'The Only Thing We Have To Fear...'

By Mel Lavine

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President Obama's Second Inaugural Address won rave reviews. Even the conservative columnist, David Brooks, said it "was bold and beautiful and something to hear. " (And that is something to write home about.)

Time will tell whether or not a phrase or line in Monday's 18-1/2 minute speech will live on in history. As the New York Times put it, "With this speech, he has made a forceful argument for a progressive agenda that meets the nation's needs. We hope he has the political will and tactical instincts to carry it out."

And this puts me in mind of a story behind one of the most memorable lines ever spoken in an Inaugural Address: "...the only thing we have to fear is fear itself..." It was delivered by Franklin Roosevelt in the depths of the Great Depression on March 4, 1933, and helped rally the sprit of

the country. ”

A couple of weeks before, on the night of February 15, five shots were fired at Roosevelt after he’d addressed a crowd in a Miami park. None of the bullets hit their target. But Mayor Anton “Tony” Cermak, of Chicago, who had come to Miami to mend fences with the President-elect, was hit in the lower right abdomen. He was chatting with Roosevelt who was sitting atop the back of an open car when the gunman fired from a .32 on a wobbly bench which made his aim unsteady.

Fearful for Roosevelt’s safety, the chief secret service agent ordered Roosevelt’s driver to get moving. “Get him the hell out of here!“ he said. Roosevelt countermanded the order. He wanted Cermak with him in the lead car in the caravan. It would be the first

to reach the hospital. Cermak was lifted into the backseat. Roosevelt felt his pulse and tried to comfort him as they sped to the hospital. “Tony, keep quiet – don’t move” Roosevelt said. “It won’t hurt if you keep quiet.”

Cermak died of his wounds in early March. The killer was an unemployed bricklayer, Joseph Zangara. He pleaded guilty to murder and died in the electric chair.

On the eve of Inauguration Day and with the shock of what occurred in Miami still ringing in the nation's psyche and with multitudes of Americans struggling I hard times Louis Howe, FDR's longtime friend and adviser, is believed to have contributed those few words to Roosevelt's First Inaugural Address. Howe could have borrowed from thinkers like Henry David Thoreau, the American naturalist and author, who wrote. "Nothing is so much to be feared than fear." Or from the Scottish writer, Thomas Carlyle: "Nothing is so much to be feared than fear." Howe said he saw the line in a newspaper ad for furniture but no ad was ever found.

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