace's loss in 1958 is often cited as a turning point in his political career. Legend has it that shortly before his concession speech, Wallace turned to several of his top campaign workers and said, "Well, boys, no other son-of-a-bitch will ever out-nigger me again."<sup>24</sup>

During the four years following that defeat, Wallace used his judgeship in the third circuit to build a strong pro-segregationist reputation. Wallace carefully crafted an image of himself as a "fighting judge." Understanding the value of publicity in constructing and communicating that image, Wallace was not above engineering public events to display his political stands. When the Civil Rights commission subpoenaed the voting records for his district, he publicly announced that he would fight to prevent the commission from getting the voting rolls. Once the reporters and cameras were gone, Wallace quietly handed over the records.<sup>25</sup> This sort of political theatre became a regular weapon in Wallace's political arsenal.

When Wallace ran for governor a second time in 1962, he was much better prepared. Wallace raised the racial issue himself by tying civil rights activists to communists and hippies.<sup>26</sup> Wallace's new speech writer, Asa Earl Carter, was a former Ku Klux Klan leader who bolstered Wallace's segregationist credentials with more "snappy, hard-hitting speeches."<sup>27</sup> Wallace's

1962 gubernatorial campaign also benefited from a provision of the Alabama state constitution that prohibited governors from consecutive terms. This removed the incumbent John Patterson from the race. Wallace won handily, beating Ryan DeGraffenreid and his other more moderate opponents. The victory would prove to be the first of three successful gubernatorial campaigns by Wallace. His wife, Lurleen, also ran for governor once and won.

Wallace's reputation as a firebrand politician did not stay confined to Alabama for long. As governor, his words and actions took on national significance. In his first inaugural address, written by Asa Carter, Wallace famously declared: "I draw the line in the dust and toss the gauntlet before the feet of tyranny and I say segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever."<sup>28</sup> This declaration was tested in the first year of Wallace's governorship when the University of Alabama, under orders from a federal judge, admitted two African American students, Vivian Malone and James Hood. The university had been avoiding integration through a number of strategies, including background investigations into prospective students.<sup>29</sup> When investigations of Malone and Hood turned up nothing to justify denying their admission, Wallace was left with little choice.<sup>30</sup> He could not prevent their admission. At the same time, he felt he had to make some show of opposition.

Standing in the schoolhouse door was hardly a spontaneous reaction. Wallace had promised to do exactly that at the kickoff of his campaign for governor in Montgomery on March 10, 1962. That day he swore that "when the court order comes," he would "refuse to abide by any such illegal federal court order even to the point of standing in the schoolhouse door, if necessary."<sup>31</sup> When it came time to actually make good on that promise, however, Wallace was more cautious. As in the voting records incident, Wallace carefully engineered his stand in front of UA's Foster Auditorium to ensure that he would appear defiant but not risk arrest or a violent confrontation.<sup>32</sup> On the day of the incident, Nick Katzenbach, the assistant attorney general of the United States, approached the doors of the Foster auditorium without Malone or Hood to warn Wallace that they would be coming to register. Wallace refused to respond to Katzenbach. About an hour after the encounter, Wallace sent word through his speech writer, Taylor Hardin, that he would back down if he were allowed to give a speech explaining his defiance. The national guardsman in command, Henry V. Graham, agreed, and the spectacle of Wallace's stand in the schoolhouse door ended after the governor was allowed to express his opposition to "dictatorial" federal power.<sup>33</sup>

Wallace's stand at the schoolhouse door helped make him a household name. Not only was the incident itself televised nationally, but prior to the confrontation Wallace was invited to appear on NBC's Sunday political program, *Meet the Press*. On the air from Washington, Wallace was grilled by Lawrence Spivak and three other unsympathetic journalists.<sup>34</sup> The national coverage of Wallace was so significant that President Kennedy responded with his own televised address in which he announced his intention to pass civil rights legislation to prevent the denial of rights to black citizens in the future.<sup>35</sup> For maximum effect, the President gave his address on June 11, 1963, the same day that Wallace spoke in front of Foster Auditorium.

Although Wallace was widely criticized for his political theatre, he also won many admirers. For some, Wallace became a symbol of the struggle to preserve states' rights and racial segregation. From outside Alabama he began to get encouragement and political donations to run for president. Less than a year after the stand at the schoolhouse door, he threw his hat into the ring, running in three of the 1964 Democratic primaries: Maryland, Wisconsin, and Indiana.<sup>36</sup> His campaign, which lasted into July of 1964, was destined to fall short of the nomination, but it succeeded in giving the governor widespread exposure outside of Alabama and the Deep South.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, Wallace won more than thirty percent of the votes in all three states, demonstrating his capacity to compete in northern states.<sup>38</sup>

Wallace was not deterred by the failure of his first run for the Democratic presidential nomination. He came right back in 1968, this time as a third-party candidate under the banner of the American Independent Party. At the same time, he expanded his fund-raising apparatus, leveraging the state government's vast system of patronage to collect donations from companies working under state contracts.<sup>39</sup> More importantly, Wallace demonstrated a remarkable ability to attract large numbers of small donations. Turning campaign rallies into fund-raising events, Wallace attracted crowds with performances by country singers, then enticed them to donate and sold souvenirs.<sup>40</sup> Meanwhile, his wife Lurleen ran for governor of Alabama and won, becoming the state's first female governor.<sup>41</sup> This allowed Wallace to maintain control over his home state even as he campaigned for the presidency.

The stated goal of the Wallace campaign in 1968 was to win seventeen states, depriving both Richard M. Nixon and Hubert H. Humphrey of a majority of electoral votes and pushing the election into the House of Representatives.<sup>42</sup> Although Nixon ultimately won the election, Wallace's effort still ranks among the most successful third party candidacies in the nation's history. Wallace won five southern states and almost ten million popular votes. Only Millard Fillmore in 1856, Theodore Roosevelt in 1912, and Ross Perot in 1992 won a greater percentage of the popular vote than Wallace. Roosevelt's 1912 campaign under the banner of the Bull-Moose Party was the only third-party effort that won more states or more electoral votes than Wallace.<sup>43</sup>

The surprising success of his 1968 campaign earned Wallace the status of a serious presidential candidate. At the beginning of the 1972 election season, President Nixon considered Wallace (since reelected governor of Alabama) his most formidable Democratic opponent.<sup>44</sup> Nixon was wary of Wallace's potential appeal among white working-class northerners. Meanwhile, Wallace honed his appeal as the anti-establishment candidate by condemning the "pointy-headed bureaucrats" and other vaguely defined enemies in Washington D.C.<sup>45</sup> Although much of Wallace's success in 1968 came in southern states like Florida, Nixon worried that another independent Wallace campaign might win enough working-class votes to cost the Republicans some Midwestern states.<sup>46</sup>

All of this changed, of course, on May 15, 1972, when Wallace was shot three times by a mentally unstable man from Milwaukee named Arthur Bremer. The shooting, which took place at a campaign event in Laurel, Maryland,<sup>47</sup> left Wallace paralyzed physically but not politically.

The next day he won both the Maryland and Michigan primaries, and he technically remained in the race, ultimately finishing third behind Hubert Humphrey and George McGovern. Wallace won more than 3.7 million popular votes on his way to victory in six states. The shooting, however, effectively ended his race for the presidency in 1972, much to the relief of the Nixon campaign.<sup>48</sup> Wallace was able to speak from his wheelchair at the Democratic National Convention on July 11, but despite his efforts to push the party to the right George McGovern ended up with the Democratic nomination.<sup>49</sup>

Wallace ran for the presidency one last time in 1976. Polling the primaries identified Wallace as the early Democratic front-runner,<sup>50</sup> and he once again amassed a large campaign war chest. Wallace collected most of his funds through a state-of-the-art direct mail campaign by Richard Viguerie, one of the early pioneers of political direct-mail. In 1973, Viguerie went to work mailing solicitations to a huge list of potential donors that he had compiled from previous work for conservative campaigns and religious organizations. Then he went through Wallace's records of past contributors and began sending them direct-mail as well.<sup>51</sup> Viguerie would later go on to raise large sums of money for the coalition of conservative organizations that constituted the so-called New Right of the 1980s.

