

by Barry Farrell

Billy in the Garden

Billy Graham came alive for me last Inauguration Day, when I started thinking of him as an American Rasputin. Before, he had seemed an innocuous presence, even while earning more than \$10 million a year for his various evangelical enterprises—and perhaps especially while golfing or praying with every President since Roosevelt. But on Inauguration Day I had to grant that Billy must have some really eerie gift for politics, or politicians. For here was a man who had stayed with the Johnsons through every trying hour of their final weekend in the White House—and had then outstayed his departing hosts to be ready at the door with blessings and benedictions for the Nixons.

Not that Nixon hadn't had Billy's blessing all along. The two had been intimate friends for more than 20 years, and both have said, in public and in earnest, that the other would make a good President. During the campaign Billy thought it best to affect a churchly distance, but there were some rather major lapses, as when he introduced his old friend to a crusade audience in Pittsburgh as a man more realistic than Jesus. If any doubts remained after the election, they were dispelled forever when the new President revealed that Billy had talked him into running.

One was left to ponder what else Billy might be able to talk him into, and for me the question was unsettling enough to recall Rasputin's haunting name. The idea of a revivalist once again holding spiritual sway over a sovereign, our sovereign, was far too intriguing to be dismissed because of obvious contrasts between Billy and Rasputin—one a barely literate peasant, the other a Doctor of Humanities from Bob Jones University; one a wicked Russian madman, the other foursquare on the side of American good. Leave it to Nixon, I told myself, to come up with a safe and sane Rasputin.

My own acquaintance with Billy was limited to attending two of his Crusades—Seattle in 1951, in the tow of my aunt, and New York six years later, when Bil-

ly was at the height of his powers, packing Madison Square Garden nightly for 16 weeks. I wandered in on impulse one night and, after climbing up into the final godless reaches of that sinister place, I was amazed to look down from the distance of a city block or so and recognize Billy away from the pulpit by the clear pale blue of his eyes. Now, with Billy back in New York for the 10-day Crusade just ended, it seemed a cautionary move at the very least to see how the years had touched him.

It was a new and different Garden, a vaulting, pillarless arena of color-coded plastic seats, 20 blocks downtown from the old site; elevators and escalators took me to the Crusade Press Lounge, where I was issued a small brass badge saying MEDIA and a handsome press kit containing glossy photos and glossy biographies of Billy and the whole evangelic team: Cliff Barrows, George Beverly Shea, Grady Wilson and his brother T.W., Crusade Director Bill F. Brown ("... and what a Giant for God that man is!" Billy said later on). A copy of *Decision*, Billy's monthly magazine, was opened to an article called "God in the Garden," that told how Crusade advance men had spent two years organizing 1,200 churches in the metropolitan area into "an uptight force determined to drive a wedge into the secular glob." The 2,000-voice choir was singing *Trust and Obey* as I entered.

Billy was sitting well back from the hydraulic pulpit on a portable stage crowded with dignitaries' chairs and banked on all sides with false shrubs and ferns. His face was tan with the sun of Key Biscayne, where he had spent the weekend with the President, resting up for the Crusade. Four serious illnesses in recent years have made him watchful of his strength, but from the look of him it is easy to see why many of his followers believe him to be preserved by the purifying fire inside. He is 50, but with just a touch of TV makeup, he still looks 35.

His sermon, timed for the 12-city "television outreach" that brought the Crusade "to millions upon millions of American homes," was another feat of preservation: the same glad voice, the same elucidating gestures, the same good-news Gospel. Some of his metaphors, though, were almost painfully

contemporary (God is the infinite "heart donor"; our struggle is with "rejection"), and, like so many others these days, he seemed obsessed with the problems of sex and dope.

Night after night he returned to the attack on pornography, sensuality, lust, "trips of alcohol, sex and dope." Times Square, he said, was "an open sewer" of depravity and vice, and he warned that "no city in history, no nation in history, has ever gone in for that kind of immorality and withstood the Judgment of God." Student revolt was another obsession—revolt, he said, is a sign that the End is near. Can Nixon believe this, I wondered.

Billy was more encouraging about the future of the big cultural sins. Dismayingly so, in fact. "We don't have a race problem," he said. "We don't have a poverty problem. We don't have a war problem. The problem, ladies and gentlemen, is sin, S-I-N." When Christ comes to redeem us (and Billy says "it could be soon"), illusory problems such as these will vanish, being nothing more than symptoms of our estrangement.

My days as a Times Square thrill-seeker ended when I was about 19, but hearing Billy talk about it in such vivid terms made me yearn to get up there the minute the service ended. A hot summer mist had polished the streets into broken black mirrors, and every doorway held a clammy nest of people waiting for the action to begin. As Billy had warned, there were a great many new pornographic bookshops, and all of them were crowded. "It's the rain," one dirty book dealer told me. "These bums never buy nothin'." In the back room, a dozen men were plugging quarters into peepshow machines. "Echhh, Jersey commuters, waiting for the bus," the dealer said.

It might have been Billy's doomsday preaching that made the famous street of shame seem so vacant and gloomy. But for all the facets of misery and breakdown, I couldn't find a trace of simple lust. I prowled around for a couple of hours, then headed for the subway home. On the way, I bought a sailor hat for my daughter in an all-night penny arcade; and while watching the lady sew "Anny" on the brim it struck me hard that this was the best thing I'd done all day.