More Thoughts While Shaving

By Mel Lavine

Special to the Times

The name may be unfamiliar but it is one that should be remembered. Barry Commoner, one of the thinkers who made the environment a popular cause, died on Sunday in New York at 95.

A biologist trained at Columbia and Harvard, Commoner's research on the effects of radioactive fallout "contributed materially to the adoption of the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty of 1963," said the front-page obituary in the New York Times.

The paper cited him as "a leader among a generation of scientist activists who recognized the

toxic consequences of America's post-World War II technology boom and one of the first to stir the national debate over the public's right to comprehend the risks and make decisions about them."

In 1970, Barry Commoner was on the cover of Time magazine as the Paul Revere of the environmental movement. President Richard Nixon had already heeded the alarm. That same year Nixon said "The great question of the'70s is, shall we surrender to our surroundings, or shall we make our peace with nature and begin to make preparations for the damage we have done to our air, to our land and to our water."

Before the year was out the Environmental Protection Agency was created.

Barry Commoner would be a speaker and an author at the center of environmental and social issues for many years. In 1980 he ran for president but was little noticed in a contest between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. My late wife, Donna, was not star-struck over an ex-movie actor or a sitting president. She voted her conscience for Barry Commoner.

In the late 1980s I was working on a CBS documentary for Walter Cronkite on the environment. Looking for experts, Commoner was one of the people we talked to. I didn't think it was one of Walter's best interviews . My hunch is that he was uncomfortable with the interviewee's history as a left-wing radical.

Tuesdays are my deadline for this column, so I can only speculate how President Obama and Mitt Romney would fare Wednesday night in Denver. It is a fool's errand, so I let it pass.

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Unlike the presidential nominees, none of the political appointees on the Supreme Court will ever have to answer for their decisions to the voters, as Bill Moyers and Bernard A. Weisberger point out in The Nation magazine in a special issue devoted to the Supreme Court.

In recent years, they claim, the Court, led by Chief Justice John Roberts, has moved to "affirm the right of organized wealth – especially of corporations – over the individual or the public interest in almost any contest with regulators or victims of abuse." With its 2010 decision in Citizens United, they assert, "the Court has given a jet-powered boost to the move toward plutocratic control over our lives and fortunes" by the one percent.

The next president may have a vacancy or two to fill before his term is up. Four justices are

over 70: Ruth Bader Ginsburg is the oldest at 77. Justice Antonin Scalia is 74.

There is more than the economy and foreign affairs riding on the outcome of this election.

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