Thoughts While Shaving

By Mel Lavine

Special to the Times

FDR's was one of the great voices on radio. Credit, too, his skill as an actor. (He once told Orson Welles that he and Welles were the best actors in America.) In his "Fireside Chats" he explained complex issues in everyday language as one would chat with a neighbor across the backyard fence. On almost any night when I was a kid and he was on the air, you could walk the quarter mile of Beals Street and not miss a beat.

In contrast to today's angry mood toward Washington, it seems the majority of Americans during the Great Depression were less cynical about government than they are today – and yet the country in the 1930s was in much worse shape. A reason was advanced in a little book I just

came across. Called “Dear FDR,” it was written by Leila A. Sussmann and published in 1963. It is an analysis, in part, of how Roosevelt made use of his mail which came in day after day by the thousands for years, some of it critical, even abusive, but in the great majority of cases most favorable, even affectionate.

The man in the street believed that the man in the White House was their friend and champion. In their outlook, Roosevelt battled the rich and powerful for the welfare and security of the ordinary person. Reviled by the great industrialists and bankers, Franklin Roosevelt rejoiced in their hatred. John Q. Citizen admired the president’s chutzpah.

Of course, even then the polls gave a more accurate picture of opinion than the mail ever did. But as Louis Howe, FDR’s closest adviser, pointed out after FDR moved into the White House:

“When letters are received from the small merchant or the country storekeeper or the workman in a city factory, or the farmer...they are always read carefully.” When they shed light on a problem with a New Deal program, “the whole letter or at least a summary reaches the president’s desk.”

In searching for solutions, Howe maintained that Roosevelt “attaches chief importance, not to what the experts think is good for the man but what the man himself feels he needs most to help him out of his troubles.”

How much of this was window dressing one can't say. But the man in the street trusted Roosevelt and elected him president four times.

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A journalist friend recently returned from Europe says that if you are caught speeding in a luxury car in Finland the ticket could cost you a lot more than $100,000.

"That's because," Henrik Krogius writes in the Brooklyn Heights Press and Cobble Hill News in New York, a paper he edits, "in Finland traffic fines are graded according to income."

"Where a $100 fine could cause pain to someone trying to make ends meet, it would be pocket

change to a multimillionaire. As Finland sees it, the offense should cause a somewhat comparable level of pain all along the line."

And he adds: "Such an idea would of course be unthinkable to Republicans in the U.S." As an example, he cites the refusal of Republicans "even to eliminate tax breaks on corporate jets."

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