F. D. R.'s Man Friday

by HELEN AND CLEM WYLE

"ROOSEVELT IS the best speaker in Washington," the saying goes, "but Rosenman is the best listener." As President Roosevelt's "close friend and most valued adviser," Samuel I. Rosenman inspires trust. Genuinely interested in what his visitors have to say, he follows them closely, his massive, gray-haired head at almost rigid attention, his gray-blue eyes alert. Ask Rosenman just what he does for the President, and he replies quietly, "Whatever is needed at the moment."

This answer is typical of the man. As F. D. R.'s acknowledged "right arm," Rosenman makes a cult of anonymity, partly out of modesty, partly out of necessity—most of his tasks being highly confidential. But whatever the reason, his reticence often gives rise to wild speculation.

Take last October, for instance, when F. D. R. plucked "Sammy the Rose" off the New York Supreme Court bench and planted him in the White House as his special counsel. One news source held that Rosenman would review court martial cases. Another insisted he would handle appeals for draft deferments of federal employes. A third, that he would work exclusively on the problems of postwar planning.

None of these reports proved to be true. The genial, stocky, 48-year-old jurist accepted the post for far different reasons. Ever since 1933, he had been making frequent trips to the capitol. When court closed on Friday, he would fly there and work at the White House until Sunday night. After war was declared, he had to commute every weekend, so that his health suffered, and for a brief period he lost the sight of one eye. Imperative, then, that he either remain in New York or Washington, he had no difficulty making the choice. The President, faced with grave and constantly pyramiding problems, had often expressed a desire for complete use of his "right arm."

"Sammy the Rose's" value to Roosevelt can be gleaned, in part, from some accomplishments which need no longer be kept secret. As a coordinator, he suggested and helped in the organization of the War Manpower Commission, the Office of War Information, and the National Housing Agency. As a talent scout, he called the President's attention to administrative stars like Donald Nelson. And as a peacemaker—one of his chief roles—he settled squabbles between the Treasury Department and the Alien Property Custodian over the control of alien property; between the WPB and the Federal Power Commission over wartime electrical power; and between the War Department and the Department of Justice over proposed anti-trust suits against certain war manufacturers. In addition, Rosenman drew numerous executive orders, helped solve administrative problems and sifted suggestions, criticisms and complaints of all kinds.

Right now he continues to be a jack of all trades, but on a full-time basis. Every week scores of government and business big-wigs trek to his huge green and cream-walled office in the West Wing of the White House for conferences. Only a handful go away dissatisfied.

While "hearing out" a caller, Rosenman digests facts quickly and thoroughly. His judicial temperament, though, keeps him from jumping to conclusions. And particularly when trouble-shooting, he makes no recommendations until he has carefully examined both sides of a problem.

A Texan by birth, Rosenman, the son of an immigrant clothing merchant, was brought to New York when he was eight. He attended the local public schools, Columbia College, then Columbia Law School. Following World War I, in which he served as a lieutenant, he was admitted to the bar. A keen interest in politics soon led Rosenman to join the local Democratic club where he became an active member. His reward on this occasion was a nomination for the Assembly in 1921.

The district had long been a Republican stronghold, but the Democratic landslide for Mayor John F. Hylan helped sweep the young lawyer into office. Besides, he had an ardent booster, a pretty brunette named Dorothy Reuben, (now Mrs. Rosenman) who organized a band of doorbell-ringing vote-getters called "The Flying Squad of Debs."

Rosenman remained in the Assembly until 1926, when his colleagues made him bill-drafting commissioner. This work familiarized him with all phases of state government and led to his meeting with Franklin D. Roosevelt late in the summer of 1928.

About to plot his gubernatorial campaign, F. D. R. needed a capable, experienced adviser. Maurice Bloch, his campaign manager, suggested Rosenman. Roosevelt phoned him in New Jersey, where he was vacationing, and they arranged to meet at the Hoboken Ferry. According to F. D. R., "Sammy the Rose" stumbled off the boat obscured by at least a dozen suitcases and portfolios. Peering over them, he panted: "Here I am, Mr. Roosevelt!"

