

Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

James Brady's universal triumph

In an otherwise uneventful vacation to Santa Barbara this month, one of President Ronald Reagan's most significant acts was to honor his press secretary, James Brady, on the occasion of Brady's 48th birthday at a special reception for the press corps Aug. 29.

When the definitive history is written of the last eight years in Washington, one of the great stories will be that of James Brady.

When President Reagan leaves office in January, Brady's tenure as the official White House Press Secretary will have come to an end. He will have completed one of the longest terms in that office of anyone in American history.

But, of course, that is not the real story of James Brady. Since he was struck down by a bullet from a would-be assassin of President Reagan on March 31, 1981, Brady has retained his office mostly ceremonially.

In reality, he has been engaged in a task far more important to humanity than anything he, or his deputies Larry Speakes and Marlin Fitzwater who have acted in his place since that day, have ever done.

Hit in the head by a stray bullet from the gun of John Hinckley Jr. on that fateful March 31, Brady suffered massive brain damage, and was even pronounced dead on national network TV for a few moments, while, in fact, he fought for his life near the wounded President in the emergency room of the George Washington University Hospital.

Brady's pilgrimage since that day

is one of the truly great stories of courage and the indomitable human spirit—as expressed not only by Brady himself, but also his wife, Sarah, and his physician, neurosurgeon Dr. Arthur I. Korbine.

The details of the first years' account of the struggle to rehabilitate Brady in the face of overwhelming odds are presented in a book by Mollie Dickenson, entitled *Thumbs Up!* (New York, William Murrow and Co., 1987, \$19.95).

It was split-second decisions made by White House aide Rick Ahearn, to send Brady to George Washington Hospital, and by the 37-year-old Dr. Korbine in the emergency room which saved Brady's life. He had been hit directly above the eyebrow by a "devastator" bullet, which broke into 20 or 30 fragments as it shattered Brady's skull and penetrated the tip of the left frontal brain lobe, crossed the midline and continued on into the right lobe. The largest fragment ended up an area of the brain just above the right ear.

But the real story has been Brady's fight against the odds to regain the capacity to function as a creative human being. It is a story that will embolden the spirit of anyone facing a fight against long odds to function despite handicaps and defend the sanctity of human life.

In Brady's case, it is clear that his own fight has taken on a universal character, one that will ensure a special place for him in the history books.

Affirming the sanctity of life

The continued, visible support for Brady by the Reagan administration is one of the lasting contributions it has made to the moral fiber of the nation. By example, in his repeated expres-

sions of good will toward Brady, Reagan affirmed for the nation his dedication to the sanctity of life far more profoundly than he could have done by any mere speech or pronouncement.

It has set an example for the entire nation, just at the time when forces that would snuff out any human life it judges "useless" have been making their strongest push toward legalizing euthanasia, including heinous forms of gradual murder by starvation committed against the comatose or mentally infirm.

The Brady case stands as a powerful symbol of the best that America should be for all its people.

Once again this message was conveyed when Brady's 48th birthday celebration in Santa Barbara.

Anyone approaching the wheelchair-bound Brady with a condescending or maudlin attitude is in for a big shock. Brady's irrepressible sense of humor throws most people who greet him off guard.

This reporter, together with his wife, have had the privilege to meet and talk with Brady on numerous occasions in recent years, and find his wit and insight sharp as a tack. Meanwhile, speech therapy continues to produce remarkable progress for him.

While, as the book describes, Brady has his good days and his not-so-good days, he continues to symbolize the best qualities of the human spirit, both in himself and in those around him.

He is one who makes us think twice about the real values of life, and the hidden potentials of many people that society has all too much inclination to give up on—including the elderly, handicapped, and uneducated.

I was happy to be there to celebrate Jim Brady's 48th birthday, and to wish him many more. He is one of our real heroes in a time when there are all too few.