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SCOM 381

Final Paper

## **An Analysis of George Wallace and his First Inaugural Address as Governor of Alabama**

George Wallace. A name closely associated with racism and everything that was wrong with the South. But what about the George Wallace who was endorsed by the NAACP during his first run for Governor? Or how the African American lawyers requested Judge Wallace when he was an Alabama state judge during the 1950s? This was a man who, at one point, was considered a moderate liberal on racial issues (PBS documentary, 2000). But this is not the Wallace that came to power and prominence in Alabama and then national politics. That Wallace died long ago and it took many years for it to be even remotely reborn. The George Wallace of the 1960s was a man who put aside his previous convictions and ideals for power and made a deal with the devil. And no point in his life better marked this descent into bigotry and hate than his January 14, 1963 inaugural address for Governor of Alabama. Several of his most prominent biographers have referred to Wallace as “the most influential loser” in contemporary politics (Lee, 2006, p. 368). Even though he, or his wife, was elected to be governor of Alabama a total of four times, he never made it to the national level. Wallace tried four times to run for president – 1968 being his most successful run. To understand the governor, one has to look back at his watershed moment. The 1958 election for governor. From there, one can attempt to explain how Wallace became a figure of tragedy (by his own doing though) and how he had to sell his soul for the governorship.

After understanding what made George Wallace tick, I shall move into his inaugural speech in 1963. By explaining this fiery speech through ideological criticism, one will be able to better comprehend the subtleties of both the man and the times. The bulk of the ideological criticism will be on the symbol and idea of the Lost Cause and naturally following that, coded language. From there, an analysis of his use of freedom and faith as a rallying call for white Southerners everywhere. With Wallace's election, the Governor of Alabama became a national position in a sense. Now let's head back in time to a Wallace that wasn't filled with hate and racism: 1958.

## **History**

In 1958, then-Judge Wallace made his first run for Governor of Alabama. His campaign focused on helping the poor. He didn't distinguish the blacks from the whites. He knew they both needed help and called for a change to how poverty was dealt with in the state. He ran on the platform that his idol, Governor "Big Jim" Folsom became popular on. It consisted of populist beliefs on economics and moderate views on race relations. In truth, Wallace was considered ahead of his time on many racial issues according to interviews done in the PBS documentary *Settin' the Woods on Fire*. But 1958 wasn't like previous years in Alabama. Racial tensions were beginning to rise and a shift to very conservative beliefs was unfolding. This was perhaps the only time that Wallace did not know what the electorate was feeling

Wallace was beaten in a landslide. His opponent ran on a white supremacist platform and the moderate Wallace was left in the dust. Later, back in his home county of Barbour in South-East Alabama, he vowed that he would never be "out-niggered" again (Pitts, 1998). And thus he became the villain to the Civil Rights Movement. He radically changed his views and sought the endorsement of white supremacist everywhere – including the KKK. His new campaign strategy

capitalized heavily on stoking the fears of white Southerners everywhere. This strategy won him the 1962 Governor's race with more votes than any previous Alabama candidate had ever received. He paid deeply for this win though.

### **Ideological Criticisms**

His life choices – much of them bad – led up to this win in 1962. Wallace and his speechwriter, Asa Carter (founder of a Ku Klux Klan organization), knew this speech would set the stage for the next four years. Alabama's tumultuous present was teetering on all out civil war with itself. Wallace recognized the importance of his inaugural address and how the eyes and ears of the nation would be keen on what he would do as governor of the Yellowhammer state. And he could not have been clearer with his message to fellow Alabamians and Americans all across the United States. From here I will analyze Wallace's speech using the ideological criticism method. I felt that this was the most effective choice and gave many options on paths to take.

But what is ideological criticism? Ideological criticism is a “symbol representing an ideological concept and is more than what the symbol itself depicts” (Class notes, 18 October 2016). These ideologies create a community that believe in it or not and creates that “us” vs. “them” mentality that really affected the minds' of white Southerners. As mentioned earlier, the ideologies I will be focusing on will be Wallace's view of the Lost Cause (and thus coded language as well) and then on Freedom with Faith. These two ideologies were powerful in his speech and helped to spread his call to action against the Federal Government.