That incident still tickles the President, and each time he relates it he seems to add a few more pieces of luggage. Rosenman, however, will only admit to three suitcases and a briefcase. At any rate, the two worked together throughout the 1928 campaign (as they have on all others since then) and when F. D. R. was elected governor, he appointed Rosenman his counsel.

Their 16-year-old friendship has been strengthened by a number of factors. They see eye-to-eye politically. They share similar views on social and economic problems, although Roosevelt is reputedly more liberal. Whatever disagreements they may have—and there must be some, since Rosenman cannot be accused of being a "yes" man—all are settled privately.

BUT PERHAPS there is a still more obvious reason for Roosevelt's implicit trust in Rosenman. The President knows his own interests will never suffer because of his friend's personal ambitions. Rosenman's greatest ambition, indeed, was satisfied back in 1932, when F. D. R., as governor, appointed him a New York State Supreme Court judge. Elected the following year to a 14-year-term, he would still be serving on the bench, had not the wartime emergency arisen.

Like all members of the President's inner circle, Rosenman has his quota of annoyances. Favor-seekers, whom he automatically spurns, top the list. Then there are the professional Roosevelt-baiters. One of their favorite indoor sports is drawing a "Ring Around Rosie," hoping thereby to discredit the President. The baseless accusation that Rosenman had authored the recent tax veto message typifies their strategy. So does the constant, monotonous bleat that he writes the President's speeches.

What Rosenman does do, along with several others, is supply background material and facts. Occasionally he may also edit and polish. But as for writing those speeches—"No," he says.

Rosenman, who is a somewhat complacent-looking man with pink cheeks and a low, pleasant voice, views all his critics dispassionately. His calm demeanor, in fact, seldom varies, and he could easily be taken for a prosperous businessman without a worry in the world. His steady nerves are the result of an ability to relax completely. Before moving to Washington, he would indulge in what his wife calls a "movie jag." He would see one picture at five, another at eight, take a light snack and wind up at a midnight show. Mrs. Rosenman, thoroughly conditioned by years of these sprees, admits she can survive two movies. "But the third . . . well, that's when I begin to balk."

Rosenman's movie bromides, however, are no longer necessary. He can now take most Sundays off, and in the afternoon he and his wife like to walk in the picturesque Rock Creek Park section of Washington. Rosenman's Sunday evening is typically American. He amuses himself with magazines, books, preferably current history, and the radio. Partial to humorous programs, he feels cheated if he misses his favorites, Fred Allen and Edgar Bergen.

Each weekday morning at nine o'clock, Rosenman passes through the northwest gate of the White House and goes directly to his office. He examines his mail, answers a few important letters, then heads for the President's quarters. Steve Early and a few others may be there, and while F. D. R. breakfasts, they discuss the latest headlines. Then the day's work is gone over, and by 10:30 or so each is at his own desk.

During the day, the President again may call Rosenman for a conference, and if necessary, the two may dine together and work until midnight—sometimes later. Most of the time, though, Rosenman leaves the White House between 7:00 and 7:30.

According to Rosenman's friends, his feeling for President Roosevelt borders on devotion. Here is just one evidence of this:

During the fall and winter of 1941, Rosenman had labored particularly hard on national problems. The weekend of December 7th, he was so exhausted he remained in New York. While he was reading in his study Sunday afternoon, Bobby darted in with news about Pearl Harbor. Rosenman, accustomed to his son's teasing, did not believe him. But when he learned the boy really had spoken the truth, he called the White House at once.

"What are my orders, Mr. President?" he asked.

"Come down immediately," was the reply.

Brushing aside his fatigue, Rosenman flew to the capital and worked all that night and far into the next morning.

What more could anyone expect of a right arm?