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Bruce Bliven

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Some Famous People

Many elderly journalists are accused of being name-droppers. Sometimes the charge is true, but often it is partly or wholly false. If we are good at our job, it is our business to know a lot of very important people, and to be on such terms with them that they will tell us, on or off the record, what is going on. Often this results in a personal friendship; I shall mention a few of them.

By a meaningless accident, I met face-to-face every president of the United States from McKinley to Truman, inclusive, but with only two of them was my contact anything more than casual. When Franklin Roosevelt was trying to force his sweeping reforms through Congress, *The New Republic* worked hard reporting and explaining what he was trying to do and why we thought it was necessary. Most of his reforms had been debated in our pages, years before he took office, by a group of regular contributors of ours who afterward became the original members of his "Brain Trust."

I saw him in action in his famous press conferences in the Oval Room of the White House, joking with the reporters, expressing mock indignation that they did not know something they had

no possible way of knowing, cheerfully contradicting himself and then denying it. While on the whole we supported the New Deal, we constantly criticized his measures because we believed they did not go far enough—a position I still feel was correct. He sent me word privately to please continue the attacks; that they helped convince his critics on the right that he was not as liberal as they said.

The other president with whom I had close contact was Herbert Hoover. We had a double bond—coming from Iowa and being graduates from Stanford University. He was born in West Branch—where the Herbert Hoover Library now stands with his papers and other memorabilia. While it is true that he was sent to Oregon at the age of eight, he continued in an Iowa milieu, and I always felt that, like me, “he never left home.”

In May, 1920, I wrote the first magazine article, as far as I know, suggesting Mr. Hoover for president. It appeared in *The Independent*, a mildly intellectual weekly that ceased publication many years ago. I proposed he should run on either the Republican or the Democratic ticket; mine was a nonpartisan nomination.

People today have forgotten that Hoover was then our chief national hero. He had kept the Belgians from starving. He was a Great Engineer in a time when people thought engineering principles would save the nation. During the war he had

been the highly successful Food Administrator; the Washington propaganda machine had worked hard to identify his personality with economy in this field. Millions of copies of a handsome four-color picture of him were distributed with "Food Will Win the War" imprinted on the bottom; housewives hung it in their kitchens and mooned over it as they poured extra fat into a tin can. I remember only Lindbergh and Eisenhower as objects of such widespread devotion.

Nobody knew whether Hoover was a Republican or a Democrat and nobody much cared; engineering was above partisanship. I believed then, and still do, that if he had kept still, the Republicans might have nominated him in fear that if they did not the Democrats would, and that this might well have happened. He could have beaten anybody then in sight.

Just after my article appeared, the bubble burst; Mr. Hoover announced that he was a Republican. The pressure was off; the G.O.P., knowing the Democrats could not choose him, happily selected a mediocrity from Marion, Ohio, Senator Warren G. Harding. Mr. Hoover, who could have swept the convention, received a few complimentary votes on the first ballot or two. After the election Harding named him Secretary of Commerce.

A year or so later I asked him why he had so suddenly announced that he was a Republican, repeating the argument made above. "I didn't

have any choice," he told me. "Some California friends had entered my name in the primary there as a Republican and I couldn't let them down."

In the autumn of 1921, a great international Conference on Naval Disarmament was held in Washington, attended by the five chief naval powers of the world—the United States, Great Britain, Japan, France, and Italy. I stayed in the capital for several months, reporting the Conference for *The Globe* and *The New Republic*. From time to time I dropped in on Mr. Hoover. He liked to spend quiet Sunday mornings in his office, accompanied sometimes by his special assistant, a bright young man from Boston named Christian Herter, who was to go on to service in Congress, as Governor of Massachusetts, and as Secretary of State for Eisenhower. Frank Taylor, then *The Globe's* Washington correspondent, and I would join them for a leisurely talk on aspects of the state of American public opinion.

On one occasion Mr. Hoover sought our advice on a problem. In the early 1920's, postwar Germany was in desperate financial and economic straits; France had taken huge quantities of her machinery in the guise of reparations; her credit for the purchase of goods abroad was at low ebb. Medical and other supplies were desperately short; new-born babies were being wrapped in paper because no linen or cotton cloth was available. People were starving.

Mr. Hoover told us the American Relief Commission, which he had headed, still had huge stocks of non-perishable foodstuffs in storage all over Europe. But feeling against the Germans was still very high in the United States; he wondered how the Americans would react if some of these supplies, not urgently needed elsewhere, were used to aid the Germans.