### ***The Lost Cause***

If one wants a perfect example of something intangible and abstract with no clear accepted definition, then look no further than the idea of the Lost Cause. It was used heavily during the 1960s as a rallying call for white Southerners. But what exactly is this Cause? To many, it is in reference to not only the military defeat of the Confederacy after the “War Between the States” but also the end of the “southern way of life.” This way of life alluded to the antebellum period in which African Americans were subservient (or worse) among other things (Cox, 2013). George Wallace knew exactly this is what many of his supporters longed for again. Perhaps not slavery but at least a complete separation of races with whites being seen as superior. Essentially, the Lost Cause is parallel to the Old South and thus racism at its worse.

Just from pulling from historical examples, George Wallace begins his speech with a reference to perhaps the most famous Southerner of all time: General Robert E. Lee. He talks about how “duty” was most important to Lee and that Wallace had a duty to help the people of Alabama. He craftily linked himself to a noble line of Southern defenders (Lee, 2006). And then a couple minutes later, Wallace reminds his audience who else has stood where he stands. “Today I have stood, where once Jefferson Davis stood, and took an oath to my people. It is very appropriate that from this Cradle of the Confederacy, this very Heart of the Great Anglo-Saxon Southland...” One’s mind automatically now shifts between the Civil War and what they were fighting for and then their present time and what they’re fighting for. It sets up a comparison of how the South is under attack again and they have to defend themselves anew. This comparison is a constant analogy throughout the speech with references everywhere. Some more subtle than others in their hints. This core idea will be discussed in greater detail in the freedom ideological criticism however.

Definitively this speech is best known for his line about segregation. Segregation, by 1960s, had become associated with the Lost Cause. One part of the Cause was to keep the two races separate – if they could no longer be enslaved. Segregation was part of the “southern way of life” and needed to be defended at any cost. Wallace tapped into these feelings:

“Let us rise to the call of freedom-loving blood that is in us and send our answer to the tyranny that clanks its chains upon the South. In the name of the greatest people that have ever roamed this earth, 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.”

A previous chapter head of the NAACP, James L. Poe, Jr., said, when he heard that line: “To hear the governor of a state get up and make the kind of comments that you would expect that someone in the back alley, with their sheets on and burning crosses would make — that was the thing that really caught us” (Freemark & Richman, 2013). Wallace and Carter knew that that proclamation would be what the speech would be known for. No one before had dared state so starkly and clearly his/her position on segregation. Essentially Wallace proclaimed that it was time for the Southerners to rearm themselves and fight for the Lost Cause again. “As Carter explains, ‘With this melodramatic rhetorical flourish Alabama’s new governor had made himself the champion of embattled white southerners’” (Lee, 2006, p. 372). And fight it they did.

To be able to fight the tyranny of the federal government one needs an army. With that in mind, Wallace began a call to action in inspiring fellow Southerners to join him for this Cause. “And you native sons and daughters of old New England’s rock-ribbed patriotism... Mid-West... far West... we invite you to come and be with us.. for you are of the Southern mind... and Southern philosophy... you are Southerners too and brothers with us in our fight.” By creating a common identity, Wallace effectively begins weaving his nationwide coalition together. When he runs for president, Wallace’s appeal reaches far beyond just the Deep South

but also to the working class everywhere. His main appeal though resided in the minds' of Southerners however.

But who were they fighting against? In the Civil War, there was a clear enemy. This is where the coded language becomes prevalent. The Republican strategist Lee Atwater described coded language the best in his 1981 interview: “You start out in 1954 by saying, ‘Nigger, nigger, nigger.’ By 1968 you can’t say “nigger”—that hurts you, backfires. So you say stuff like, uh, forced busing, states’ rights, and all that stuff, and you’re getting so abstract” (Perlstein, 2012). Wallace already knew what Atwater was saying 20 years before the interview was given and he came up with this abstract enemy of the Federal Government. This federal government was coming down and infringing on their rights as free men. “We can no longer hide our heads in the sand and tell ourselves that the ideology of our free fathers is not being attacked and is not being threatened by another idea... for it is.” They weren’t fighting against the African Americans – no, instead they said they were fighting against the Federal Government and their infringement on their way of life. That “southern way of life” which was being invaded just happened to consist of segregation and other forms of racism. Their freedom became threatened Wallace would say.

### ***Freedom***

Freedom and faith become woven together to such an extent that one begins to imply the other by the end of the speech. And this freedom is in constant reference to the Lost Cause as well.

