FILE

CAPITOL STUFF

By JOHN O'DONNELL

A FEW nights ago, at one of these Capital feed-fests where the great of the New Deal gather to find out who didn't come and stay to listen with polite boredom to the interminable gush of the New Deal mutual admiration society, we noticed Mrs. Woodrow Wilson chatting earnestly with Mrs. Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

The widow of our World War One President and the wife of our World War Two President are good friends. And in these present days seem to have even more in common than in the past.

Memories of World War One recall that in the final months of Woodrow Wilson's second administration there was quite an uproar on Capitol Hill over Senate suspicion that the then First Lady—the former Edith Bolling Galt—was exercising considerable influence in her own behalf on the White House administration of the affairs of the republic.

In fact, the issue became so hot that at one time a group of Senators, fearing the First Lady of World War One was really running the show, formed a committee which went to the White House to get the answer to the question: "Is the President of the United States the real boss or is the First Lady moving in on the Executive Branch of the Government?"

The Senate Committee decided that Woodrow Wilson was still on the scene and functioning. At least, the episode ended quickly.

The more insistent Senators were damned by the Wilson devotees as a group of coarse, uncouth boors who wanted to "feel beneath the sheet" to determine how much life was still in the Chief Executive and anyway, Wilson's final term was drawing to a close.

NOW—history ever repeats itself—comes the same muttered question on Capitol Hill. Is Mrs. Roosevelt the Assistant President? If not, who is the Assistant President when the Assistant Presidents are away?

True, vanished from the Capital scene at the moment are Assistant President Jimmy Byrnes, the former Supreme Court Justice, now the mighty poo-bah of war mobilization. Vanished also the Assistant President and F.D.R.'s alter ego, Harry Hopkins, who bounds up through security censorship in Italy.

Also missing, is the President's faithful co-worker, Anna Roosevelt Boettiger, the daughter on whom he has become accustomed to lean so much in recent months.

The job of Assistant President—or at least the chore of speaking out on the White House political front—seems to have descended on the strong shoulders of the ubiquitous, energetic and seemingly tireless First Lady.

At all events, hers is the politically powerful voice from the White House that has rallied the followers of Henry Wallace to win the Senate battle against the angry supporters of the roughly ousted Mr. Jesse Jones.

No direct word for utterance on the floor of the embattled Senate has come from the lips of the President since the start of the Wallace-Jones battle—a clash which may well result in a new political lineup in the congressional elections of '46 and the presidential election four years hence.

BUT Mrs. Roosevelt has spoken out loudly and vigorously for Wallace—and her words get close attention here in Washington. The President might have waved his wife's column aside as "just a diary" and declared that she wasn't one of the "unnecessary excrescences" which all other political columnists are.

But Mrs. Roosevelt noted in her non-political diary that in her opinion Mr. Wallace was a man who looked forward and Mr. Jones was one who looked backward. Now that meant some votes for Brother Wallace.

The non-political First Lady followed this up with a non-political press conference in the non-political or domestic wing of the White House in which she again supported Brother Wallace—but this time on the grounds that Mr. Wallace was a real conservative.

At times, it's hard to follow the First Lady's reasoning or clarity of expression, but her statement declared:

"I happen to consider Wallace's proposals the only conservative proposals there are. I think it is dangerous to look forward to defeat. That is not a conservative approach; that is a defeatist approach.

"The only conservative thing is to use all the strength we have or face an alternative so serious I can't think how any conservative could face it with any sense of security."

We confess that this isn't very clear to us. But we get this point: If Henry Wallace is vulnerable because Senators think he's radical, present White House spokesman Mrs. Roosevelt will do her best to present him as a conservative. Well, we gotta win, ain't we?

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