

Honorable Profession

NO FINAL VICTORIES

by LAWRENCE F. O'BRIEN

394 pages. Doubleday. \$12.50.

No one's knowledge of Democratic national politics over the past 22 years will be entirely complete without this account by the man who operated so long at its stormy center. Larry O'Brien is one of the most decent men in a profession currently held in low esteem; he is also a tough Irishman who has shed more tears in joy and sorrow than ought to be allotted any single lifetime in politics.

Out of sudsy neighborhood political debate in his immigrant father's café and bar back in Springfield, Mass., O'Brien rose to play a unique national role. He managed John Kennedy's spectacular unseating of Senator Henry Cabot Lodge in 1952 and directed Kennedy to the presidency in 1960. As chief congressional lobbyist for both Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, he led the drive that ended in the most significant social legislation since the days of F.D.R. Yet O'Brien was also with Jack at Dallas and Bob at Los Angeles. He agonized with Hubert Humphrey after managing Humphrey's losing campaign against Richard Nixon in 1968. As national chairman, he struggled to unify a shattered party and so became the prime Watergate target of Nixon's burglars and buggers, as well as a victim of the outrageous theory that he had known about the Watergate break-in in advance and permitted it in order to embarrass the Republican Party. Still, O'Brien confesses, "the three worst months of my life—a nightmare" were spent in George McGovern's dismal 1972 campaign.

Out of this diverse experience, O'Brien has woven a surprisingly spare and calm narrative. He is suspicious of philosophizing, concentrating instead on the individual and organizational side of politics. He does not minimize the role of TV in modern campaigning, but in an age when bigness and bureaucracy seem to stifle individual effort, it is a comfort to find O'Brien still preaching the practicality of the personal touch. From the habit of using a "guest book" at political receptions (begun as a way to compile mailing lists at Jack Kennedy coffee hours in 1952), O'Brien's accent has been on candor and

grass-roots contact. He argues that within reason, plain talk is good politics.

O'Brien recalls that Patriarch Joseph Kennedy told him in 1952 how to keep from being unduly influenced by prestigious people in or out of politics: "Whenever you're dealing with someone important to you, picture him sitting there in a suit of long red underwear." He watched, appalled, in the early 1950s as both Jack—still on crutches from his back injury—and Ted urged on Bob during a bloody fistfight with a brawny college student whose buddies kept knocking fly balls into the midst of a Kennedy



O'BRIEN (IN GLASSES) WITH J.F.K. & R.F.K. DURING 1960 RACE
Also a suit of long red underwear.

touch-football game in Georgetown. "They had been trained that way," O'Brien recalls. "If Bob had been beaten, Ted would have stepped in, and if Ted had been beaten, I suppose the Senator would have gone after the fellow with his crutches."

Endearingly—and convincingly—one of O'Brien's great political regrets is apparently the fact that he slipped some distorted information about Humphrey's draft status to Franklin Roosevelt Jr. during Kennedy's key struggle with Hubert in the 1960 West Virginia primary. Roosevelt used it to make Humphrey appear a draft dodger. "We should have destroyed that rubbish," O'Brien now admits. He is still bitter about those "fair-weather Democrats" who could not see in 1968 that Hum-

phrey would at least have been a far better President than Nixon.

O'Brien is currently occupied giving speeches about his book and his experiences. Despite all that has happened—and despite repeated denials—he will almost certainly be heavily involved in the 1976 Democratic presidential campaign. O'Brien believes that U.S. politics is a rough but principled, continuing struggle. He has little patience with ideological or issue-oriented "purists" who refuse to see that "no final victories occur," that compromise is necessary. He spent seven months as an unhappy president of a Manhattan brokerage firm in 1969 and insists that except for Nixon, Wall Street was "a far more ruthless world than anything I have known in politics. I saw men who had been with a company for decades fired by telegram, just like that, without warning or sympathy. You don't often see people treated that way in politics."

O'Brien is no romantic. He doubts there ever was a Camelot. "What there was, rather, was an extraordinary, dynamic young politician who was able to inspire this nation, to bring out the best in us, and to appeal to our nation's limitless wellsprings of hope and compassion and decency." Making no claim to writing talents, O'Brien is aware that such terms are clichés. But it is a measure of the book's achievement that the reader is convinced that phrases like "bringing out the best" and "compassion" hold much meaning for Larry O'Brien.

■ Ed Magnuson

Bark and Bite

THREE MOBS

by WILFRID SHEED

157 pages. Sheed & Ward. \$6.95.

The best writers on that ever popular, ever portentous subject, the American character, tend to be members of the family—but by a sort of adoption only. They are not quite at ease at home. They look about them with a preternaturally bright, not overfond eye. They like to go off into a corner and smile ironically when the rest of the family sings, "For he's a jolly good fellow."

George Santayana, that New England Spaniard, was such an outside-insider. So is Wilfrid Sheed, who—to his public's edification and entertainment—cannot make up his mind whether he will sound like an Oxford-trained critic, an Irish pub wit, a defrocked Catholic priest or a simply first-rate novelist. In any role, he is never more than, say, three-quarters American.

This time, in three long articles, Sheed studies American character collectively, as men-in-groups: the labor movement, the Catholic Church, the Mafia. Though developed, as a great