Despite Wallace's fund-raising capacity and his early lead in national polls, his campaign began to crumble after he lost the Florida primary to Jimmy Carter. Although Wallace had won every county in the state during the 1972 primaries, Carter, a Georgia native, upstaged his southern appeal. With a much more restrained speaking style, Carter took on Wallace directly, attacking his record as the Governor of Alabama. Carter called attention to Alabama's regressive tax system and, as another southern governor, his accusations carried greater weight with southern voters than the same accusations made by northern Democrats in previous elections.<sup>52</sup> Carter showed how it was possible to appeal to many of the disaffected southern voters who had previously supported Wallace without making the campaign all about race.

By the time Wallace arrived at Serb Hall in Milwaukee on the eve of the 1976 Wisconsin primary, his campaign for the presidency was all but over. Yet his speech at Serb Hall (which accompanies this essay on *Voices of Democracy*) remains an archetypal example of the hundreds of rally speeches Wallace delivered before predominantly white, working-class audiences in northern industrial states over the course of his four presidential campaigns. This was not the first time that Wallace had appeared at Serb Hall. He first spoke there while campaigning for the Democratic nomination in 1964,<sup>53</sup> and he returned several times after that. His "fire-and-brimstone performance" at Serb Hall in 1972 inspired a memorable passage in gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson's account of that year's presidential campaign, *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail*:

The air was electric even before he started talking, and by the time he was five or six minutes into his spiel I had a sense that the bastard had somehow levitated himself and was hovering over us. It reminded me of a Janis Joplin concert. . . . He jerked this crowd in Serb Hall around like he had them all on wires. They were laughing, shouting, whacking each other on the back . . . it was a flat-out fire and brimstone *performance*.<sup>54</sup>

The performance that Thompson witnessed at Serb Hall in 1972 was hardly unique in the history of American politics. Wallace repeated the performance hundreds of times over his four national campaigns, and it stood squarely in a long tradition of populist demagoguery dating back to the Calamity Howlers of the 1890s.<sup>55</sup> Domesticated forms of populist speech have been seen in presidential politics as well, beginning with Andrew Jackson in 1828 and continuing through William Jennings Bryan in the 1890s and Pat Buchanan in the 1990s. Although Wallace's rally speech might not conform to any rational model of campaign discourse, it was clearly in that populist tradition. As such, the rhetoric of George Wallace—as well as the appeal of that rhetoric for his following of alienated and disaffected voters—is best understood not in terms or ordinary theories of campaign rhetoric, but as a form of social movement rhetoric.

### The Wallace Supporter

George Wallace entered American presidential politics at a time of widespread alienation. Many Americans—especially white, working-class Americans—felt that they no longer had a voice—that their concerns meant nothing to mainstream politicians. George Wallace spoke to such people. By emphasizing politically sensitive issues that other candidates avoided, he addressed their uneasiness and discontent. That he may have said the “wrong” things about the nation's problems, as George Reedy commented at the time, “should not be allowed to obscure the fact that he had a virtual monopoly in talking about the things that counted.” He may have been a “dangerous demagogue arousing ugly emotions,” but to many Americans he seemed the only candidate who talked about the issues that really mattered.<sup>56</sup>

Perhaps the first evidence of the unconventional nature of the Wallace coalition came in a 1972 *Time* magazine story. Based on polling data, *Time* reported what seemed a startling political anomaly: a surprisingly large number of Wallace supporters named George McGovern as their second choice for president.<sup>57</sup> Later, a CBS News survey confirmed the finding. According to the CBS poll, while southern voters who supported Wallace in 1968 moved into the Nixon camp by a three-to-one margin after Wallace left the race in 1972, former Wallace supporters in the rest of the country divided fairly evenly between Nixon and McGovern.<sup>58</sup> In 1976, former Wallace supporters again revealed their lack of ideological unity by “voting for Ford or for Carter in nearly equal proportions.”<sup>59</sup> These findings, of course, defy the conventional wisdom that Wallace appealed to right-wing ideologues. They suggest that something other than political ideas defined the Wallace coalition.

Survey data from the University of Michigan's Center for Political Studies (CPS) allow us to probe more deeply into what that “something” might have been.<sup>60</sup> In its series of American National Election Studies, the CPS assessed their respondents' views on political issues by having them choose their preferred solution to a number of problems, with those solutions ranging from extreme conservative to extreme liberal positions on a seven-point, Likert-type scale. The data from 1974 show that respondents, who elsewhere in the survey professed very strong support for Wallace,<sup>61</sup> chose the most conservative solutions more often than did all other

respondents. But they also chose the liberal solutions more often. In other words, Wallace supporters as a group were more extreme in their positions on issues, but not simply in the conservative direction, as one might have expected. Even more surprising, Wallace supporters who favored extreme solutions were more likely to opt for the liberal than the conservative extreme, even on some issues which Wallace addressed as a conservative hard-liner. For example, when asked about the urban unrest of the 1960s, strong Wallace supporters were more likely than other voters to favor using all force necessary to stop the disturbances. But Wallace supporters were even more likely to choose the most liberal response: solve the problems of poverty that lead to unrest (see Table 1).

Table 1			
Favored Solutions to Urban Unrest Among Strong Wallace Supporters and All Other Respondents (Percentages) on a 7-Point Scale*			
	Solve problems of poverty (1)	Intermediate Responses (2-6)	Use all force necessary (7)
Strong Wallace Supporters (N=92)	36	44.5	19.5
All Other Respondents (N=1203)	30	59	11
*Percentages are rounded, and “don’t know” and “no response” categories are excluded. Percentages add horizontally by rows to 100. <i>Chi square</i> =10.1415. With 2 df, $p<.05$ .			

Similarly, when asked about their priorities in dealing with crime, strong Wallace supporters were more likely to choose the extreme solution than were other respondents. Again, a greater percentage of Wallace supporters chose the conservative extreme: do whatever is necessary to stop crime. But Wallace supporters were also more likely to choose the liberal extreme, saying that the top priority should be protection for the rights of the accused (see Table 2).

This pattern—Wallace supporters choosing extreme solutions while all other respondents took more moderate stances—also appeared on questions about government aid to the unemployed and poor, school integration, and aid to minorities. Although Wallace supporters were somewhat less likely than other respondents to choose the extreme liberal positions on distinctly race-related issues, on all questions they remained less likely to give intermediate responses.<sup>62</sup> Clearly, Wallace supporters were not simply conservative ideologues. The explanation for their attraction to Wallace is more complicated than that. It also defies conventional wisdom. Wallace supporters apparently wanted *action*; they wanted *something*

done about the problems facing the nation. But they did not agree on whether those actions should reflect liberal or conservative ideals.

