

George Wallace on segregation, 1964

Introduction

In 1958, George Wallace ran against John Patterson in his first gubernatorial race. In that Alabama election, Wallace refused to make race an issue, and he declined the endorsement of the Ku Klux Klan. This move won Wallace the support of the NAACP. Patterson, on the other hand, embraced Klan support, and he trounced Wallace in the election. In 1962 Wallace, having realized the power of race as a political tool, ran for governor again—this time as a proponent of segregation. He won by a landslide.

In 1964, Wallace decided to make a run for the presidency as a Democratic candidate. The first Democratic primary was held in Wisconsin. Local politicians treated Wallace's candidacy as a joke, but Wallace shocked his critics when he received 266,000 votes—one-third of the 780,000 votes cast. On April 8, one day after the Wisconsin primary, Michigan resident Ms. Martin wrote to Wallace asking him for literature on segregation.

The sentiments expressed in Wallace's reply stand in stark contrast to the reality of race relations in Alabama during his time as governor. Between the time of Wallace's inauguration and his correspondence with Martin, Alabama had seen the bombings in Birmingham as well as Wallace's face-off with federal forces over the integration of the University of Alabama.

Despite growing conflict over race and civil rights, Wallace wrote Martin that “we have never had a problem in the South except in a few very isolated instances and these have been the result of outside agitators.” Wallace asserted that “I personally have done more for the Negroes of the State of Alabama than any other individual,” citing job creation and the salaries of black teachers in Alabama. He rationalized segregation as “best for both races,” writing that “they each prefer their own pattern of society, their own churches and their own schools.” Wallace assured Martin that Alabamans were satisfied with society as it was and that the only “major friction” was created by “outside agitators.” Increasing racial violence and the Civil Rights Movement, however, pointed toward a changing equilibrium in race relations in Alabama.

Excerpt

White and colored have lived together in the South for generations in peace and equanimity. They each prefer their own pattern of society, their own churches and their own schools—which history and experience have proven are best for best for both races. (As stated before, outside agitators have created any major friction occurring between the races.) This is true and applies to other areas as well. People who move to the south from sections where there is not a large negro population soon realize and are most outspoken in favor of our customs once they learn for themselves that our design for living is the best for all concerned.

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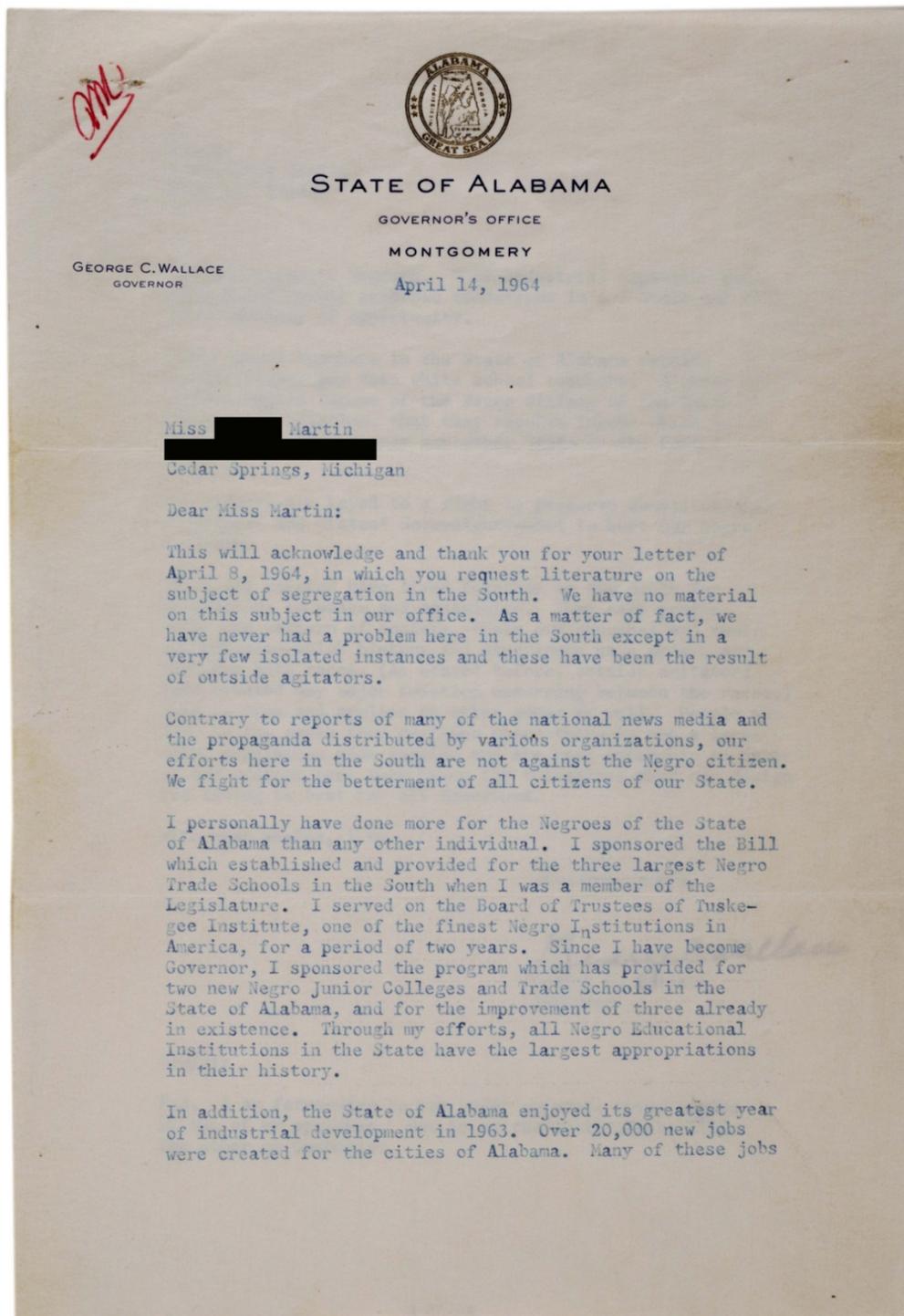
Questions for Discussion

