



THE LAST IN OUR YEAR-LONG SERIES RECOGNIZING THE MEN AND WOMEN WHO SHAPED BALTIMORE DURING THE 20TH CENTURY.

# william donald schaefer

He's 78 years old now, a dozen years removed from his last stint as mayor. But the wintry blue eyes still shine at the mention of certain topics. Of course, with William Donald Schaefer, there is only one topic: the city of Baltimore.

Schaefer spent the majority of his life serving his city, 15 years as mayor, turning it by sheer force of will into . . . well, what? A metropolis reborn, or a tourist mecca with "rot beneath the glitter," as one anonymous city father put it in a 1987 report? "The city's in bad shape," Schaefer says now, and there is hurt in those eyes when he talks of the state of things. Is it his fault? Did he leave us a lemon of a city? Or were those who followed simply not up to the task?

The city we know—Harborplace, Federal Hill rehabs, Christmas lights on the Washington Monument—is the one forged from Schaefer's mind and by his hands (and the hands of those who survived the ordeal of working for him). Mayor Schaefer would patrol the streets in his chauffeured car, looking for garbage and potholes and problems. One of his favorite films was *Patton*, and the cantankerous maverick general is a fair match for Willie Don. He got things done his way, and he didn't care whose feelings may have been hurt in the process, but he did it all for his people.

The sole child of William Henry and Tululu Irene Schaefer, he grew up in a rowhouse at 620 Edgewood Street in West Baltimore and lived there until he moved to the governor's mansion. He served in the military during World War II, became a lawyer (hanging his shingle on the porch rail of the

Edgewood Street house), and became so enraged over a city councilman's nepotism that he ran for his seat in 1950. Twice he was beaten by candidates supported by the political machines. The third time, in 1955, one of the machines (run by furniture store magnate Irvin Kovens) came looking for him. Schaefer won, and would never lose another election in his life.

He became mayor in a special election in 1971 after Mayor Tommy D'Alesandro Jr., unsettled by the 1968 riots and their aftermath, left the post. He would become Maryland governor in 1987, serving two tempestuous terms in Annapolis, and recently returned to public life in 1998, winning the late Louis Goldstein's State Comptroller job. But it was in City Hall that Schaefer found his calling.

Schaefer's three-plus administrations began in an era of urban crisis. Middle-class flight, crime, and a declining industrial base had hit Baltimore hard, and the Nixon administration was butchering federal aid for cities. The new mayor marched to Washington to meet Secretary of Housing and Urban Development George Romney, who informed Schaefer that only two of Baltimore's six proposed federal grants would be approved. Schaefer's response set the tone for his administration. "Who the hell are you to say we can't have these programs?" he barked. Baltimore got its grants.

Called "The Best Mayor in America" by *Esquire* magazine in 1983 (and "The Wackiest Governor in America" by a supermarket tabloid in 1991), Schaefer's antics are the stuff of local legend. Yes, he wore silly hats—a lot of them. He swam in the National Aquar-