“We intend to renew our faith as God-fearing men... not government-fearing men nor any other kind of fearing-men. We intend to roll up our sleeves and pitch in to develop this full bounty God has given us... to live full and useful lives and in absolute freedom from all fear.”

The boogiemane of the Federal Government needed to be stood up to. The government was coming down into Alabama and enforcing their laws – unconstitutionally Wallace would say – upon unwilling Southerners. Wallace was doing his *duty* as any good Southerner would do in fighting back against their present day enemy. They had to “renew the faith in our fathers and to practice the free heritage they bequeathed to us.” This heritage – coded language again – was under siege by Liberals, Communists, the Federal Government, and though not said directly, blacks everywhere.

“But we warn those, of any group, who would follow the false doctrine of communistic amalgamation that we will not surrender our system of government... our freedom of race and religion. For that freedom was won at a hard price, and if it requires a hard price to keep it.. we are able.. and quite willing to pay it.”

This is not the first time Southerners have had to fight for their freedom and preserve their way of life. Going back to the American Revolution, Wallace referenced such great men as Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, James Madison, George Mason, and Patrick Henry were all Southerners. “For Wallace, historical Southern leadership reached beyond the Confederacy” (Lee, 2006, p. 369). And now, George Wallace was going to take on the mantle of Southern leadership and lead the charge against their newest adversaries.

So not only was their freedom under attack but also their faith in God. It was time for a call to action to all Southerners and anyone else who felt they were being encroached on. “Let us, as Alabamians, grasp the hand of destiny and walk out of the shadow of fear... and fill our divine destination” because “God has placed us here in this crisis... let us not fail in this.. our most historical moment.” How could any enemy dare to resist – not to mention win – when the South had God on their side? One of the other aspects of the Lost Cause was the feeling that Southerners were blessed by God to be from the South and already had God as their protector (Cox, 2013). This Southern philosophy and mentality was tapped into by George Wallace with

devastating consequences. Even though Wallace never pulled a trigger against another man, Alabamians – and Southerners – everywhere did so. They whole-heartily believed his words and began to “rally Southern white resistance to integration” (PBS documentary, 2000). And, in their minds, why wouldn’t they fight when their actions are compared – and justified – to the revered veterans of the Confederacy or the mythical Southerners who helped found this nation against the tyranny of Great Britain?

## **Conclusion**

George Wallace, on January 14, 1963 tapped into an anger and resentment felt by millions of Southerners. He became the face of resistance and pride in the South and bigotry in the North. The great tragedy of this though was that it could have been prevented. There’s accounts that Wallace never felt this way himself – he believed in segregation yes; but never to the extent he proclaimed from his pulpit. On the PBS documentary about Wallace, *Settin’ the Woods on Fire*, they reported how a supporter once asked why Wallace turned to the politics of race. Wallace said, sadly the witness would swear, that when “I tried to talk about roads and good schools and all these things that’ve been a part of my career, and nobody listened. And then I began talking about niggers and they stomped the floor.” Wallace’s ambitions and lust of power got the better of him and perhaps his old principals. This speech is at the height of his mandate, where he still felt he could reach an even higher office. The allusions towards the Lost Cause and freedom and faith helped to define who Wallace was to the United States. And through an ideological criticism of his themes, one can better understand the effect this speech had on Alabama. It became that rallying cry for resistance and violence. Now the racist white Southerners had a “justification” for their heinous acts. It wasn’t until much later that Wallace began to realize just how much he hurt the reputation and the people of Alabama.



When the Governor later approached Civil Rights icons such as John Lewis during the 1980s and begged for their forgiveness, they, for the most part, gave it to him. But never would they forget (Freemark and Richman, 2013). Even today John Lewis reflects on that fateful speech given on that cold January day, "Does it hurt me? No, in the end, I think George Wallace was one of the signs on this long journey towards the creation of a better America, toward the creation of a more perfect union. It was just one of the stumbling blocks along the way." In his last run for governor in 1982, Wallace sought to make inroads within the African American community and apologized for everything he did that harmed them. These Alabamians must have forgiven him for he won more than 90 percent of the black vote (Maxwell, 2014). It became a story of spiritual redemption and only after, could the healing truly begin. But George Wallace will forever be known, rightfully so, as the racist governor and the face of resistance to integration.

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