By Edgar Kemler

Washington

IT CAN almost be said of New York's Senator Herbert H. Lehman than while everybody in Washington respects him, nobody listens to him. His widely ignored proposal for revising the three-year-old McCarran-Walter Act is, patently, more important than the billion-dollar highway bill, which was the most widely touted item of the President's "must list." While the highway bill would improve our convenience and possibly our safety, the Lehman bill would restore our traditional hospitality towards the victims of foreign oppression. Thanks to this tradition, Lehman's father emigrated to Alabama in 1848 from his native Bavaria. Yet, according to McCarthy's and McCarran's disciples, who still hold the Congressional veto power in such matters, the Lehman bill would "reopen our doors to spies and traitors." Little wonder, then, that this former investment banker, who seemed so moderate a New Dealer back in the Truman era and who openly opposed President Roosevelt on his controversial "court-packing" bill, should now be linked with the fiery Morse of Oregon. Repeatedly, at their bi-weekly dinners, Lehman has urged his twenty fellow New Dealers in the Senate to make record votes against McCarthyism. But he swims against the tide. In 1950 Lehman induced his close friend, Hubert Humphrey, to cast an apparently suicidal vote against the McCarran Internal Security bill. Last year, Humphrey voted for the bill, so Lehman induced his friend in turn to cast a record no vote against the Humphrey security bill, which was even more repressive than the earlier McCarran bill. Lehman did so—presumably to show the party what he would do such things. However when the bill was taken seriously and partially enacted, Lehman was conscience-stricken. Significantly, when Humphrey began his successful effort this year to dump the security issue onto a bipartisan commission, Lehman took little part in it.

This would suggest a double alienation—-a split, not merely with his party, but also with his nation. At any rate, whenever Lehman rises to speak on the Senate floor, his gray-haired wife (the former Edith Altschul of San Francisco) watches anxiously from the family gallery. Nor is her obvious concern for him completely unjustified. In the New Dealers' recent battle to free the United States from our self-imposed entanglement in the Formosa Straits, only Lehman, Morse, and Langer of North Dakota made a record vote. On the floor and off, they were treated like the "wilful" Senators who voted against United States participation in World War I. The round-faced, dignified New Yorker has none of the nuances of the professional demagogue. His speeches are brief and cogent, with their critical impact only slightly softened by his Hudson Valley accent.

It was the late President Roosevelt who boosted Lehman from a lifelong philanthropist (in 1899 he founded the Boys Club of the Henry Street Settlement) to an extraordinarily successful statesman. Lehman freely acknowledges his debt to F. D. R., not only for the original boost, but also for the subsequent training. Yet so long as he was "my good right arm," as Roosevelt called him, his own stature was obscured. Their political connection began in the summer of 1928. Lehman had taken a leave of absence from Lehman Brothers, the family firm, to round up delegates for Governor Al Smith's Presidential bid. Characteristically, what moved him was not any dream of office, but resentment of the anti-Catholic bigotry then directed against the Catholic Smith. The subsequent campaign was a virtual tragedy. But where the debutante, Roosevelt, was elected governor in Smith's successor, and Lehman, lieutenant governor. Roosevelt's heir apparent,
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Despite his battles for today's "lost causes," Lehman is as popular in New York State as ever. Even during his lone-wolf attack on the Administration's Formosa policy, his constituents were 10-1, sometimes 20-1, for him according to the mail count. That is why there is so much speculation about his running for a second full-term next year. Last summer he quietly helped Averill Harriman get the Democratic nomination for Governor. He did not do this by intervening for Harriman (for sentimental reasons, he could not oppose Harriman's opponent, F. D. R., Jr.) but by absolute veto over the boss-favored dark-horse candidate, Mayor Robert Wagner, Jr., of New York City. Lehman had looked forward to close collaboration with Harriman. But unfortunately, like Hubert Humphrey in the Senate, Harriman now acts like a Presidential candidate. On Alcoa's current bid for a share of Niagara public power, in which Lehman and Harriman are both vitally interested, Lehman has publicly taken a much tougher line than Harriman.

As Lehman now decides whether to run or not—he will make no final decision, he says, until the last minute—he will undoubtedly consider his undeclared breach with his fellow Democrats. Yet it would be a mistake to think that this breach, such as it is, will be decisive. His career has brought him twenty-three honorary degrees, and innumerable honors. He is a top official of the American Jewish Congress, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Joint Distribution Committee, and others. But he also has had numerous disillusionments. According to close associates, while he is actually 77, Lehman has the bounce of a man of 40. Moreover, so long as the McCarran-Walter Act "blots and shames the law books of our nation," his Democratic friends can count on his loyalty, no matter how little they deserve it.