

In Defense of George Wallace

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David Boaz of the libertarian Cato Institute — which champions individual liberty, limited government, peace and free markets — has been outspoken in his criticism of 2016 Republican front-runner Donald J Trump: "Not since George Wallace has there been a presidential candidate who made racial and religious scapegoating so central to his campaign."

It is true that Trump announced his White House candidacy by vilifying immigrants from Mexico as rapists and drug-traffickers. He has advocated a ban on all Muslims entering the country, for shutting down mosques and for implementing a database system to track Muslims in the United States. He has repeatedly and falsely testified that "when the World Trade Center came tumbling down," he personally witnessed "thousands and thousands of people ... cheering." He has even argued for the U.S. to commit the war crime of deliberately killing the children and families of terrorists.

I met George Wallace, and I remember well his 1963 gubernatorial inaugural address ("Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever"). Later that same year, Gov. Wallace stood "in the schoolhouse door" — prior to stepping aside before federal authorities — to oppose the court-ordered admission of two African-American students, Vivian Malone and James Hood, to the then-all-white University of Alabama. He cannot escape responsibility for Alabama state troopers' gassing and beating civil rights marchers at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma (including future Georgia Rep. John Lewis, whose skull was fractured) for simply seeking the right to register to vote; nor can he escape responsibility for contributing to the climate of hate in Birmingham that led to three Ku Klux Klansmen bombing the 16th Street Baptist Church and killing four young African-American girls attending Sunday school.

But on May 15, 1972, while campaigning in Laurel, Maryland, George Wallace was sentenced to a lifetime of unremitting pain in a wheelchair by assassin Arthur Bremer's bullets. (The next day, while in the hospital fighting for his life, Wallace would win both the Maryland and Michigan Democratic presidential primaries.) After one final White House bid in 1976 was effectively ended by former Georgia Gov. Jimmy Carter, leader of the New — and very different — South, Wallace endorsed Carter to help Carter become the first Southerner since the Civil War to win the presidency.

But George Wallace, unlike Donald Trump, was able to admit that he had been wrong and to apologize to those he had hurt. As Stephen Leshner recounted in his book "George Wallace: American Populist," in 1979 Wallace went unannounced to Montgomery's Dexter Avenue

Baptist Church, where Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. had been pastor a quarter century earlier. Wallace was pushed to the front and said: "I have learned what suffering means. In a way that was impossible (before the assassination attempt). I think I can understand something of the pain black people have come to endure. I know I contributed to that pain, and I can only ask your forgiveness."

George Wallace sought out John Lewis, who described their meeting: "I could tell that he was a changed man. He was engaged in a campaign to seek forgiveness from the same African-Americans he had oppressed. He acknowledged his bigotry and assumed responsibility for the harm he had caused. He wanted to be forgiven." And forgiven he was. When the repentant and changed man won his fourth and last term as governor in 1982, he did so because 90 percent of Alabama's African-American voters cast their votes for George Wallace