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Caught on Tape: The White House Reaction to the Shooting of Alabama Governor and Democratic Presidential Candidate George Wallace

[Historians/History](#)

by Luke A. Nichter

Mr. Nichter is a Ph.D candidate in History from Bowling Green State University. He is currently co-authoring a book about Nixon foreign policy based on the Nixon tapes.

On May 15, 1972, Arthur H. Bremer shot Alabama Governor and Democratic presidential candidate George Wallace five times at close range with a .38 caliber revolver during a campaign stop in Laurel, Maryland. The shooting in the Washington, D.C. suburb ended Wallace's political career and he was paralyzed from the waist down for the remainder of his life. In November, thirty-five years later and in the middle of another political season, Bremer was released from the Maryland State Penitentiary in Hagerstown on November 6, 2007. The first political assassin to be paroled in American history, his sentence for the shooting was reduced on good behavior from an original term of 53 years, even though Bremer apparently never expressed any remorse.

American citizens then had a vivid memory of the recent assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr., among others. Therefore, the Nixon White House followed the Wallace shooting very closely immediately after it occurred. Caught on tape, the Nixon tapes document the President's reaction, his assembling a kitchen cabinet in the Oval Office to react to the crisis, and finally, a long session in his private office in the Executive Office Building in which Nixon and his advisors discussed the political effects of the shooting and concerns over the way that the Secret Service and the FBI handled the subsequent investigation. The more than 100 pages of transcripts of conversations that took place in the 24 hours that followed the shooting demonstrate the administration's highest interest and the direct personal involvement of the President and his top advisors in the matter.

On the afternoon of May 15, 1972, Nixon was working in the Oval Office and had just concluded meetings on the budget and trade when he became aware of the shooting shortly after 4:00 pm. His first reaction was to instruct the White House Operator to reach his wife, as well as Cornelia Wallace, the wife of George Wallace, who had been in Laurel with her husband and had held his slain body before being transported to Prince George's County Hospital in Cheverly, Maryland.

Speaking first to Mrs. Nixon, the President said, "We've got a problem. Have you heard about Wallace?"¹ The President's instinct was to cancel a scheduled appearance that evening in order

to show respect, adding, “Why don’t we just tell the press it’s closed to the press because of this event?” Nixon then comforted Mrs. Wallace: “You tell him to keep his spirit, and tell him that all of us people in politics have got to expect some dangers, and that Mrs. Nixon and I both send our very best wishes, and you can be sure that we’ll remember him in our thoughts and our prayers.”²

Meanwhile, Nixon, without details yet on the assailant or the motive behind the shooting, ordered Secretary of the Treasury John B. Connally to offer full Secret Service protection to those political figures the President considered most at risk, including Sen. Ted Kennedy. Connally, who as Governor of Texas had been injured by a stray bullet while sitting in the same car in which President Kennedy was assassinated, was polite but firm with the Senator: “The President asked me to come over here a minute ago. He said he doesn’t really care what the hell the law provides as far as our counsel is concerned. He thinks that you’re traveling around the country, he thinks that out of all of the people who are susceptible to some nut, you, probably more than anybody except George Wallace, and he would like, this afternoon, to offer you a full Secret Service protection, and I’m calling to tell you that, and it’s available to you, and it’ll be available as of tonight if you want it, Ted.”³

Moving across the street to the Executive Office Building, the President then brainstormed potential motivations behind the shooting of the former-segregationist Governor during discussions with his closest advisors, including Chief of Staff Bob Haldeman, Counsel to the President for Domestic Affairs John Ehrlichman, and Counsel to the President Chuck Colson. “You know, how long did it have to be said that somebody was going to shoot Wallace?” Nixon noted. “Didn’t he ask for it? He stirs up hate.” However, nearly two hours after the shooting, the President became furious over not knowing even basic details about the shooting or the assailant. As Haldeman said to the head of the Secret Service, James J. Rowley, “the key thing now is the identity of the assailant and all the particulars on him before they start putting it out to the press.”⁴

Nixon demanded to know the details of the assailant before the press had them. (Although the animosity Nixon felt toward the press is well-documented, here Nixon was particularly outraged over recent press reports that lambasted his May 8 decision to mine Haiphong Harbor in an escalation of the Vietnam War, a risky move that came as final preparations were being made for the U.S.-Soviet summit in Moscow that produced the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty on May 26.) To ensure that he stay informed of Wallace’s evolving condition, Nixon had even ordered his own personal physician, Dr. William M. Lukash, to oversee the Alabama Governor, and Nixon had also offered the use of the presidential suite at Bethesda Naval Hospital.

