No Small Talk

By Mel Lavine

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When I was a student at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, I once shared a cab with George A. Barrett, a star reporter for the New York Times. He'd had many adventures over a long and distinguished career.

 Anxious to take advantage of the chance encounter, I asked Barrett if he could cite the most memorable of all his assignments. Without a moment's hesitation he said the two days he spent with William Faulkner, the American novelist and short story writer and Nobel laureate.

 Surprised, for I had expected something on the order of wars, assassinations, revolutions and the like, I said, "You're kidding?"

 He shook his head. “No small talk,” he said.

 My late, good friend, Kirk Rowlands, of Berkeley, was not a famous writer but, he, too, was not given to small talk. What drew me to him was his passion for history in general and the era of Franklin D. Roosevelt in particular. His library was filled with works on foreign affairs, U.S. history and presidential politics. Nearly 800 volumes were about FDR.

 At first, this struck me as an anomaly. For 30 years, he worked on budgets and administration for the University of California under five presidents and another 30 years as a financial adviser. With that background, one could be forgiven for taking Kirk for a moderate Democrat or Republican. In fact, he was an unreconstructed New Dealer until the day he died on July 9 at 92. FDR was his hero.

 Kirk, who began life on a farm in Washington State, was a teenager during the darkest days of the Depression. Because of Roosevelt’s New Deal, he was able to find work and scrape together enough money to attend Washington State University. (Later he would study at the University of Washington and the Harvard Graduate School of Business Administration.)

 He remained a Democrat because he never forgot what life was like under the Republicans who believed the acceptance of federal money undermined a man's self-respect. He was more in tune with the New Deal philosophy as paraphrased by Frederick Lewis Allen in his book about the 1930s, "Since Yesterday:" The millions who are out of work "are not to be considered paupers. They are not to be subjected to any humiliation which we can spare them. They are to be regarded as citizens and friends who are the temporary victims of an unfortunate economic situation for which the nation as a whole is responsible…"

 I sometimes wondered what people thought of Kirk and me in restaurants where we met for conversation, no small talk: two old fellows discussing personalities and issues from the present back to a long ago when giants walked the earth.

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