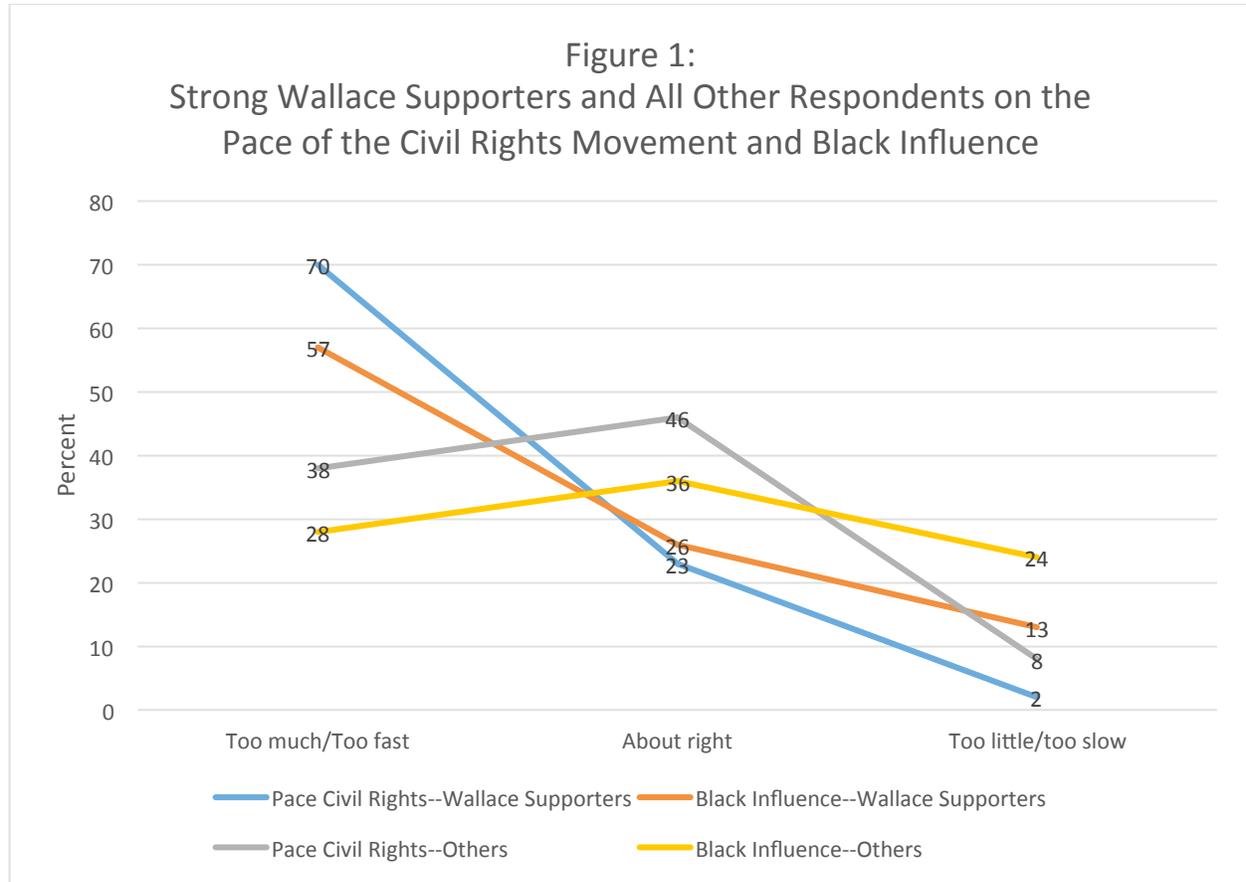
The explanation for this political oddity emerges as one searches for the bonds that *did* unite strong Wallace supporters. The significant common bonds included opposition to the civil rights movement, greater distrust in the federal government, and a fundamental pessimism. One

Table 2 Favored Priority in Handling Crime Among Strong Wallace Supporters and All Other Respondents (Percentages) on a 7-Point Scale*			
	Protect Rights (1)	Intermediate Responses (2-6)	Stop Crime (7)
Strong Wallace Supporters (N=95)	31	42	27
All Other Respondents (N=1203)	19	64	17
*Percentages are rounded, and “don’t know” and “no response” categories are excluded. Percentages add horizontally by rows to 100. <i>Chi square</i> =10.1415. With 2 df, <i>p</i> <.05.			

might say that Wallace supporters shared an ideology of gut emotions—of fear and distrust—rather than one of political ideas. While they did not agree about what should be done about America’s problems, they did share dissatisfaction with the existing world and hostility toward certain enemies.

Of course, conventional wisdom holds that the chief enemy of Wallace supporters were blacks and other minorities, and at first glance the CPS data would seem to confirm that. Wallace supporters were far more likely than other citizens to claim that civil rights leaders had pushed too hard for change and that blacks already had too much influence in America (see Figure 1). In addition, a comparison of Wallace supporters and other Americans on a CPS scale measuring feelings toward blacks in general reveals that Wallace supporters also expressed somewhat “cooler” feelings toward blacks than other Americans. Yet while 70 percent of Wallace supporters criticized the civil rights movement for moving too fast and 57 percent claimed that blacks already had too much influence, 60 percent actually claimed to have favorable attitudes toward blacks in general (see Table 3). In short, many Wallace supporters opposed the civil rights movement but claimed positive feelings toward blacks. The obvious conclusion might be that Wallace supporters had nothing against blacks as long as they knew their place. But there appears to be more to this apparent contradiction than at first meets the eye.

As the common bonds among Wallace supporters are explored further, their hostility toward the civil rights movement becomes part of a broader landscape of fear and pessimism. Believing that their own status was declining, many Wallace supporters blamed not only the civil rights movement but the federal government. They seemed to believe that an incompetent or even corrupt government was ultimately behind a variety of social changes, including more



	Unfavorable	Neutral	Favorable
Strong Wallace Supporters (N=104)	31	42	27
All Other Respondents (N=1399)	19	64	17

\*Categories derived by collapsing a 100-point scale. Percentages are rounded, and “don’t know” and “no response” categories are excluded. Percentages add horizontally by rows to 100. *Chi square*=9.547. With 2 df, *p*<.05.

assertive blacks who threatened the status of white “average citizens.” Wallace supporters were significantly more likely than other Americans to agree with negative statements about the government. They were more likely to agree that government officials were incompetent or even “crooked.” They also agreed more often than others with the notion that “big interests” controlled government at the expense of “average citizens” (see Table 4). These negative

Table 4		
Percentages of Strong Wallace Supporters and All Other Respondents Agreeing with Statements About Government*		
	Strong Wallace Supporters (N=108)	All Other Respondents (N=1467)
Agree that government people do not know what they are doing	54	45
Agree that quite a few government people are crooked	56	44
Agree that big interests run the government for their own benefit	77	66
*Percentages are rounded. Z-scores from difference of proportions tests are as follows: 1. Z=1.812; 2. Z=2.419; 3. Z=2.342. With direction predicted, all are significant at the .05 level.		

attitudes toward government paralleled the Wallace supporters’ low estimations of their own political efficacy. Wallace supporters tended to believe that they had little impact on the government and derived few benefits from governmental actions. For example, Wallace supporters were more likely than other citizens to agree with the statement that government provided little help in solving their problems. They also tended to agree that “average citizens” had no say in government and that public officials did not care what they thought about the course of the nation (see Table 5).

The belief that blacks were getting ahead while white “average citizens” were being ignored by the government undoubtedly shaped one last striking characteristic of Wallace supporters: a fundamental pessimism. Wallace supporters tended to believe that their status had been declining, especially in economic terms, and they feared that decline would continue.

Table 5 Percentages of Strong Wallace Supporters and All Other Respondents Agreeing with Statements About Political Efficacy*		
	Strong Wallace Supporters (N=108)	All Other Respondents (N=1467)
Agree that government is not helpful with problems	63	50
Agree that citizen has no say in government	49	40
Agree that public officials do not care what citizens think	56	49
*Percentages are rounded. Z-scores from difference of proportions tests are as follows: 1. Z=5.407; 2. Z=1.838; 3. Z=1.406. With direction predicted, the first two are significant at the .05 level.		

Wallace supporters claimed that their income was “much less” than their “fair share” more than twice as often as other citizens.<sup>63</sup> They also responded to a question about whether they expected their financial situation to improve, get worse, or stay the same in the next year with significantly more pessimism than other Americans (see Table 6). As Pettigrew, Riley, and Vanneman observed, Wallace supporters seemed to suffer from “relative deprivation” in an era of “rising expectations.” Apparently, they saw themselves as members of “a group victimized by national neglect” at a time when other groups were making great advances.<sup>64</sup>

All these findings paint a portrait of Wallace supporters as “true believers,” as described in the classic work by Eric Hoffer. They were united by little more than “intense dissatisfaction with things as they are.”<sup>65</sup> While most Americans took neutral or moderate positions on political issues, Wallace supporters felt the need for *some* drastic action, even though they did not agree on the nature of that action. Wallace supporters felt threatened by the increasing influence of blacks and other minorities, and they viewed the government as unresponsive, even hostile. Fear for their status united them more than any liberal or conservative political orientation. Sensing a conspiracy of malicious neglect against “average citizens” like themselves, they shared gut emotions, not political ideas. They felt persecuted; they were

unhappy, alienated, pessimistic, and angry. In Hoffer’s terms, they were “ripe” for participation in “any effective movement, and not solely for one with a particular doctrine or program.”<sup>66</sup> They looked for someone to articulate and justify “the resentment dammed up in their souls” and to restore purpose to their lives.<sup>67</sup> In short, they were ready for George Wallace.

