BEHIND THE SCENES WITH THE MEN AND WOMEN WHO REALLY RUN 1600 PENNSYLVANIA AVENUE

JAMES ALLEN STANDS IN THE south end of the White House dining room to make sure that everything is going as planned. Butlers zip by with trays, bustling around dozens of tables while the dinner guests soak in the room's regal atmosphere—complete with ornate high ceilings and shimmering chandeliers. When the butlers remove the dinner plates and replace them with bowls of water with green leaves floating in them, nobody seems to know what to do—nobody except the host, who dips his fingers in the bowl, dries his hands, and puts the bowl aside. The guests dip accordingly.

"Nobody uses fingerbowls anymore," explains Allen, an assistant usher of the White House. "That's why every table has a host. His job is to set an example of how the guests are to act."

Allen is a pleasant, graceful man whose job is to keep the White House's social events running efficiently. He started there as a tour guide in 1972, then moved to the usher's office eight years ago.

The Office of the Chief Usher oversees the work of 93 employees who maintain the White House and serve the first family. The team includes maids, butlers, cooks, plumbers, and curators, all of whom work for the executive mansion—an institution with its own set of rules and procedures.

LATE MONDAY MORNING THE HOUSEkeeping staff is getting ready for another hectic week. Allen walks into the Red Room, which is across the hall from his office. The operations crew next door is setting up tables for the following day's Bush-Quayle luncheon, while the florist arranges bouquets and the butlers polish silverware.

"The social function is a reflection of what's going on politically," he says. "When things run smoothly, it means that everybody in the east and west wings are on the same wavelength. When they aren't in place, you get people who want to do things but don't have the authority. Bush was off to a slow start with getting his appointments in place, so we got mixed signals. But now we're moving right along."

In many ways Allen's job is similar to that of a luxury-home owner. He plans dinners, buys artwork, decorates rooms. He must make sure that the White House is kept clean. The main difference is that this house has dozens of rooms and it's used to entertain some of the most important political and cultural figures of our time.

Every year the first family hosts an average of 300 official gatherings. Thousands of guests attend its briefings, receptions, and press conferences, and millions more plod through on the famous White House tours. All of this takes its toll on the furnishings and on the grounds.

"We roll up the carpets during the tours so that people don't walk all over them," says Allen. "This sofa has been done twice. You can see it's worn in the middle, where traffic runs up against it."

Allen thinks of each first family as a tenant. Although newcomers have their own vision of what life should be like on Pennsylvania Avenue, there is a distinctive White House way.

"Everyone comes in thinking they're going to do it their way," says Allen, as he brushes his finger over a glass-covered coffee table to check for dust. "The house has been here for 200 years. Not that changes can't be made, but some things you can't change."

The dining room's capacity is one of those things. "You just can't have 1,400 people for dinner," he says. "It's impossible." It's equally impossible to change dining-room settings. "One social secretary thought it would be wonderful to have place mats instead of tablecloths. Those tables, I told her, are made of plywood. You have to cover them with cloth. Otherwise they are ugly."

Each family has its own style of social

izing. The Carters, who were down to earth, played the presidency "to make it more relatable" to people, says Allen. The Reagans were more formal, more lavish. "If Mrs. Reagan said, 'We'll have 25 people for lunch tomorrow,' she meant 25 at noon. The Bushes are more spontaneous. If someone shows up at the last minute, they say, 'Have lunch with us,' and we add a plate."

Over the years Allen has gotten to know first-family members intimately, and is appalled at the way the press has intruded into their lives. Reporting everything from the dog's litter to routine visits to the doctor, the media crash into the White House "wheeling their equipment" and leaving "gouges" in the doors. Sure, Allen explains, the first family has its private residency upstairs, where the president can walk into the kitchen at night to get a bag of potato chips. But the family never knows when there will be an interruption.

"The phone rings all the time," says Allen. "We have this system where we screen calls. If it's for the president, we ring a bell once. If it's for the first lady, we ring twice. It's terrible; they have no privacy."

