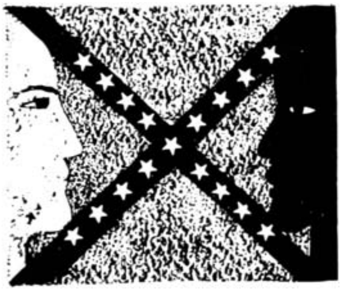
States of the Union

GETTING ALONG WITH WALLACE

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS



THE OTHER DAY I telephoned my friend John Huelett, the remarkable black sheriff of Lowndes County, Alabama, and asked him if what Tom Wicker had written in the New York *Times* was true—namely, that Huelett had publicly endorsed the candidacy of George Wallace for governor.

I confess to having felt a certain pique; the story had chafed my Northern-liberal sensibilities. Here was this brave man, a veteran of countless civil rights wars and a walking metaphor for the "New South," allegedly singing the praises of that confounded, durable demagogue, the politician who had stood in the doorway at the University of Alabama in 1963 and said to Deputy Attorney General Nicholas De-B. Katzenbach and two black students, *You shall not pass.*

I remembered Huelett's nervy campaign for sheriff in 1970, the dark and lonely roads, the threatening phone calls. As it was coming down to the wire my wife, Diane, and I flew to Montgomery. John picked us up at the airport and we all piled into the front seat.

"I seem to be sitting on something very strange," Diane said, fishing for the offending object. She found it—and discovered that for the first time in her life she was holding a gun. John smiled and took it.

"Is that loaded?" Diane asked.

"You bet," said John.

"Do you always carry a gun?"

"Only at elections."

John won the election—becoming the first black sheriff in the history of "bloody Lowndes"—by only 210 votes, 2,078 to 1,868. The next morning a friend of his said to me, "It's a new day in Lowndes County. The caged bird has been released." Now, as I dialed John's number in Haynesville, I wondered if the bird had inadvertently flown into a nest of vipers.

The first thing John told me turned out to be important: He had never heard of Tom Wicker. Clearly, we were reading different publications—and taking different readings. My questions and his answers highlighted the differences. I stressed doctrinal trends: Had he endorsed Wallace? Did he *agree* with Wallace? Was Wallace friend or foe? John, meanwhile, was thinking about his day-to-day duties. No, he had never endorsed Wallace. On the other hand, as sheriff he had gotten "a lot of good cooperation from the state." Montgomery transported prisoners; state laboratory workers analyzed fingerprints and other clues.

"Well," I pressed, "does that mean that you're for Wallace?"

"He's in charge," John said. "You can't get a thing done without him."

As we talked I realized that in writing about Huelett's electoral triumph four years ago ("Sheriffs North and South," NL, November 30, 1970) I had overlooked one small matter: What he had won was not a trophy but a job. "It's not always easy to keep law and order here," Huelett said. "But we keep working at it."

He works at it 14-18 hours a day, seven days a week. He's never had a vacation and he's forever on call. Just to make sure he won't miss anything, Huelett has moved himself and his family (he and his wife have eight children, ranging in age from 6-23) into a three-bedroom apartment behind the jail. "It's good for the kids," he said. "They get to know the juveniles who are locked up. Sometimes they all play ball together in the yard."

Huelett has two deputies, both black. "I've tried hard to get a white deputy, but the ones who apply either drink too much or they have a record." Still, Huelett has managed to strike a blow for another kind of integration: One of his deputies is a woman. On the morning I called she had just arrested a man on a charge of attempted homicide. It seems he had shot his former mistress in the leg.

"Did he give your deputy any trouble?" I asked.

"No. Most people, when they see the badge, they respect it."

Huelett said he had more trouble with blacks than with whites. "At first the white kids might kick up a fuss if I stopped them for speeding or something. Now we get the best responses from the white community. The kids are nice and humble. If you give them a ticket, they'll thank you for it.

"Now the black people, they're not trained to respect the law. And some of them are inclined to think I owe them a favor. There was this one boy I picked up Sunday night—he was too drunk to drive. I had to take him to jail. It was the second time that happened with him. Well, his mother comes to take him home and she complains that I shouldn't have locked him up. His mother's a school teacher. I told her he had to learn to behave better. 'You're a teacher,' I said. 'Take him home and teach him.' "

Of the 13 homicides that have occurred thus far during Huelett's stint, all the victims and all the arrestees have been black. "But I think things are getting better," John told me. "Especially with the kids. They are beginning to stop themselves. They are staying out of trouble." Huelett is an indefatigable lecturer at black churches and before various black youth groups in the area. His message never varies: Study hard, work hard and don't break the law.

NO WHITE GROUP has yet invited Huelett to speak. But he enjoys a good deal of political support from the white community. Last month, running again for sheriff, Huelett easily won a Democratic primary against three challengers, two of whom were also black. Overcoming the dangers of a split black vote and a solid white vote, Huelett collected 900 more ballots than did his three opponents combined. Moreover, he carried all eight precincts, at least two of which have white majorities.

In sum, many white people may feel about Huelett's candidacy the way Huelett feels about Wallace's: He's not the man one would choose in a world of one's own making, but he's *there*, and he seems to be getting the job done. So the new politics of Wallace's Alabama resembles the old politics of pragmatism, with its alliances between blacks and whites. Accordingly, although Huelett was a founder of Alabama's New Democratic party (NDPA)—a black alternative to Alabaman white Democracy—and ran four years ago under the NDPA banner, he ran this time as a traditional Democrat.

Thus the stars over Alabama, and over most other Southern states, are forming strange new configurations. Lambs are consorting with lions; famous victims are lunching with their quondam victimizers. Even Charles Evers, the courageous black mayor of Fayetteville, Mississippi, whose brother Medgar was murdered by white supremicists, has publicly suggested that Wallace would make a fine vice-presidential candidate.

Such reversals are unsettling but hardly mysterious. They reflect what Max Weber has called a "normalization" of bureaucracy that follows every successful crusade: after the deluge, accommodation. "You can't blame the blacks," says John Lewis, a founder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and now head of the Voter Education Project in Atlanta. "Every black official has to depend on white good will. Do you know, in most Southern states, a local politician can't even get travel money to leave the county without permission from the state? That means he can't go to Washington and get Federal grants unless someone in the state capital gives him the green light."

Nonetheless, progress has been made. It has been nine years since Congress passed the landmark Voting Rights Act, seeking to guarantee protection at the ballot box to all citizens and especially to eligible black voters in the South, then 6 million strong, whose rights had been systematically suppressed ever since Hayes beat out Tilden in 1876. That act, which expires next year, inaugurated a period of mini-Reconstruction. It abolished literacy tests, prohibited racist gerrymandering and extended to frightened blacks throughout the South the reassuring shelter of Federal registrars and poll-watchers.

The result has been a flesh-and-blood political transformation, beyond what generally gets recorded in the dead pages of high school civics texts: More than 2.5 million Southern blacks are now registered; about 1,200 blacks now hold elected office, from county commissioner to congressman. The symbol of black power in the South is no longer a clenched fist (which, after all, is empty); it is a black hand closing firmly on a voting-machine lever. It is also John Huelett's children playing baseball with white and black "juveniles" in the prison yard.