Table 6			
Responses of Strong Wallace Supporters and All Other Respondents (Percentages) to Question About Whether They Expected Their Financial Situation to Improve, Get Worse, or Stay the Same in the Next Year*			
	Finances will improve	No change expected	Finances will get worse
Strong Wallace Supporters (N=96)	11	48	41
All Other Respondents (N=1283)	20	49	31

\*Percentages are rounded and “don’t know” and “no response” categories are excluded. Percentages add horizontally by row to 100. *Chi square*=6.385. With 2 df, *p*<.05.

### The Rhetoric of the Wallace Rally

Leaders of mass movements typically rally their followers by purging their feelings of anxiety and frustration through the creation of scapegoats. The rhetoric of the mass movement leader, as Hoffer explained, “articulates and justifies . . . resentment,” attacks “prevailing creeds and institutions,” and fosters anger and hatred,<sup>68</sup> but it makes “strikingly little reference to the future” and “only rarely discusses solutions.”<sup>69</sup> Nonetheless, the movement leader offers hope for the future. Although it is enthymematic, calling upon listeners to imagine their own version of a better day, the rhetoric of social movements promises fulfillment of those dreams by celebrating the power of the collectivity. As Hoffer wrote, “the quality of ideas seems to play a minor role in mass movement leadership.”<sup>70</sup> More important is the leader’s personification of “the defiance and grandeur of power.”<sup>71</sup> Movement rhetoric “feeds on and at the same time nourishes” feelings of unity, common purpose, and collective strength, as the leader portrays him or herself as the incarnation of the collective spirit.<sup>72</sup> For “true believers,” Hoffer concluded, “surrender to a leader” becomes “not a means to an end but a fulfillment. Whither they are led is of secondary importance.”<sup>73</sup>

Not all of George Wallace’s rhetoric appealed to his following of “true believers.” In news conferences, political advertising, and speeches to the uncommitted, Wallace addressed

specific issues as a conservative alternative to his more liberal Democratic competitors. But at the rallies for his faithful, his rhetoric assumed the tone, not of conservative politics, but of radical protest. At his rallies, he offered his followers more than just a political alternative. He promised them a historic crusade, not for particular policies, but for revenge against their enemies and restoration of their status and power. Reminding them of the conspiratorial persecution of “average citizens” and casting himself as their savior, Wallace went beyond specific issues to offer politically isolated and alienated citizens a new collective identity and a sense of political efficacy. Shedding the costume of a “respectable” presidential candidate, Wallace cast his rallies as part of a “revolutionary” crusade to save the “Great Middle Class.” In the tradition of most who lead mass movements, he offered his followers fulfillment as the vanguard of a revolution to remake America.

The Wallace rally address exhibited characteristics rarely seen in mainstream campaign discourse.<sup>74</sup> First, Wallace articulated, explained, and justified the negative feelings of his followers by *polarizing* the world into two opposing camps: “average citizens” committed to traditional values, and elite or establishment forces out to destroy those values. From the rituals and music used to rouse up the audience to the rally speech itself, the Wallace rally was designed to highlight traditional or “old-fashioned” values while identifying and scapegoating supposed “enemies” of the “common man.” Second, the rally speech promised a “return” to some past better day when the “average citizen” counted, while also celebrating the collective strength of the “Great Middle Class.” Wallace offered a restoration, not of specific policies, but of his followers’ status and political relevance. Finally, Wallace suggested that he alone could lead the crusade to restore the status and influence of the “average citizen,” for he was the incarnation of their collective spirit and strength. Wallace presented himself as the only national political figure who could genuinely identify with the “common man,” while at the same time he established that he had uncommon qualifications for leadership. This seemingly paradoxical *ethos*, combined with the absence of any clear political platform in Wallace’s rally speech, served to make commitment to Wallace’s leadership an end in itself.

At the heart of George Wallace’s appeal to his supporters was a celebration of the past. His cause was “revolutionary,” he insisted; it aimed at fundamental change. But his goal was a restoration of past traditions and values, not something new. The focus on the past began long before Wallace appeared on stage with his careful scheduling of rallies in areas that had seen better days—neighborhoods of ethnic transformation or economic decay.<sup>75</sup> Wallace aides, having carefully prepared the sites chosen for rallies with banners, bunting, and flags symbolic of old-fashioned patriotism, led the crowd in an hour of cherished rituals from a presumably lost era. Unison recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance, collective prayers, and group singing of traditional country, religious, and patriotic songs fostered unity grounded in “rabid patriotism, fundamental Protestant religion, and nostalgia.”<sup>76</sup> Rally attendees “sang together, prayed together, stood together, sat together, and intoned the Pledge of Allegiance together,” building to a “frenzied atmosphere” reminiscent of an old tent revival.<sup>77</sup> The “gospel-singing, toe-tapping crowds at Wallace rallies struck outside observers as social relics.”<sup>78</sup> But as descriptions of the

atmosphere at their gatherings often suggested, their nostalgia helped them recapture a sense of relevance and purpose: “The crowd sang along, gustily, feet stomping and hands clapping; people pulsed with a messianic joy; their cause was holy and their savior was at hand.”<sup>79</sup>

Wallace’s rally address built upon these patriotic and religious feelings by infusing them with political substance. Wallace did not merely reiterate the values celebrated in his preliminary rituals. He explained how they had come under attack by creating a polarized world with supporters and opponents of the cherished traditionalism. He judged the two sides by assigning them names. On the one side were the “average citizens,” the “common men,” or the “Great Middle Class.” On the other side were the “pseudo-intellectuals,” the “anarchists,” and other assorted proponents of “social experimentation.” At Serb Hall in Milwaukee in 1976 he made it sound as if his crusade had nothing at all to do with race: “And let us not let anything degenerate into this matter involving race. . . . Let us hope and pray for the American dream for everybody, regardless of their race and color, . . .”(46).<sup>80</sup> During a speech in Virginia in 1967, he even claimed to have “never made a speech in my life reflecting on anybody because of color.”<sup>81</sup> But while the rally address was not explicitly racist, it did foster hatred for a number of enemies, including “intellectuals” who thought themselves “superior to the man in the streets.” Wallace spoke for those who were “sick and tired” of those intellectuals “lookin’ down their noses” at “average citizens” and telling them how to run their lives.<sup>82</sup>

Anti-intellectualism and hostility toward social change were the guiding principles in Wallace’s “torrent of negativity” against the *status quo*.<sup>83</sup> Over the years, he created a variety of scapegoats, including the “suave newsmen” of the television networks and big city newspapers, bearded college professors, tax-exempt foundations, and other institutions corrupted by the “intellectual cult.”<sup>84</sup> His primary targets, however, were always elements of the established political system: big government, the two-party system, the federal courts, and government bureaucrats. His “great issue” over the years, as he reminded his supporters in Serb Hall, was “the matter of big government trying to infringe upon the pocketbooks and lives of the people of this country more than they ought to” (4).