Read the document introduction, the excerpt, and the transcript. Then apply your knowledge of American history in order to answer the questions that follow.

1. How did George Wallace change his campaign strategy between 1958 and 1964?
2. Why did Wallace use the arguments of preserving “Constitutional Government and States’ Sovereignty” in his letter?
3. How did the demand for improvement in civil rights for African Americans in the early 1960s contribute to Wallace’s popularity?
4. FOR FURTHER RESEARCH: Examine one of Wallace’s claims to evaluate its accuracy.

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Image



George Wallace to Ms. Martin, April 14, 1964, page 1. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC00295).
 First name and address redacted for privacy.

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Miss [REDACTED] Martin
April 14, 1964

will be filled by Negroes. This industrial expansion will bring about better economic conditions in our State and will offer equality of opportunity.

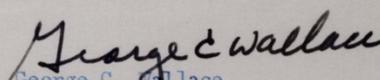
Negro school teachers in the State of Alabama receive average higher pay than white school teachers. A check of the per capita income of the Negro Citizen of the State of Alabama will disclose that they receive income which is much greater than nearly any other State in the United States.

Our efforts are keyed to a fight to preserve Constitutional Government and States' Sovereignty—not to hurt our Negro citizens.

White and colored have lived together in the South for generations in peace and equanimity. They each prefer their own pattern of society, their own churches and their own schools—which history and experience have proven are best for both races. (As stated before, outside agitators have created any major friction occurring between the races.) This is true and applies to other areas as well. People who move to the south from sections where there is not a large negro population soon realize and are most outspoken in favor of our customs once they learn for themselves that our design for living is best for all concerned.

With best wishes, I am

Sincerely yours,


George C. Wallace
Governor

GCW/sfr

P.S. I am forwarding to you under separate cover copies of two of my speeches. One is on the Civil Rights Bill, the other on Communism.

George Wallace to Ms. Martin, April 14, 1964, page 2. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC00295)

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Transcript

April 14, 1964

Miss [REDACTED] Martin
[REDACTED]

Cedar Springs, Michigan

Dear Miss Martin:

This will acknowledge and thank you for your letter of April 8, 1964, in which you request literature on the subject of segregation in the South. We have no material on this subject in our office. As a matter of fact, we have never had a problem here in the South except in a very few isolated instances and these have been the result of outside agitators.

Contrary to reports of many of the national news media and the propaganda distributed by various organizations, our efforts here in the South are not against the Negro citizen. We fight for the betterment of all citizens in our State.

I personally have done more for the Negroes of the State of Alabama than any other individual. I sponsored the Bill which established and provided for the three largest Negro Trade Schools in the South when I was a member of the Legislature. I served on the Board of Trustees of Tuskegee Institute, one of the finest Negro Institutions in America, for a period of two years. Since I have become Governor, I sponsored the program which has provided for two new Negro Junior Colleges and Trade Schools in the State of Alabama, and for the improvement of three already in existence. Through my efforts, all Negro Educational Institutions in the State have the largest appropriations in their history.

In addition, the State of Alabama enjoyed its greatest year of industrial development in 1963. Over 20,000 new jobs were created for the cities of Alabama. Many of these jobs [2] will be filled by Negroes. This industrial expansion will bring about better economic conditions in our State and will offer equality of opportunity.

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Sincerely yours,

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Miss [REDACTED] Martin

April 14, 1964

Notes: Typed on stationery of the Alabama Governor's Office. Name and address of recipient redacted for privacy.