Allen's job is to help them out on matters that affect daily life, and he intrudes as little as possible. If Barbara Bush calls to complain about a dripping faucet, Allen is careful to ask when he can send up the plumber. If a chunk of plaster were to fall from the ceiling just before she was to have guests for tea, he would send a painter to patch it temporarily and then ask a carpenter to repair it after she left the house.

THESE DAYS FIRST FAMILIES ARE BEcoming homebodies. Presidents keep hectic schedules and are more involved in Washington's social activities than they used to be. Until President Truman moved into the White House, it would virtually close down for the summer. But Allen can't recall the last time that any of his tenants took extended vacations.

The more they stay at home, he says, the more work they create for Allen and his staff. The day starts with White House tours at 8:00 A.M. and continues with lunches, receptions, teas, briefings, dinners, and other official functions.

State dinners are the most difficult to coordinate, says Allen, although he does know what to expect. These meals are elaborate; they involve three courses for 120 people, formal entertainment during dinner, and ballroom dancing afterward. Allen calls in additional butlers (who have already received security clearances) to help out.

While the chef prepares the food, Allen checks the table settings to make sure that the bouquets are neatly arranged in the center and that the forks are straight. If somebody cancels at the last minute, a butler removes the place setting and rearranges the table.

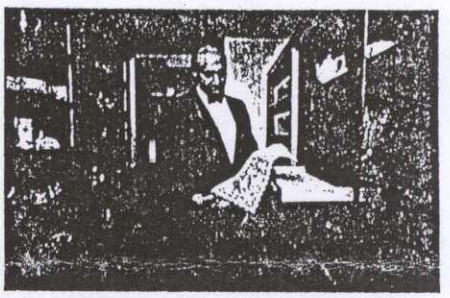
Typically the staff has two weeks to prepare a state dinner. The first lady tells her social secretary about the function, and then the secretary meets with Allen and a few others to decide on the menu. The store clerk gets the grocery list and picks up the food at a wholesale market that has a security clearance. For security reasons, no food is delivered to the White House and Allen isn't allowed to tell where the wholesale store is located. If the wholesalers don't have the food in stock, or if it's not available, the clerk goes to a supermarket where special arrangements have been made. "We go to a Gourmet Giant. But we don't stand in the checkout line because we buy in bulk. Not many families go to the grocery store to buy salmon for hundreds of people," says Allen.

Kosher foods require special attention. Several guests who attended a luncheon in honor of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak ordered kosher meals. "We ask the caterer to make the meals as similar to ours as possible. The butler keeps them in a separate section and takes each out individually."

When people entertain a small number of guests at home, they often can afford to be daring and make exotic dinners. But at the White House, says Allen, "We stay away from anything strange. When you are serving that many people you don't know how many can eat sushi. We stick to American foods: beef and potatoes, chicken and potatoes, veal and potatoes."

NO MATTER HOW WELL EVENTS ARE planned, something unexpected always happens. For example, if a guest turns around quickly and bumps into a butler carrying a tray of drinks, the guest is immediately taken downstairs, where a housekeeper blow-dries his clothes. If the stain cannot be removed with water, the government will even foot the bill for a dry cleaner.

Life can be especially rough at the White House during the winter, when employees get snowed in at home, because tourists line up outside the gates to take a spin through the White House, snow or no snow. And the show must go on.



A butler inspects the linen in the pantry where the Lincoln china is kept.

Luckily, Allen's staff has little turnover; some employees have been there 40 years. "People don't stay here for the money," he says. "They can make more working in private homes."

You couldn't pay Allen to leave his job. The White House is the place for people like Allen, who enjoy international hobnobbing. "I see people I would never see anyplace else," he says. "You want to touch them, but you can't do that. You have to *ooh* and *ah* in the background."

Of all those he has seen, which one would Allen most have liked to talk to? "The pope," he says. "I would have liked to go up to him to say hello."

Presidents come and go but the White House staff remains. No matter which way the political winds blow, this crew ensures that the first family's home is well preserved.

Allen steps into his office, a small room he shares with two other people, and talks about all the presidents he has served. He has seen history in the making in this house. At the end of each day he heads home to Herndon, Virginia and leaves all the formalities behind—until the next day.

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