Wallace blamed the “social experimentation” that threatened the “Great Middle Class” on an “intelligentsia” with “high-falutin’ theories”<sup>85</sup> As a third-party candidate in 1968, of course, he focused on how those crazy theories had led both parties to settle for a “no-win” strategy in Vietnam and military “inferiority.”<sup>86</sup> During a rally in Toledo on October 3, 1968, Wallace also accused the two parties of supporting laws that stripped “average citizens” of the right to “determine the policies of . . . school systems,” to control “their own labor unions, their own businesses, and the ownership of [their] own property.”<sup>87</sup> Worst of all, the “intellectuals” leading both parties had encouraged the “anarchy movement” and “kowtowed to every anarchist that has roamed the streets.”<sup>88</sup>

When not blaming the parties for social disorder and lawlessness, Wallace blamed the federal courts, which encouraged crime and legislated social change when they had “no right to write law” (47). Citizens could not walk the streets “in safety,” he declared at his rally in Serb Hall, because “these permissive federal courts and judges pay more attention to those who shoot

and rob you than they do to those who are shot and robbed” (22). Meanwhile, the federal courts had destroyed traditional moral values by ruling that “you can send obscene literature through the mail” but “you cannot even say a simple prayer in a public school.”<sup>89</sup> Again, the problem, in Wallace’s world view, was a simple lack of common sense.

Finally, Wallace targeted an amorphous group of federal bureaucrats—those “pluperfect hypocrites . . . over in Maryland and Virginia”<sup>90</sup>—who believed that you could “solve every problem under the sun, imagined or unimagined, with the middle class’s money” (11). These federal bureaucrats were “parasites” who wrote “guidelines” telling Americans everything from “when to go to bed at night” to “when to get up in the morning.”<sup>91</sup> To add insult to injury, they then blamed “average citizens” for America’s problems with talk of a “sick society.” “Well, we don’t have any sick society,” Wallace assured his followers. Absolving the Wallacites of blame, he concluded: “We have a sick Supreme Court and some sick politicians in Washington—that’s who’s sick in our country.”<sup>92</sup>

The best evidence for Wallace’s claim that “social experimentation” was ruining America predictably showed up at Wallace rallies in the form of protestors. Although Wallace blamed the federal government for the changes that were ruining America, he counted on the protestors to demonstrate the results. The protestors personified all that was wrong with America, providing the concrete, tangible enemies needed to focus his followers’ scorn and spark their emotional outrage.<sup>93</sup> These were the “anarchists” who provided clear evidence of a society gone bad. In contrast to an establishment that allegedly encouraged them, Wallace came on stage itching for a fight. Much to his audience’s delight, he would turn on the demonstrators with a litany of insults and put-downs. Some of those one-liners emphasized the assault on traditional values: “There are two four-letter words I bet you folks down there don’t know: ‘work’ and ‘soap.’”<sup>94</sup> Others emphasized the protestors’ rejection of traditional sex roles and standards of dress: “That’s alright honey—that’s right sweetie pie—oh, that’s a he. I thought you were a she.” “You come up when I get through and I’ll autograph your sandals for you. . . . You need a good hair-cut. That’s all that’s wrong with you.”<sup>95</sup> Whatever the barb, Wallace’s sparring with demonstrators delighted the crowd and focused attention on flesh-and-blood symbols of a threatening new order.<sup>96</sup> Again, Wallace provided scapegoats for his followers; he provided targets that helped transform alienation and pessimism into anger and scorn.

The negativity of the Wallace’s rally speech helps account for his ability to forge a coalition characterized by discontent rather than support for particular political policies. As long as Wallace emphasized what was wrong with America rather than what should be done, his followers could entertain politically diverse ideas about the best solutions. Wallace did talk about the future on occasion. He promised his followers a better day, but he did so ambiguously. He talked vaguely about “returning” to some past better day when the “average citizen” counted. Although promising to “restore” the Constitution or to “return” to “average citizens” control over their own lives, he never spoke in detail about that ideal past he celebrated. For some Wallace supporters the promise of the future may have been little more than restored parental authority and “dream-visions of revenge on all the rebel children, a cosmic spanking when George took

over.”<sup>97</sup> Others may have entertained more politically specific visions, like a return to the New Deal as mythologized by liberals or to the Old West as celebrated by the New Right of the 1970s.<sup>98</sup> Whatever the vision, Wallace’s rhetoric never precluded it, for he emphasized the immediate future rather than “final rewards or ultimate compensations.”<sup>99</sup> In the rally speech, Wallace offered belonging, status, and power through participation in the crusade and commitment to his leadership. He left it to his followers to imagine their final destination.

Power itself, not specific policies, was Wallace’s promise for the future. At times he portrayed the opposition as formidable, controlling all of America’s institutions. When promising restoration of his followers’ power, however, he reduced the opposition to a noisy, unproductive, and spineless minority. Again polarizing the world, he cast his enemies as “those who don’t work when they can find work, and those who want to rip you off at welfare and the filthy rich” (12). He talked of “a few anarchists, a few activists, a few militants, a few revolutionaries, and a few communists” supported by “some professors and some newspaper editors and some judges and some preachers.”<sup>100</sup> On the other side were the more virtuous and productive citizens who supported Wallace: “. . . those who produce the wealth and fight the wars and pay the taxes that hold our country together” (12). Not only did Wallace claim for his movement the superior virtue and strength of the “Great Middle Class,” but he also assured his followers that “there are more of us than there are of them.”<sup>101</sup>

Wallace exhorted his followers to exercise their power, not to win adoption of particular policies, but to reclaim their rightful status. Offering them the immediate satisfaction of revenge against those who had ignored them, he urged them to vent their anger in demanding, coercive tones. The “Great Middle Class” was “big enough” to get what it wanted, he told his supporters at Serb Hall, and he urged them to get tough: “And you’re . . . not going to get it with just askin’ them to do it—you’ve got to demand it” (15). Elaborating the point, he explained that you “can’t cut it by talking easy, and smilin’ about it. You gotta talk rough about it, that’s the only language they understand” (17). The very act of venting their anger—of “telling off” the establishment—became a reward in itself in Wallace’s rally address.

Yet Wallace never let his followers forget that they could not do it alone. He constantly reminded them that they were powerless as individuals; only through commitment to his special leadership could they hope to succeed. He went to great lengths in his rally speeches to establish himself as their *leader*—as an “image or mirror of collective forces.”<sup>102</sup> Indeed, it apparently became his conviction—“more than conviction, visceral sensation”—that he was “the incarnation of the ‘folks.’”<sup>103</sup> He spent much of his rally address trying to solidify this *ethos* as the only national leader who could truly identify with the “common man” yet at the same time stand up to the powers-that-be. He boasted of how his extraordinary leadership had made the establishment “respectful” toward him; instead of “making fun” of him they now took him “mighty seriously.”<sup>104</sup>

Wallace’s status as a southerner, as a state governor, and as perhaps the most vilified politician in America contributed to his special *ethos*. His reputation as a political outsider mirrored his followers’ self-perception. Claiming that he, too, had been mistreated by the

political elite, he attributed attacks on his candidacy to the fact that he too was a “common man.” At his rallies, he even *sounded* like a “common man.” Political commentators and scholars ridiculed his unpolished style, but it conveyed to his supporters a likeness of mind. He talked like the “common man,” using “simple illustrations and anecdotes . . . loosely strung together through careless organization.”<sup>105</sup> As Rosenfield observed, he seemed to find “evidence burdensome,” so he carried a “stock of anecdotes to be plugged into his speech at appropriate spots.”<sup>106</sup> In a 1968 rally address in Toledo, for example, he attacked gun control with an illustration which revealed his disregard for ordinary standards of evidence and reasoning. With gun control, he predicted, “you’ll find that every law-abiding citizen in Ohio would not have a gun but every thug would have ten guns and a machine gun.”<sup>107</sup> When speaking on law-and-order, he made his point in an equally hyperbolic, simplistic illustration: “And according to the decisions of the Supreme Court, if you go—if you go into the streets tonight and are attacked and a policeman knocks the person in the head, he’ll be let out of jail before you get into the hospital, and then they’ll go and try the policeman about it.”<sup>108</sup> Wallace incorporated this type of exaggerated scenario into a loosely structured review of America’s woes, with the illustrations tied repeatedly to a simple, central idea, like out-of-control crime or the persecution of the “Great Middle Class.” He did not discuss a specific topic in “a line of reasoning with any thematic consistency.” Instead, his “speeches verged at times on free association.”<sup>109</sup>

Wallace supplemented his stylistic identification with the common man with explicit claims that only he thought like the supporters at his rallies. He frequently told his followers that if he were ever “kicked out” of Alabama, he knew he would be welcome among the people of their town.<sup>110</sup> He also made the point more directly, as when he addressed a rally in Missouri in 1968: “I am the only candidate in the race who speaks both for you and to you.”<sup>111</sup> In 1972, he liked to call himself a “southerner,” not in a “geographical sense,” but in “state of mind.” Presumably, only a leader from that historically marginalized region could emphasize with the neglected and persecuted “average citizen.”<sup>112</sup> Even in 1976, after many candidates had co-opted his anti-establishment themes, he still drew cheers at Serb Hall when he proclaimed himself that only national leader who could genuinely identify with the common man: “And I still speak the language of the Southside better than any candidate in this race for the presidency here at the present time” (2).