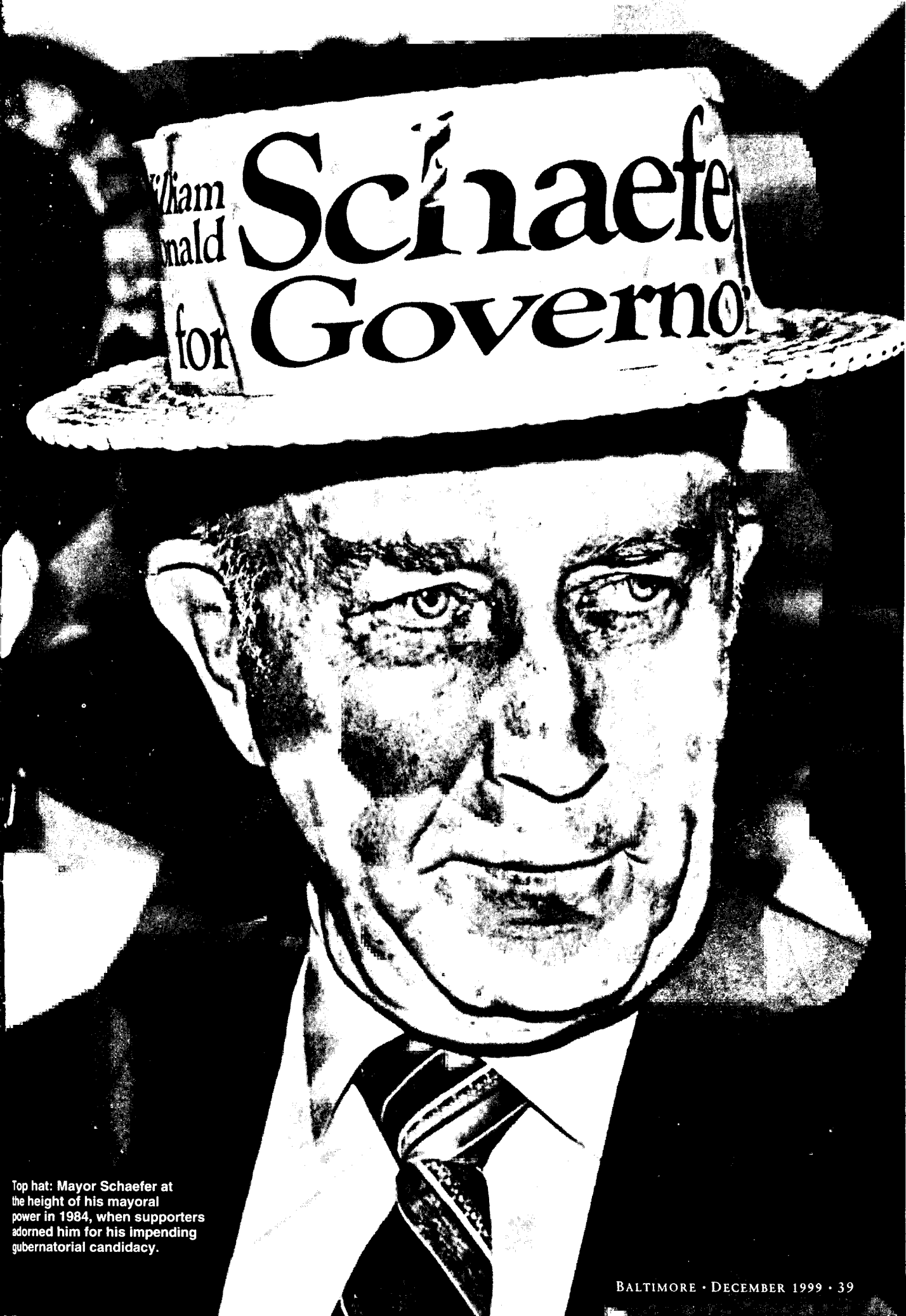
ium's seal pool and fired off hate mail to his critics. He threw tantrums in press conferences, called the Eastern Shore an outhouse, and lived with his mother well into his 60s. What's your point? Mayor Schaefer—the showman, the salesman, the irascible and unstoppable "Do It Now" persona—turned a dying backwater into The Renaissance City, the nation's unlikeliest tourist hotspot.

Even as the blocks beyond the Inner Harbor struggled on with crime and decay and lingering social problems, Schaefer managed to carry stratospheric approval ratings that hovered around 72 percent. And while he played fast and loose with the rules—the "Shadow Government" scandal of 1980 being the most notorious example—most Baltimoreans were willing to look past the mayor's quasi-legal red-tape slashing and slush funds. After all, Schaefer kept us from turning into Detroit.

Times have changed, but the question is the same: "Can the city be saved?" Of course it can. Don't think Schaefer hasn't been pondering the incoming mayor's task. "He has to totally reorganize the city government and get the best people," he declares, "and he has to let people know he's not a miracle man. It'll take him some time to reverse things. And when he does, it'll be the happiest time of his life. He'll be like a pig slopping in mud. I know the city will come back."

He's getting animated now, because he is talking about the love of his life. "Oh my God," he says intently, leaning forward, mouth half-open. The blue eyes blaze. "If I was 25 years younger, and stepping in. Oh my God."

• GEOFF BROWN



William Donald Schaefer for Governor

Top hat: Mayor Schaefer at the height of his mayoral power in 1984, when supporters adorned him for his impending gubernatorial candidacy.