

FDR is Still Making News

By Mel Lavine

Special to the Times

Franklin D. Roosevelt is back in the news. The veteran actor, Bill Murray, plays him in a new film opening Friday, “Hyde Park on Hudson.” We’re told it focuses on such moments as when George VI of Great Britain visited Roosevelt on the eve of World War Two, FDR living with the crippled effects of his polio, and an affectionate friendship with a distant cousin.

Roosevelt is also back on the op/ed page, if he ever left it.

In her piece in the New York Times, Susan Dunn, a professor at Williams College, notes that President Obama and Mitt Romney met for lunch at the White House at a time “with the country is on the brink of a ‘fiscal cliff’ and yearning for longer-term unity.”

She asks, where will it lead? “Will this president welcome the counsel and assistance of a man who for months pounded his philosophy and policies? Can the defeated candidate see past his pain and withstand predictable criticism from divisive figures in his own party to cooperate with Mr. Obama?”

Each, she says, has a role model “in the partnership that blossomed seven decades ago.”

After trouncing Wendell Willkie in the 1940 election, President Roosevelt met with his former rival at the White House. Later Roosevelt told his labor secretary, Frances Perkins, “You know, he (Willkie) is a very good fellow. He has lots of talent. I want to use him somehow. I want to offer him an important post in government. Can you think of one?”

In 1940, as one country after another fell like dominoes to Hitler, Roosevelt won an unprecedented third term. He reached out to Republican critics Henry Stimson and Frank Knox, and made them secretaries of state and the Navy, respectively.

The method in his madness was to forge a bipartisan foreign policy to check fascist aggression. During the campaign, as Susan Denn reminds us, Willkie accused Roosevelt of having phoned Hitler and Mussolini to urge them “to sell Czechoslovakia down the river.”

After the election Willkie shrugged off his remarks as just “campaign oratory.” A week after the election Willkie said, “We have elected Franklin Roosevelt president. He is your president. He is my president.” Roosevelt picked up Willkie’s cue. Like Stimson and Knox, Willkie was “uncompromising” toward fascism. Isolationist Republicans were appalled when Willkie backed Roosevelt’s Lend-Lease bill, which would send war materials to the British although they couldn’t pay for them. He traveled to Britain as Roosevelt’s personal representative. He met with Churchill, toured bombed-out sites, visited war plants, and joined Londoners in underground shelters as bombs exploded.

Professor Dunn asks, could Obama and Romney follow a Roosevelt-Willkie scenario today? Maybe Obama would consider offering Romney a cabinet office or another important job?

As it happened, the Republican “old guard,” was determined to end Willkie’s political future. He was barred from speaking at the party convention in 1944. He died in October of that year at 52, an outcast for cooperating with FDR.

Mel Lavine was a television producer for many years with NBC News and CBS News in New York. Contact him at his e-mail address: mellavine@aol.com.