Yet Wallace was always quick to remind his followers that, while like-minded, he was larger, more dynamic, and more prophetic than the “average citizen.” He was, in short, a genuine leader. His delivery contributed significantly to this leadership *persona*. As Raum and Measell reported, there was just “something about Wallace’s pugnacious, ‘bantam rooster’ manner that [commanded] attention.”<sup>113</sup> He came out “with boxer’s steps” and “quick, darting eyes that [sized] up things in a moment”; and as the tension and noise mounted within the hall, his voice came over the loud speakers “like a bugle, reverberant, spine-tingling. . . . He had a vital, poisonous glee.”<sup>114</sup> He seemed to make his followers “feel something *real* for once in their lives,” one reporter commented. “You saw those people in the auditorium while he was

speaking—you saw their eyes. . . . You can't help but respond to him. Me—my heart was pounding. I couldn't rake my eyes off him, there were all those people screaming.”<sup>115</sup>

Wallace solidified this image-as-leader by talking, in Hoffer's words, “the language of the visionary and the idealist.”<sup>116</sup> In the language of religious prophecy, he repeatedly reminded his audiences that he had predicted all the problems now besetting America: “I came here first twelve years ago, and nearly everything that I predicted and stated in that day has now come to pass. I was a prophet out of my own time. And now nearly every single candidate, Republican and Democratic, is talking and sounding exactly like those of us here at Serb Hall sounded several years ago” (3). Mixing his religious metaphors, he concluded: “. . . and I am glad to see them all come down the road of repentance politically, and now drink out of the same dipper and draw water out of the same well” (4). Wallace thereby admitted that his political positions were not distinctive; candidates with a better chance of winning the presidency now took many of the same stands. But he still commanded the loyalty of his followers because he offered them something more: an affirmation of their worth. Although by 1976 Wallace had become just one of many anti-establishment candidates, he remained the only candidate for president who could genuinely identify with the “common man.”

### **Wallace's Legacy: The Politics of Disaffection**

Wallace supporters were not ordinary voters. They did not choose their candidates or engage in political activity to promote particular policies or to fulfill a sense of civic duty. They are better understood as “true believers,” motivated by emotional factors and zealous in their dedication to a particular leader. Contrary to their stereotype as right-wing ideologues, Wallace supporters shared no conventional political ideology. Instead, they were united by dissatisfaction with politics-as-usual—and a longing to be heard. Their extremism was grounded not in political ideology but in disaffection and frustration with things-as-they-are. Although they wanted fundamental change, they sought a *return* to some past better day and a *restoration* of their political status. They sought relief from feelings of neglect, persecution, and pessimism at a time of rapid social change. In Hoffer's terms, they were “ripe” for participation in a movement—any movement—launched in their name against the existing order. They looked for someone to give voice to their anxieties, absolve them of blame, and restore their sense of political efficacy.

George Wallace gave voice to those feelings of disaffection and alienation. He articulated and legitimized the negative feelings of his followers and provided them with scapegoats. By attacking “social experimentation” and the “anarchists” who were destroying America, he transformed alienation and pessimism into purposeful scorn. He offered his followers a return to the good-old-days when the “average citizen” counted, and he instilled in them a sense of collective power and purpose.

In short, Wallace offered his followers a historic mass movement, not just another political campaign. Religious imagery—visions of crusades and prophets—permeated Wallace's

rallies, perhaps reflecting his imitation of the maverick revivalist preachers he admired as a youngster.<sup>117</sup> Like the early populist “Calamity Howlers,”<sup>118</sup> Wallace emphasized all that was wrong with America, and he offered his leadership as the solution. While other candidates upheld the rhetorical protocol of American politics, Wallace distinguished himself with “impassioned double-talk and sonorous refrains.”<sup>119</sup> While others strove for respectability, Wallace reveled in “the arrogant gesture, the complete disregard of the opinions of others, the single-handed defiance of the world.”<sup>120</sup> As his critics noted, Wallace violated virtually every rhetorical standard of mainstream politics. Yet that very defiance of the norms and conventions of politics-as-usual made him a hero within a particularly alienated segment of the American electorate.

Much the same might be said—and *has* been said—about the 2016 presidential campaign of Donald J. Trump. Although Trump did not embody the “common man” in appearance or demeanor, his raucous political rallies were eerily reminiscent of the Wallace rally. Defying the rules of “polite” political discourse, both Trump and Wallace lashed out against the decline of traditional values. Both tapped into working-class angst over the social and cultural changes that were taking place in America, and both blamed a Washington elite out of touch with the common man. Trump’s pledge to “Make America Great Again” invoked the same nostalgia for some past better day as Wallace’s slogan “Stand Up for America,” and his critique of “political correctness” echoed Wallace’s denunciations of “social engineering.” Of course, both appealed to fear and bigotry, and both bear responsibility for the “intermittent spasms of violence” that erupted at their rallies.<sup>121</sup> But to many disaffected and alienated Americans, they were the only candidates who talked about what mattered. They gave voice to the angst of millions of Americans who felt forgotten, displaced, disrespected, and ignored.

Donald J. Trump and George C. Wallace are not unique in American history. Both represent a long tradition of “rough-hewn populism” that historically has proven effective at riling up the disaffected despite being “light on policy.”<sup>122</sup> Of course, there’s a “sharp contrast between Wallace’s blue-collar belligerence” and Trump’s “incessant boasting about how much money he has made and how famous he is,” as historian Michael Kazin has observed. Yet, rhetorically, both drew upon the same three “pathological strains in American history and culture”: (1) hostility toward immigrants and others whose ethnic or religious identities “clash with those of the native-born majority”; (2) a “contempt toward established political authorities”; and (3) an emphasis on the “image and personality of the man himself.” As Kazin concludes, “a candidate who makes no specific promises can never disappoint his followers.”<sup>123</sup> Nor is such a candidate damaged by “bad press,” for critical news coverage only reinforces their *persona* as defiant outsiders. Trump’s “populism of derision,” like Wallace’s rants against the enemies of the “average citizen,” was not *about* policies or politics-as-usual. To the contrary, it was about giving voice to the frustrations, fear, and anger of an especially disaffected segment of the American electorate.

Trump and Wallace both deserve the label “demagogue,” and many of their followers may well have been bigots or fools. Yet there are important lessons to be learned from the

periodic emergence of populist demagoguery in U.S. history. During times of uncertainty and change, a sizeable minority of Americans will always be drawn to “forceful figures who confidently promise the destruction of all enemies, real and imagined, allowing Americans to return to a past that never existed.”<sup>124</sup> If we hope to contain the damage that can be done by such demagoguery, we must find other mechanisms for challenging the anger of citizens who feel they do not have a voice.