After conflicting reports to the President from the Secret Service described the assailant as everything from a middle-aged man to three teenagers, either acting alone or with an accomplice, Nixon, wishing to avoid a what seemed to him like a potential government scandal on his watch, ordered Haldeman to instruct Ehrlichman to interfere and take control of the investigation. Nixon noted, “I’m not going to let them get away with this this time. They are to report to me directly. I don’t want to read it in the press, and I don’t want to hear it on the radio. I want a report, and I don’t want any cover up. You know, this could be like the Kennedy thing. This son of a bitch Rowley is a dumb bastard, you know. He is dumb as hell. We’ve got to get somebody over there

right away. Get Ehrlichman on him! Get Ehrlichman over there right away, Bob, to work on it. Don't you agree? Secret Service will fuck this up! They do everything!" Finally, on the basis that one of Wallace's body guards—who included fifty Secret Service agents and a detail of the Alabama State Police—was injured in the shooting, Nixon ordered the FBI to take jurisdiction of the investigation away from the Secret Service: "Get the FBI. Order, at my direction, the FBI!"⁵

The investigation soon came under control. Within the hour, the FBI traced the gun to a purchase made on January 13, 1972, by an Arthur Herman Bremer, white male, 21 years old, from West Michigan Street in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Bremer had been previously arrested by the FBI for carrying a concealed weapon in November 1971.⁶ He was described as "a loner" and seeking attention. Once these details became known to the President, Nixon's concerns shifted to how the press would report the shooting. As the President instructed Ehrlichman, "Keep the heat on them, because don't let us make the mistake that was made of the Kennedy thing. [...] You don't realize the forces that could let loose in this, you know. This fellow [Wallace] was a Goddamn demagogue, a hate monger, and he could let loose horrible forces, and we have got to be doing the right thing, John. That's what you've got to understand."⁷

Meanwhile, Nixon instructed Haldeman to have Colson put a report out to the press: "Put a call in immediately to [White House Deputy Director of Communications Kenneth] Clawson, or somebody [...] to the effect that the first reports of the [Bremer] interrogation [are] that a McGovern/Kennedy person did this. Know what I mean? Rumors are going to flow all over the place. Put it on the left right away." Later, Nixon further elaborated, "Just say he was a supporter of McGovern and Kennedy. Now just put that out. Just say you have it on 'unmistakable evidence.'" When Colson returned to the EOB after meeting with Clawson to execute the President's order, Nixon asked, "You sell it?" Colson summarized: "You don't have to sell it to this fellow [Clawson]. He says, 'of course, of course he's a student radical, naturally.' I said, 'of course, he's from Wisconsin, that he worked in McGovern's campaign.' [...] [laughter] You don't have to sell him. He's already convinced."⁸

In the days and weeks that followed, the President's interest in the shooting waned once the FBI brought the investigation under control. However, in the midst of crisis immediately following the shooting, all of the classic elements of the Nixon persona were in place: having little faith in the appropriate government agencies, he gathered his closest advisors to manage the event. Being fearful of history, rather than learning from it, he demonstrated a fatalistic belief that the investigation into the Wallace shooting would be botched just as he believed that cover-ups were made following the Kennedy assassinations. Finally, wanting to counteract the spin control he expected the press would leverage against his handling of the crisis, he tasked his own spin masters with creating a portrait of Arthur Bremer as a loner who was sympathetic to left-leaning political causes even before the FBI had finished questioning him.

Today, Bremer is a free man at age 57, after spending two-thirds of his life in prison. He is something of a time capsule from a tumultuous era filled with political violence. Now a bygone era, perhaps now we will learn who the real Arthur Bremer is. In the mean time, the Nixon tapes provide a fascinating glimpse into the White House during a time of national crisis.

¹ WHT 24-83, 5/15/72, 5:10-5:13 pm.

[2](#) WHT 24-89, 5/15/72, 5:38-5:41 pm.

[3](#) WHT 24-91, 5/15/72, Unknown time between 5:41 pm and 5:45 pm. See also 24-93.

[4](#) WHT 24-95, 5/15/72, Unknown time between 6:45 pm and 7:07 pm.

[5](#) WHT 24-97, 5/15/72, Unknown time between 6:56 pm and 7:07 pm.

[6](#) WHT 24-100, 5/15/72, Unknown time between 7:07 pm and 7:37 pm.

[7](#) WHT 24-107, 5/15/72. 7:37-7:42 pm.

[8](#) EOB 339-4, 5/15/72, Unknown time between 7:42 pm and 8:10 pm.