That one was easy. Frank and I pointed out that Americans were the most generous people on earth; that they did not make war on women and children; that they would applaud this action. I do not know how much we had to do with his decision, if anything, but soon thereafter Relief Commission food began to be distributed in Germany.

In later years, Mr. Hoover and I diverged widely in our political views. Either he became more conservative, or an innate conservatism that had not been realized earlier began to make its appearance. But we remained good personal friends in spite of our political differences. When he left office in 1933, after being overwhelmingly defeated by Franklin Roosevelt, he was highly unpopular with most people in the country. But as the years passed, much of this feeling died away.

For two years in the late 1940's he performed a fine public service as head of the United States Commission on Organization of the Executive Branch of the Government. It is to the credit of Harry Truman, then president, that he laid aside

political disagreements and called Herbert Hoover to head this commission. Many of his excellent recommendations have been carried out by Congress. Others are still waiting to be implemented.

For years, my best Iowa friend in Washington was Henry Agard Wallace, who was successively the third-generation editor of *Wallace's Farmer* in Des Moines, then Secretary of Agriculture for President Roosevelt, Vice President from 1941 to 1945, Secretary of Commerce under President Truman for a short time, and finally the nominal editor of *The New Republic* itself. Henry was a year older than I, and had graduated from Iowa State University at Ames a year before I got my degree at Stanford. We shared not only an Iowa background and a common interest in science, but many political ideas.

It seems to me probable that long after Henry's public career has been forgotten, he may be remembered for his brilliant work in corn genetics. He developed a new strain of hybrid corn that proved enormously successful, with greatly increased yield per acre, more sugar, less starch, and uniformity in size for machine handling. His corn sold all over the world, and at one time he had done more than any other individual to increase the food supply for hungry people everywhere. The last fifteen years of his life were devoted to a successful similar effort to improve poultry—with

better size, increased egg-laying capacity, and resistance to disease.

I used to see Henry Wallace on my frequent trips to Washington in the 1930's, when the Roosevelt Administration was wrestling with the problem of a heavy oversupply of agricultural products (in terms of salability, not, of course, in terms of human need). He would tell me what was going on, and I would report this in articles in *The New Republic*. Since we had a very heavy readership among editorial writers on daily newspapers all over the country, spreading this information was a useful service.

I remember traveling with Henry many miles across Iowa, from Des Moines, to a small town where he made a speech, and back again late at night. He talked of his philosophy of life; I could see that he was somewhat attracted by a form of mysticism which has always left me cold. But never did I see any evidence of the fantastic beliefs attributed to him by the late Westbrook Pegler, the syndicated newspaper columnist, whose smear campaign against Henry went on for many years.

We often talked of what he would do when he left public office. We gave him a standing invitation to write a good Iowa column for *The New Republic*. But, in 1946, he was summarily dismissed as Secretary of Commerce by President Truman. His idealistic view of world affairs had clashed head on with the plans of Secretary of

State James F. Byrnes. *The New Republic* was, at the moment, engaged in an effort to make itself a more popular magazine, with a much larger circulation. Under the inspiration of Michael Straight, son of the original founders of the paper, we conceived the idea of bringing in Henry as the nominal editor, to write a weekly signed column, and to represent the paper in public appearances, where his name and reputation would be of great value to us. He accepted and came to us at the end of 1946. My own title was changed to editorial director.

We worked easily and well with Henry; he took no part in the actual work of getting out the magazine, but wrote his weekly article faithfully. When, for any reason, he was unable to do so, one or the other of us "ghosted" it. Before long it became evident that Henry still had unsatisfied personal political ambitions. There began to be talk of a new third party, far to the left of the middle-of-the-road Democrats under Harry Truman. The new party finally came into being as the Progressive Party in the early summer of 1948.

It was obvious that an avowed candidate for president could not very well serve as even the nominal editor of an independent magazine whose policy was to criticize all men and institutions without fear or favor. Accordingly, we asked Henry to resign and he amiably did so. He and I continued to be good personal friends until his death.

While there were many honest liberals in the Progressive Party, it is also true that some of its important leaders were men on the Far Left, who either were members of the Communist Party or might as well have been. The Progressives polled only about 1,100,000 votes. With Henry at its head, the Party should have appealed to the dissatisfied farmers and workers of the Middle West. But most of its votes came from New York State, and a large proportion from New York City, the one place where the Far Left was strongest. Truman, whom *The New Republic* supported instead of its recent editor, got about twenty-four million votes. Thomas E. Dewey, the Republican candidate, got nearly twenty-two million. Even Strom Thurmond, the States' Rights candidate in the south, did better than the Progressives.

