

JIMMY BRESLIN'S RUN TO WIN

V I C T O R P E P P A R D

IN WRITING ABOUT THE MAILER-BRESLIN CAMPAIGN for the leadership of New York City in 1969 in the *Mailer Review* of 2018, my principle sources were Mailer's son, John Buffalo, and his manager, Joe Flaherty. Both of them did justice to Jimmy Breslin's participation in the race, so this is not meant to "correct the record," but rather to enhance it with Breslin's own words, written in his inimitable style. In the short space of three pages of the May 5, 1969 edition of *New York Magazine*, the cover of which features these two stalwarts of American letters, briefly but famously acting as politicians, Jimmy Breslin tells a good story with a bevy of characters who were involved in the race. One of them was not actually a part of the campaign, for his wife Rosalie wanted nothing to do with something she thought was a cheap publicity stunt on her husband's part. Some of the others were subject to Breslin's brilliant stingers, such as former mayor Robert Wagner, whom he describes as "a dumpy little man" who led the city during its decline. On Mario Procaccino he had this to say: "Mario for waiter, yes. For mayor? Good Lord." Breslin tried to convince Rosalie that, with people like this running for mayor, he just had to run himself, but she was unmoved.

As for those who were already in charge of the city, they were one of Breslin's greatest motivations to run. He writes that "The business of running this city is done by lobster peddlers from Montauk and old Republicans from Niagara Falls and some Midwesterners—come-to—Washington—with-good-old—Dick such as the preposterous George Romney."

When Breslin learned that Norman Mailer has been put forward as the candidate for mayor, his reaction was that he was the one who was best qualified for that position. He never said so, but I think he believed that, as a practicing journalist who knew the city's neighborhoods and frequented all manner of hangouts, from Toots Shor's to the bars of Brooklyn and hob-

nobbed with all kinds of people, from the famous to the likes of Marvin the Torch and Fat Thomas, his semi-fictional favorites, he had better “street creds” than Mailer. Breslin, who attended but never graduated from Long Island University, granted that, as a college graduate, a Harvard man at that, perhaps Mailer was better suited to be mayor.

Breslin’s article refers to a number of the central parts of what was to become their platform: power to the neighborhoods, especially the black ones that white leadership had only ever betrayed, Sweet Sundays once a month when there would be no automotive or airplane traffic, and New York City for statehood. Norman Mailer’s assertion of this last desideratum was what convinced Jimmy Breslin of Mailer’s political acumen.

At the base of Breslin’s desire to run was his profound love of the city, a city he saw in a state of decline, a city many of whose neighborhoods were “gone” or about to become gone, and the world’s largest system of publication was “up for grabs.” He makes sure that we understand that glitzy Manhattan was far from the whole of the city with an extended metaphor from the realm of boxing, one of a number of things with which both he and Mailer were fascinated. In a match between Marcel Cerdan and Tony Zale, Cerdan only hit Zale below the head, leaving his face virtually untouched, but Zales collapsed from the body blows that tore up his insides. Breslin fears that the same fate will befall New York City that befell Tony Zale. While Manhattan’s proud face with its hustle and bustle remained untouched, the whole city would be brought down by the internal damage that was ravaging the neighborhoods. The situation was so dire, that “New York can’t afford a politician thinking in usual politicians’ terms.” Thus, “The City of New York either gets an imagination, or the city dies.”

I have to confess that reading Jimmy Breslin and writing about him is addictive, but it is now time to turn over the words to him.