

The City Politic

BY JEFF GREENFIELD

VIEW FROM GRACIE MANSION: HOW WE SUCKERED THE GREAT BRESLIN

Author's Note: Although James Breslin was completely, 102 per cent factual in his account of his role in John Lindsay's re-election, he was entirely too modest and self-effacing. Accordingly, as the individual assigned to copy Mr. Breslin's speeches and steal them for the mayor, I am now telling the altogether true, inside story of how Mr. Breslin won this campaign—with the same scrupulous regard for the real authentic facts as Mr. Breslin showed in his account.

It all began on June 18, the day after the primaries. I walked into the mayor's Gracie Mansion office and found Lindsay absorbed in the vote tabulations.

"Pretty rough in Brooklyn and Queens, Your Honor," I murmured. Lindsay looked up, surprised.

"Never mind that," he said. "Look at these figures in the Democratic City Council race. Breslin polled eleven per cent."

I looked at the figures in total disbelief. It was true.

"Eleven per cent," Lindsay repeated, shaking his head and letting his hair blow in the wind. "Do you realize what that means?"

I nodded solemnly.

"He almost beat Guggenheimer."

"That's right," Lindsay said grimly. "And any man that can almost beat Ellie Guggenheimer is a political force to be reckoned with." He looked up, his jaw set waspishly. "We've got to get Breslin."

In these short words, Lindsay had defined the central, critical task of his campaign—to link his fortunes to the Man Who Almost Beat Ellie Guggenheimer.

This was confirmed a few hours later in the office of Campaign Manager Dick (Baccala) Aurelio. Strategically located in the men's wear department of DePinna's, the office that night was filled with the key staff, freezing under the refrigeration (Aurelio wasn't called Mr. Cool for nothing). We huddled together, waiting. Suddenly the door flew open. Aurelio walked in, clad in a fedora, a purple shirt with yellow tie, gray gloves and a foot-long cigar. Slowly Aurelio took the cigar from his mouth and spoke.

"Get-a Breslin," he said.

Jay Kriegel put down one of the five phones he was using and dialed a number. He spoke urgently, quietly, for five minutes. Then he turned to us.



"It looks good," Kriegel said, hanging up on Arthur Goldberg, Howard Samuels, Herman Badillo, Mrs. La Guardia, Mrs. Lehman, Albert Shanker, John DeLury and Andy Stein. "Just one thing," he added.

"What-sa dat?" asked Aurelio.

"How do we get a new City Council president on the ticket?"

Piling into a car, we raced up to Gracie Mansion with the latest Breslin bulletin. We arrived just as Lindsay did, leaping from his limousine, yarmulke askew.

"Hurry it up," he said, breathing heavily. "I've got two more synagogues and a bris tonight."

We outlined the situation.

"Oh, my God," the mayor groaned. "As if I haven't got enough troubles. Do you have any idea what it's like being a Protestant in an election year?"

He looked from Kriegel to Goldmark to Davidoff to Gottehrer to Rothberg to Feldstein to Morgan to Aurelio to me.

"Never mind," he said. Then his face brightened.

"Look," the mayor said. "Let's junk the little stuff. Let's just convince Breslin that he's running our campaign. That should do it."

"Great idea," said Sid Davidoff, handcuffing two off-duty policemen to a tree. "But how do we do it?"

"What we have to do," said Lindsay, "is to convince Breslin he's writing my speeches." He looked around quickly. "Now here's what we do . . ."

Next morning, following Lindsay's instructions, I called Jack Newfield. He was busy in his special assayer's office, figuring out whether George McGovern's populism was more radical than Susan Sontag's movie. I knew that Newfield would help Breslin write any endorsement (Jimmy's a little weak on capital letters) and started to plant our ideas.

"Why not tell Breslin to attack the war?" I said.

"Gee, that's a good idea," said Newfield. "Maybe the mayor'll pick it up."

"Yeah," I said. *He's only been against the war for four and a half years, I thought.*

"Then he could go after Con Ed and the phone company."

"Right, right," Newfield exclaimed. "Hey, how come Lindsay didn't think of this?"

"Dunno", I muttered, looking at the court papers the city had filed six weeks earlier against the rate increases.

"And maybe you could have Jimmy attack tough talk."

"Yeah, yeah," Newfield said. "Gee, it's too bad Lindsay isn't saying this." *You bet, I thought, glancing at the Life magazine article the mayor had done a year ago attacking "simplistic solutions . . . to crime."*

I waited anxiously for a week until Breslin came to City Hall for his endorsement. I read his draft. It was all there.

"Hey this is good," I said.

"What?" Breslin said.

"Nothing," I said innocently. "This stuff on Con Ed is great."

"Them bums shut off my electric for three weeks once," he growled.

"And I like all this about reforming institutions," I added.

"I didn't say nothing about visiting hours at Dannemora," Breslin said. I dropped the subject and the whole thing went fine.

There were lots of close calls in the next two months. Like the time Breslin went out to a Queens Jewish Center and confused me with Dave Garth. Luckily, Garth was sharp enough to brag about the things we had given Breslin to say. And then there was the day Lindsay took Jimmy to the Randall's Island Polo Matches, to help Breslin with the WASPS. Jimmy took one look at the horses, stood up, and screamed, "Two bucks on Number Four!" A minute more and we'd have blown the Gramercy Park vote.

But by Election Night, the job had been done. At 12:15, with 90 per cent of the vote in, Breslin came up to the the headquarters, modestly acknowledging the cheers of the throng, and letting the tall blond WASP beside him get into the pictures with him.

Once inside Aurelio's office, Breslin turned to Lindsay, admiring his Election Night *tallis*.

"OK," Breslin said, "Now to business. There's this Jerome Avenue reservoir that needs cleaning and a sewer contract for Fresh Pond Road . . ."

Lindsay looked up balefully.

"Always the *goyim*," he murmured quietly, and gently easing Alex Rose aside, he turned to listen to the Kingmaker. ■