Henry, himself, of course, was never a Communist or a fellow-traveler. He did not know what was going on among his supporters. When North Korea invaded South Korea in 1950, he was indignant, as most good Americans were, and issued a statement saying so. Thereupon the Communists denounced him savagely, forgetting all the nice things they had said about him two years earlier.

Another well-known public figure who played quite a role in my life was Bernard M. Baruch, who, as I have said, made a large fortune in Wall Street very early. He spent the rest of his career

in public service, as confidential adviser to every president from Woodrow Wilson to John F. Kennedy. I have already reported that he once offered to lend me \$2 million with which to buy *The New York Globe* when that paper was about to go under. We remained friends for forty years, until his death. He never offered me any stock market information. I should have thought it improper for him to do so, or for me to accept. Perhaps I was too punctilious!

Baruch had a passion for meeting people on park benches. I used to talk to him in Central Park in New York City near Cleopatra's Needle. He had a passion for peanuts, which his doctor had forbidden, and he used to share a surreptitious five-cent bag with me, sometimes casting an apprehensive eye over his shoulder for fear his medico might be approaching.

Since I have mentioned talking with kings, perhaps I should confess that I have talked with only two. (But there are not many around any more!) My two were King Edward VIII (after he had become the Duke of Windsor) and King Carol of Rumania. Both these monarchs lost their thrones on account of women—in Edward's case, because of his wish to marry the former Mrs. Wallis Simpson; for Carol, because of his long liaison with Madame Lupescu. Both these men seemed to be agreeable, average, human beings; but in both cases I was struck by the rigid train-

ing they had obviously undergone for kingship, how to deal with inquisitive reporters, and how to censor their own natural expressions of opinion.

Like every editor, I was asked to go on the boards of a good many organizations. I fought shy of most of these and I think, wisely. One that I did join, almost at its beginning, was the Foreign Policy Association, a nonpolitical, purely educational organization intended to help inform the American people about world affairs. It has performed a useful service, and is still going strong fifty years later. Of the many distinguished people who served on its Board the one I remember best (in the early days, when her husband was Governor of New York) is Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt. She was a controversial figure when her husband was in office and was disliked by many, but toward the end of her life she was almost universally admired for her unflagging, incredible energy, which she devoted to what she considered worthy causes.

One of the nasty jobs of the Trustees was going to millionaires and asking for money with which to keep the Association afloat. At our monthly Board meetings, the chairman would mention the name of a prospective donor and call for a volunteer to go see him. There would be a long, agonized pause, and then Mrs. Roosevelt would quietly say, "I will." She was usually successful, too.

Another organization on which I served for a third of a century was a foundation, the Twentieth Century Fund. Also going strong after fifty years, it began by making careful studies in the field of economics, and then publishing the results; today it has broadened its field of interest greatly, as well as its effectiveness.

The Fund, also, had many distinguished men on its Board over the years, people like Owen D. Young, head of General Electric, Attorney General Francis Biddle, David Lilienthal of the T.V.A. and the Atomic Energy Commission, and J. Robert Oppenheimer, the distinguished physicist, head of the group that brought the first atom bomb into being. One of those I remember best, and my friend for many years, was the late William W. Waymack, editor of *The Des Moines Register*, and a distinguished member of the Atomic Energy Commission during some of the most difficult times, in the late 1940's. For a long time he and I were the only Middle Westerners on the Board; as was the case when Alvin Johnson and I were surrounded by Easterners on *The New Republic*, we sometimes felt we spoke a different language from our colleagues.

We had another bond, in addition to our warm personal friendship. Bill and I were for years the only two people on the Board who had any training or experience in the art of mass communication. Our worthy colleagues, who tended to be

college professor types, showed an inclination to spend two or three hundred thousand dollars making a study of some critical national problem, and then publish it in a couple of fat volumes, destined to die unread on the shelves of a few libraries. Bill and I fought hard, and in the end successfully, to get information down to the grass-roots level. We had skilled popularizers engaged to produce inexpensive readable books summarizing the results; we had press releases prepared for newspapers and magazines; we even had a few films produced, for use in motion picture theaters and on television.

When Bill came to New York, we always had dinner together, and I renewed my strength, like Antaeus, by this contact, even at second hand, with my native soil. When I needed to know what was going on in Iowa and adjacent points, I pestered Bill, in Des Moines, with questions, and when I could—which was not very often—I would persuade him to write about what was happening for *The New Republic*.

I have lately been rereading some of his enormous correspondence (now in the files of the State Historical Society of Iowa Library), and have been impressed all over again with his great range of interest and his bright and shining spirit.