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**Author’s Note:** J. Michael Hogan is the Edwin Erle Sparks Professor Emeritus of Rhetoric at the Pennsylvania State University. He would like to thank Sara Mehlretter Drury, Mark Hlavacik, and Lubov M. Zeifman for help with transcription and research for this essay.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Bill Jones, *The Wallace Story* (Northport, AL: American Southern Publishing, 1966), 176.

<sup>2</sup> The disadvantages facing a third-party candidate include the winner-take-all Electoral College, federal campaign finance laws, the rules governing eligibility for debates, and a lack of media attention. See Kristina Nwazota, “Third Parties in the U.S. Political Process,” *PBS Newshour*, July 26, 2004, [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/politics-july-dec04-third\\_parties/](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/politics-july-dec04-third_parties/) (accessed May 20, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President, 1972* (New York: Bantam Books, 1973), 161.

<sup>4</sup> “Turning on the Charm in Europe,” *Time*, October 27, 1975, 15; Philip Crass, *The Wallace Factor* (New York: Mason and Charter, 1976), 28.

<sup>5</sup> Crass, *The Wallace Factor*, 29. See also Jody Carlson, *George C. Wallace and the Politics of Powerlessness: The Wallace Campaigns for the Presidency, 1964-1976* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1981), 223.

<sup>6</sup> Crass, *The Wallace Factor*, 13.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Wayne Greenhaw, *Watch Out for George Wallace* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976), 32.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Marshall Frady, “The Return of George Wallace,” *New York Review of Books*, 30 October 1975, 16.

<sup>9</sup> Lawrence W. Rosenfield, “George Wallace Plays Rosemary’s Baby,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 55 (1969): 37-40.

<sup>10</sup> Dan T. Carter, “What Donald Trump Owes George Wallace,” *New York Times*, January 8, 2016, [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/10/opinion/campaign-stops/what-donald-trump-owes-george-wallace.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/10/opinion/campaign-stops/what-donald-trump-owes-george-wallace.html?_r=0) (accessed May 13, 2016).

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- <sup>11</sup> Rick Lowry, "Our George Wallace," *National Review*, March 15, 2016, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/432797/donald-trump-george-wallace-2016> (accessed May 22, 2016).
- <sup>12</sup> Carter, "What Donald Trump Owes George Wallace."
- <sup>13</sup> Roderick P. Hart, "The Rhetoric of the True Believer," *Speech Monographs* 39 (1971), 249-262.
- <sup>14</sup> Jeff Frederick, *Stand Up for Alabama: Governor George Wallace* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 2007), 7.
- <sup>15</sup> Stephen Leshner, *George Wallace: An American Populist* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1994), 33-34.
- <sup>16</sup> Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 41-45.
- <sup>17</sup> Frederick, *Stand Up for Alabama*, 11-12.
- <sup>18</sup> Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 51, 68.
- <sup>19</sup> Frederick, *Stand Up For Alabama*, 14.
- <sup>20</sup> Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 79.
- <sup>21</sup> Anne Permaloff and Carl Grafton, *Political Power in Alabama: The More Thing Change...* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1995), 69.
- <sup>22</sup> Permaloff and Grafton, *Political Power in Alabama*, 82.
- <sup>23</sup> Leshner, *George Wallace*, 125.
- <sup>24</sup> Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 96.
- <sup>25</sup> Frederick, *Stand Up for Alabama*, 20-21; Permaloff and Grafton, *Political Power in Alabama*, 158.
- <sup>26</sup> Frederick, *Stand Up for Alabama*, 22.
- <sup>27</sup> Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 106-107.
- <sup>28</sup> Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 109; Frederick, *Stand Up for Alabama* 34.
- <sup>29</sup> E. Culpepper Clark, *The Schoolhouse Door: Segregation's Last Stand at the University of Alabama* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1993), 12, 19-20, 46, 86.
- <sup>30</sup> Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 130-131.
- <sup>31</sup> Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 106.
- <sup>32</sup> Clark, *The Schoolhouse Door*, 154.
- <sup>33</sup> Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 150.
- <sup>34</sup> Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 135.
- <sup>35</sup> John F. Kennedy, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, 1961-1963*, vol. 3 (Washington D.C.: GPO, 1963), 469.
- <sup>36</sup> Frederick, *Stand Up for Alabama*, 65.
- <sup>37</sup> Frederick, *Stand Up for Alabama*, 91.
- <sup>38</sup> Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President 1964* (New York, NY: Anthem Publishers, 1965), 234.

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<sup>39</sup> Carlson, *George C. Wallace and the Politics of Powerlessness*, 67-68; Carter, *Politics of Rage*, 300.

<sup>40</sup> Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 337-338.

<sup>41</sup> Permaloff and Grafton, *Political Power in Alabama*, 238.

<sup>42</sup> Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President, 1968* (New York, NY: Anthem Books, 1970), 351.

<sup>43</sup> J. David Gillespie, *Politics at the Periphery: Third Parties in Two-Party America* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993), 3-4, 31, 46, 55; Thomas F. Pettigrew, Robert t. Riley, and Reeve D. Vanneman, "George Wallace's Constituents," *Psychology Today* 5 (1972), 3.

<sup>44</sup> Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 384

<sup>45</sup> White, *The Making of the President, 1972*, 151.

<sup>46</sup> White, *The Making of the President, 1972*, 237.

<sup>47</sup> Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 437; Leshner, *George Wallace*, 483-484.

<sup>48</sup> Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 450.

<sup>49</sup> Leshner, *George Wallace*, 486-490.

<sup>50</sup> Frederick, *Stand Up for Alabama*, 339-340.

<sup>51</sup> Carlson, *George C. Wallace and the Politics of Powerlessness*, 184-185; Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 455-456.

<sup>52</sup> Frederick, *Stand Up for Alabama*, 360.

<sup>53</sup> Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 346.

<sup>54</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* (New York: Warner Books, 1973), 156.

<sup>55</sup> See Robert G. Gunderson, "The Calamity Howlers," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 26 (1940): 401-411.

<sup>56</sup> George E. Reedy, *The Twilight of the Presidency* (New York: Mentor Books, 1971), 129.

<sup>57</sup> "A Message of Discontent from the White House," *Time*, 17 April 1972, 17.

<sup>58</sup> White, *The Making of the President, 1972*, 462.

<sup>59</sup> Carlson, *George C. Wallace and the Politics of Powerlessness*, 275.

<sup>60</sup> For descriptions of the survey and the raw data used in the following analysis, see Warren E. Miller, Arthur H. Miller, and F. Gerald Kline, *The CPS 1974 American National Election Study* (Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-University Consortium for Political Research, 1975).

<sup>61</sup> Strong Wallace supporters were defined as respondents who chose from 97 to 100 on a 100-point "feeling thermometer" used by the CPS to assess attitudes toward politicians and political groups. See Miller, Miller, and Kline, *The CPS 1974 American National Election Study*, 415-16.

<sup>62</sup> The detailed data on these questions may be found in J. Michael Hogan, "George Wallace's Political Revivalism: A Case Study in the Political Application of Religious Rhetorical Strategies," M.A. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1977.

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<sup>63</sup> Slightly more than 10 percent of strong Wallace supporters chose to say their income was “much less” than their “fair share,” while only 4.5 percent of all other respondents made that claim.

<sup>64</sup> Pettigrew, Riley, and Vannerman, “George Wallace’s Constituents,” 48.

<sup>65</sup> Eric Hoffer, *The True Believer: Thoughts on the Nature of Mass Movements* (1951; rpt, New York: Perennial Library, 1966), 103.

<sup>66</sup> Hoffer, *The True Believer*, 25

<sup>67</sup> Hoffer, *The True Believer*, 105.

<sup>68</sup> Hoffer, *The True Believer*, 105, 128.

<sup>69</sup> Hart, “The Rhetoric of the True Believer,” 252-253.

<sup>70</sup> Hoffer, *The True Believer*, 107.

<sup>71</sup> Hoffer, *The True Believer*, 105.

<sup>72</sup> Hart, “The Rhetoric of the True Believer,” 260.

