

Peter A. Jay

Here's to Bill James: Gentleman Statesman

Eight years ago, Senator William S. James (D., Harford), the president of the state Senate, was sitting in the Little Campus restaurant in Annapolis near the end of the legislative session and musing about his future.

"Yes," he said in his dry serious way, "I'm going to miss this place. But I've been here 16 years, and it's time to move on."

He didn't, of course. He was expecting to run for attorney general on one of the stronger Democratic tickets, but it didn't work out and he ran for the Senate again, rather to the annoyance of those in Harford county who were eying his seat.

Now here he is again, high and dry just as before, eight years later. The attorney generalship of the State of Maryland, a job he always has wanted, has once again been dangled tantalizingly before him and then snatched away. Nice guys, as Leo Durocher said, finish last.

So this is an encomium of sorts to a nice guy and perhaps the ablest and most industrious member of the Maryland Senate, which he has served as president since 1963, earning the respect and affection of both liberal and conservative colleagues.

(As a truth-in-reporting advisory note to newspaper-reading consumers, it should be duly mentioned that the senator and I both come from the same part of the state and that our association goes back a long time. But it has always been a

professional one, and never social.)

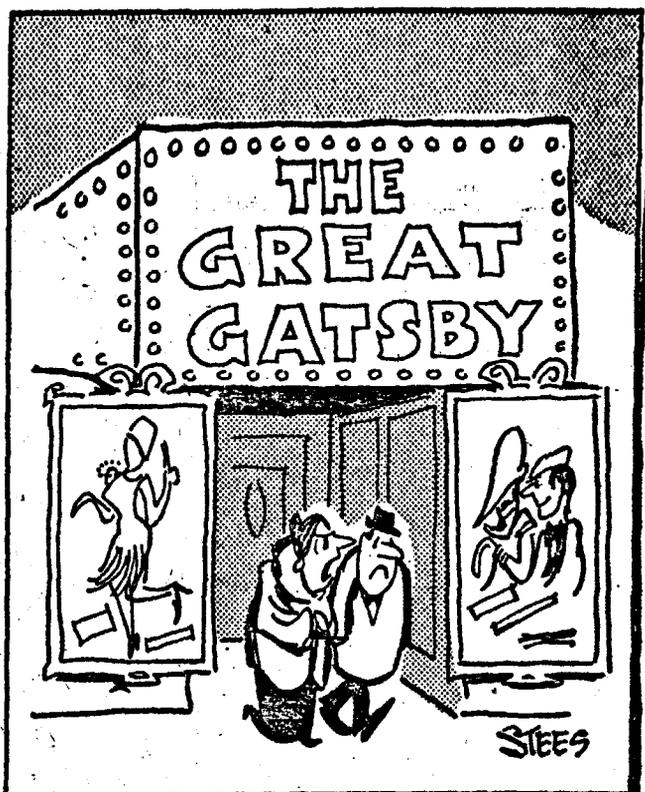
Mr. James hasn't yet made up his mind about his future, but he isn't likely to retire at the age of 60, and he has about ruled out a campaign for a sixth Senate term. He has been offered the new full-time position of state treasurer, now held on a part-time basis by former Governor J. Millard Tawes, and he will probably end up accepting it.

But he will miss the Legislature, where he operated with insight and independence on the Senate rostrum, flexible or stubborn as the occasion demanded.

He functioned, as presiding officer, like a patient and understanding schoolmaster, well-supplied with quotations and aphorisms to use as cooling diversions when tempers rose. He also used the free-wheeling position of Senate president, unencumbered by committee tasks, to pursue his interests in all sorts of legislative nooks and crannies where few had explored before.

"I've always thought Billy would make a splendid governor," said Senator Julian L. Lapidus (D., 2d Baltimore) the other day. And so he would—but of Vermont, maybe, or some other state where progressive thinking and rural courtesies blend; not, probably, of chaotic Maryland.

Mr. James is also the chairman of the Maryland Democratic party, a job he received, like the Senate presidency, because he was the only Democrat whom all factions respected—and be-



"COME TO THINK OF IT, FRANKLIN,
NOTHING TURNED YOU ON THEN EITHER."

cause he was certain to work hard at it.

As party chairman, he has done much to heal the breach between the regulars and the McGovernite left. Rikki Fleisher, a board member of the New Democratic Coalition, wrote in the NDC's March newsletter that though Mr. James's "ideas and contracts were rooted in the party's establishment and in its past . . . his undiluted integrity and elastic intelligence made it possible for him to find a way to accommodate the views and personnel offered by the New Democratic coalition."

Unlike many of his colleagues, during the legislative session he was never found wining and dining with journalists, lobbyists or other General Assembly hangers-on during the long An-

napolis evenings. He worked at night, reading bills and reports.

Nor has he made money, directly or indirectly, from his legislative career. His law office in Bel Air is about the size of a Volkswagen interior, and he does not speculate in real estate.

It has been Maryland's good fortune that, in recent years at least, it has had a number of men in positions of legislative leadership who have had vision as well as political savvy, and have seen the weaknesses of state government and been able to devise ways to improve it. Of this handful of leaders, Bill James has been the standout. He'll be missed in the Senate next year, but if he takes over the post of state treasurer we can be sure that Maryland's money will be in the best of hands.