

PRINCIPLES & HERESIES

Frank S. Meyer

GEORGE WALLACE, like every American demagogue in our history, is a populist. Populism is the radical opposite of conservatism. Why, then, are some conservatives attracted to his candidacy? Why is he able to enter the national arena as a champion of the conservative opposition to prevailing liberalism? These questions have to be answered and Wallace's claims to conservative support unmasked, if his candidacy is not to tear apart the American conservative movement and poison the moral source of its strength. The danger is twofold: the distraction of conservative energy from the difficult, but eminently possible, task of defeating liberalism in the Republican Party, and the distortion of conservative principle by acquiescence in Wallace's simplistic demagogy.

A major outcome of the 1964 campaign is that conservatives, if they organize and work, hold at the least a veto over the choice of the Republican convention. Despite the '64 defeat, they have gained substantial control of large sections of the Republican organization. They may not in 1968 be strong enough to nominate the candidate they would most desire, but if they remain united, they can certainly so act that, in alliance with the professional politicians, they can present the country with a serious and greatly more conservative alternative to Johnson.

Powerful historical currents like liberalism are not reversed overnight. The liberals took many decades to achieve their hegemony; patience and hard work should be no more difficult for conservatives, whose view of society respects the complex

interrelationships of human beings and repudiates utopian reliance upon instant change.

More surely fatal to American conservatism, however, than the impatient loss of solid political opportunities within the Republican Party would be the integral destruction of moral being that would flow from adherence to the Wallace candidacy. And this returns me to the questions with which I began this column. What is the appeal of Wallace to conservatives, and why is that appeal so dangerous for the future of American conservatism?



Meyer

THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM lies in the history of the contemporary conservative movement. That movement came into existence under circumstances of liberal domination of the national scene. Although in its intellectual leadership and development it has been based on firm conservative principle, it has drawn its support, to begin with, not primarily from widespread conscious conservative sources but from diverse groups, each of which was in opposition to liberalism for limited and particular reasons.

Some, who were appalled by the appeasement of Soviet Communism and our retreat before its drive to power, were not deeply concerned by the glacier-like advance of domestic centralization and collectivism. Some, who felt deeply the domestic danger, did not understand, and failed to be alarmed by, the power of international Communism. Some were drawn into opposition to liberalism by its steady encroachment on the liberties of individual citizens; others, by the paradoxically opposite effect of liberal theories of government, the decay of law and order.

Diverse, often contradictory, positions of this sort abound in the constituency of the conservative movement. In the brief dozen to fifteen years of its existence in its contem-

porary form, however, it has performed a massive educational task in broadening the conspectus of those whom it has influenced and in forging a broad understanding based on principle. Still, the original strains exist in many quarters—instinctively, temperamentally, emotionally—and at crucial moments they come to the surface. When they do, those of us who attack certain positions as alien to the spirit of conservatism are inevitably criticized on the grounds that those whom we are attacking are also enemies of liberalism. What such criticism ignores is that there are other dangers to conservatism and to the civilization conservatives are defending than the liberal Establishment, and that to fight liberalism without guarding against these dangers runs the risk of ending in a situation as bad as or worse than our present one.

SO IT IS with the populism of George Wallace. Populism is one of the elements in the opposition to liberalism, because the arrogant and naked élitism of the liberals, isolated from the ethics and tradition of the people, is populism's polar opposite. But the polar opposite of a political perversion is not necessarily itself a good. Thus, while liberalism stands for the imposition of utopian design upon the people because the liberals know it is right, populism would substitute the tyranny of the majority over the individual, the pure will of "the people," untrammelled by considerations of freedom and virtue. It is in its own way as alien to the American conservative conception of constitutional republican government as is liberalism.

This populism is the air that Wallace breathes. Every speech he makes, every interview he gives, is redolent of it. Of course, when he talks of Vietnam or of violence in the streets or of federal encroachment, he takes positions parallel to conservative positions. But when it is a question of socialist welfare measures or when he builds a welfare state in Alabama, he is as far from conservatism as any liberal. His combination of nationalist and socialist appeals, couched in the rhetoric of incitement of the masses and contempt for the intellect in all its manifestations, is radically alien to conservatism.

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