<sup>73</sup> Hoffer, *The True Believer*, 110.

<sup>74</sup> Although this VOD curriculum unit features an authenticated text from Wallace’s rally address at Serb Hall in 1976, the following analysis is based upon examination of a regionally diverse sample of Wallace rallies from 1964 to 1976. Primary sources include recordings or complete texts of six rally addresses delivered in Virginia, Ohio, Illinois, New York, and Wisconsin. These sources are supplemented with excerpts and descriptions of Wallace rallies dating back to 1964 in Maryland, Florida, Missouri, Indiana, Ohio, and New York.

<sup>75</sup> Wallace’s careful selection of sites for his rallies prompted John J. Makay to comment on his “strategy of illusion” during the 1964 campaign. According to Makay, Wallace appeared to stump the state of Maryland in an active campaign, when in fact he “visited only a small part of the state.” He seldom made forays into areas where he most needed to build support. Instead, he went to areas where his support was already strong, seemingly in pursuit of something other than new votes. As Makay observed, Wallace would send advance teams to make arrangements for his rallies, and he consented to appear only upon “invitations from groups that would provide ‘friendly’ forums.” See John J. Makay, “The Rhetorical Strategies of Governor George Wallace in the 1964 Maryland Primary,” *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 36 (1970), 166.

<sup>76</sup> Richard D. Raum and James S. Measell, “Wallace and His Ways: A Study of the Rhetorical Genre of Polarization,” *Central States Speech Journal* 25 (1974): 33.

<sup>77</sup> Raum and Measell, “Wallace and His Ways,” 33.

<sup>78</sup> “Wallace Campaigns in Florida,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 28, 1975, part 2, 2.

<sup>79</sup> Crass, *The Wallace Factor*, 13.

<sup>80</sup> All quotations from Wallace’s rally address at Serb Hall on March 26, 1976, are cited parenthetically with reference to the paragraph numbers in the text published along with this essay on the VOD website.

<sup>81</sup> George Wallace, speech in Charlottesville, Virginia, October 1, 1967, Language Laboratory tape collection, University of Virginia, Charlottesville.

<sup>82</sup> Wallace, speech in Charlottesville.

<sup>83</sup> Hart, “The Rhetoric of the True Believer,” 253.

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<sup>84</sup> Wallace criticized the “suave newsmen” for “making fun of our movement” while paying more attention to the “few folks” who “made the most noise” protesting. He especially liked to mock the *New York Times* for praising Fidel Castro as the “Robin Hood of the Caribbean” when the “average citizen” could tell he was a communist “just by lookin’ at him.” As for the college professors, he claimed that universities “let communists run wild in the name of academic freedom” and tolerated “overt acts of treason” in the name of “dissent.” He advocated grabbing “these professors” by “their beards” and putting them “in jail for what they are—traitors.” In attacking tax-exempt foundations, he claimed that it was “usually some pointed head from one of those multi-billion dollar tax-exempt foundations” who concluded “that you are to blame for the breakdown of law and order, and that the police are to blame.” He accused the “filthy rich” foundations of using their money to finance “subversion.” Wallace, speech in Charlottesville; George Wallace, “Speech at Madison Square Garden, October 24, 1968,” in *History of U.S. Political Parties*, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (New York: Chelsea House, 1973), IV: 3493-3494; George Wallace, speech before the American Courage Party, Americana Hotel, New York, September 1971, Pacifica Program Service and Tape Library, Berkeley, California.

<sup>85</sup> Wallace, speech in Charlottesville.

<sup>86</sup> Wallace, “Speech at Madison Square Garden,” 3494-3495.

<sup>87</sup> George Wallace, “Speech by George Wallace,” in John J. Makay and William R. Brown, *The Rhetorical Dialogue: Contemporary Concepts and Cases* (Dubuque, IA: William C. Brown, 1972), 244.

<sup>88</sup> Wallace, “Speech at Madison Square Garden,” 3492.

<sup>89</sup> Wallace, “Speech at Madison Square Garden,” 3494.

<sup>90</sup> Wallace, “Speech at Madison Square Garden,” 3493.

<sup>91</sup> Wallace, “Speech at Madison Square Garden,” 3493.

<sup>92</sup> Wallace, “Speech at Madison Square Garden,” 3493-3494.

<sup>93</sup> Hoffer has noted the importance of concrete, tangible enemies in producing mass enthusiasm: “Mass movements can rise and spread without belief in a God, but never without belief in a devil. Usually the strength of a mass movement is proportionate to the vividness and tangibility of its devil.” Hoffer, *True Believer*, 86.

<sup>94</sup> Quoted in Rosenfield, “George Wallace Plays Rosemary’s Baby,” 43.

<sup>95</sup> Wallace, “Speech at Madison Square Garden,” 3496; George Wallace, speech in Chicago, Illinois, November 4, 1968, tape in possession of the writer.

<sup>96</sup> See Murray Edelman, *Politics as Symbolic Action: Mass Arousal and Quiescence* (Chicago: Markham Publishing Co., 1971), 109.

<sup>97</sup> Gary Wills, *Nixon Agonistes: The Crisis of the Self-Made Man* (New York: Signet Books, 1971), 57.

<sup>98</sup> See Alan Crawford, *Thunder on the Right: The ‘New Right’ and the Politics of Resentment* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 78-82.

<sup>99</sup> Hart, “The Rhetoric of the True Believer,” 253.

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- <sup>100</sup> Wallace, "Speech at Madison Square Gardens," 3492-3493.
- <sup>101</sup> Wallace, "Speech at Madison Square Gardens," 3293.
- <sup>102</sup> Michael C. McGee, "In Search of 'The People': A Rhetorical Alternative," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 61 (1975): 242.
- <sup>103</sup> Marshall Frady, *Wallace* (New York: World Publishing, 1968), 9.
- <sup>104</sup> Wallace, speech before the American Courage Party.
- <sup>105</sup> Makay, "George C. Wallace," 204-205.
- <sup>106</sup> Rosenfield, "George Wallace Plays Rosemary's Baby," 39.
- <sup>107</sup> Wallace, Speech by George Wallace," in Makay and Brown, *The Rhetorical Dialogue*, 245.
- <sup>108</sup> Wallace, Speech by George Wallace," in Makay and Brown, *The Rhetorical Dialogue*, 245.
- <sup>109</sup> Rosenfield, "George Wallace Plays Rosemary's Baby," 39.
- <sup>110</sup> Makay, "George C. Wallace," 205.
- <sup>111</sup> Thomas B. Harte, "The Rhetoric of Pox: Invention in George Wallace's Speech at Cape Girardeau, Missouri," *Central States Speech Journal* 23 (1972), 204.
- <sup>112</sup> Wallace, speech before the American Courage Party.
- <sup>113</sup> Raum and Measell, "Wallace and His Ways," 34.
- <sup>114</sup> "R.R.B. From Washington," *New Republic*, 20 December 1975, 2.
- <sup>115</sup> Frady, *Wallace*, 6.
- <sup>116</sup> Hoffer, *The True Believer*, 107.
- <sup>117</sup> Greenhaw, *Watch Out for George Wallace*, 92-93.
- <sup>118</sup> See Gunderson, "The Calamity Howlers," 401-411.
- <sup>119</sup> Hoffer, *The True Believer*, 98.
- <sup>120</sup> Hoffer, *The True Believer*, 107.
- <sup>121</sup> Joy-Ann Reid, "Donald Trump is the GOP's George Wallace," *The Daily Beast*, December 15, 2015, <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2015/12/15/donald-trump-is-the-gop-s-george-wallace.html> (accessed May 24, 2016).
- <sup>122</sup> Lowry, "Our George Wallace."
- <sup>123</sup> Michael Kazin, "Trump History," *Foreign Affairs*, December 10, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2015-12-10/trumping-history> (accessed May 24, 2016).
- <sup>124</sup> Carter, "What Donald Trump Owes George Wallace."