

# In Which the Pols Were Heroes

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAUPT

HOW THE GOOD GUYS FINALLY WON. By Jimmy Breslin. 192 pages. Viking. \$6.95.

In the long run, there will be as many versions of Watergate as there are observers to describe it. As the reporter-novelist Jimmy Breslin puts it in "How the Good Guys Finally Won": "There were many people and many forces responsible for the end of Richard M. Nixon in the summer of 1974. It is difficult to determine which set of men and circumstances were most responsible. The full story never will become altogether clear in our time. Who becomes famous so often depends upon the politics of the academic world years later. Some historian will gain access to bundles of dusty letters, and the historian promptly announces that the author of the letters is a great force in history. He will receive the Summer Prize for Originality. It usually matters not how much actual value the man had in his time." But of course Mr. Breslin has a theory, based on his own particular way of seeing the world. And it yields a set of men and circumstances he thinks the most responsible. It was not the press, or the courts, or even the lawyers—to benefit whom, "Corruption . . . was built into the government structure as if it were notarized"—who finally brought down President Nixon. No, it was the Pols, as they're called up in Boston—the men whose "viral containers in [their] genes held, who knows, a couple of thousand years of the ability to control, to calm others, to decide without being abrasive, to be affable while the insides boil."

It was specifically, Representative Thomas P. "Tip" O'Neill Jr., majority leader of the House of Representatives and "a lovely spring rain of a man," who, back in January of 1973, after hearing how industrialist George M. Steinbrenner 3d had been pressured by the Nixon people into contributing \$100,000, walked into Speaker Carl Albert's office and said, "They did too many things. . . . There is no way to keep it quiet. The time is going to come when impeachment is going to hit this Congress and we better be ready for it."

## From the Heroes' Point of View

And it was Peter W. Rodino Jr., chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, who at one point in his committee's investigation listened to a tape on which "the voice of Richard Nixon, speaking to John Ehrlichman, said: 'The Italians . . . they're not like us . . . they smell different, they look different, act different . . . The trouble is, you can't find one that's honest.'" And then insisted that these remarks



The New York Times  
Jimmy Breslin

not be included in the committee transcript, for fear they would inflame people against Mr. Nixon unnecessarily. And so, because for Mr. Breslin these were the good guys, he decided to move into Tip O'Neill's Congressional offices and report the impeachment story from his heroes' point of view.

It was an extremely happy move, from Mr. Breslin's point of view and from ours. It gave him a story he could sink his teeth in and chew down to digestible scenes into which the details are always specific and the narrative almost novelistic. He could track the rise to key positions of men like Mr. O'Neill, Mr. Rodino, and John Doar, the majority counsel, relating key episodes in their own plain-spoken language, and detailing his story so minutely that he even names the title of an article written by the pilot of the plane that carried former Majority Leader Hale Boggs to his death.

And Mr. Breslin could gossip. About how John F. Kennedy, attending a Missouri fund-raising breakfast that Mr. O'Neill once organized, invited him into a tiny men's room to report the morning's contributions and then took from Mr. O'Neill and pocketed the cash portion of the receipts. About how Jeb Stuart Magruder, while serving his prison-term at Allenwood and crying "Mea culpa" to the world, tried to pressure fellow-inmate Cornelius E. Gallagher, of Bayonne, N. J., into trading dirt on Mr. Rodino for parole and the restoration of Mr. Gallagher's law practice. (Instead, Mr. Gallagher called Mr. O'Neill to sound a warning.) And about how Mr. Nixon called a friend of Mr. Breslin's late on the evening he resigned, and "talked about going to jail," saying, "I guess it won't be so bad. You can do a lot of political writing in jail . . . Gandhi went to prison, you know."

## A Hunger for Coherency

Of course some readers will not sit comfortably with Mr. Breslin's clubhouse view of America's greatest Constitutional crisis. And others may squirm over his milking of sentiment, not to speak of his somewhat unwieldy metaphorizing of mirrors and blue smoke that reflect the illusion of power in Washington, of papers with sharp edges that eventually cut Nixon down, and of the cards in Mr. Doar's manual information-retrieval system that breathed with Mr. Nixon every time he himself inhaled.

All the same, this is just the sort of concrete narrative we need now to satisfy our yawning hunger for a coherent account of the events. And when Mr. Breslin winds up his story with a close-up shot of Mr. O'Neill heading home for Cape Cod down the empty corridor of the Capitol Building—"Now he took the cigar out of his mouth and started to sing. *Some of them write to the old folks at home./ That's there old ace in the hole. . . .*"—it's hard not to stand up and cheer. "How the Good Guys Finally Won" may not be the last word on Watergate. But it's irresistible reading and the best postmortem I've come across to date.