The Residence

Inside the Private World of The White House

Kate Andersen Brower
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Discussion Questions

What were your impressions of White House life before you read this book? Did reading the book change those impressions?

Do you think that the private lives of these public people sheds any insight onto their persona? Is it fair to judge people by how they act at home versus how they act in public?

Comparisons have been made between this book and the television show Downton Abbey. In what ways are they similar? In what ways are they different?

Would you like to work as a Residence staff member in the White House? What would be some perks of the job? What would be some drawbacks?

Having a thoughtful staff serve your family in your own home is likely something many of us will never experience. But if you could, what would be some of the benefits of such service? What would you look forward to most? What would be some drawbacks?
A Really Nice Prison for Presidents

Among White House staff’s daunting tasks: increasing LBJ’s water pressure, dusting Nancy Reagan’s Limoges boxes, searching for Caroline Kennedy’s lost hamsters.

Ronald and Nancy Reagan face the South Lawn on April 11, 1981, after the president’s release from the hospital. PHOTO: RONALD REAGAN LIBRARY/GTY IMAGES

By HENRY ALLEN, April 10, 2015

The White House is like the “Mona Lisa”—you’ve seen so many reproductions that it’s a brand, more an idea than a thing. In the case of the White House: photographs, engravings (the back of the $20 bill), Christmas-tree ornaments, belt buckles, refrigerator magnets, souvenir coins, Lego sets, calendars, jigsaw puzzles and snow globes.

When you see the real thing—55,000 square feet, 132 rooms, 147 windows, 28 fireplaces, eight staircases and three elevators—you may react the way I did on my first visit to the Louvre: “Hey, that looks just like the ‘Mona Lisa.’” In Washington, the real thing looks just like the White House.

Though said to be inspired by Dublin’s 18th-century Leinster House, the White House has a touch of the country manor about it, though a manor with snipers on top and a north front cluttered with cops, fences, sidewalk protesters carrying signs and a smaller lawn than you
would expect—a lawn where an encampment of TV camera equipment makes it look like a backdrop set, which it is for news correspondents doing their stand-ups. Even the real thing isn’t quite real.

The reality of the place is inside, you assume—the nation-saving decisions or conspiratorial scurryings you can only imagine as you stare at the blank windows. You can’t see in. Can the people inside see out? It has a gracefully forbidding look.

Harry S. Truman called it “This great white jail.”

“It’s a really nice prison,” said Michelle Obama.

As it happens, Kate Andersen Brower, author of “The Residence: Inside the Private World of the White House,” reports that she was inspired by the class-bound and obligation-ruled prison represented by a fictitious country manor, the one in television’s “Downton Abbey,” which contains a family and their servants, though I don’t believe Ms. Brower uses the word “servants” when she can avoid it. Instead, approximately 96 full-time and 250 part-time White House servants are “residence staff”—a bit of egalitarian euphemism, American-style.

She could have been inspired too by the movie “Gosford Park” (2001) or the 1970s British television series “Upstairs, Downstairs,” but in these variations on the master-servant theme it’s the relationship of upstairs and downstairs that provides a lot of the drama—romances, parallel hierarchies and class conflicts, most of them missing from “The Residence.”

Besides, the White House is the reverse of Downton Abbey—Ms. Brower’s point is that first families come and go but the staff remains for decades, even generations. Nine members of one family, the Ficklins, have worked there over the years. At Downton Abbey, the Granthams stay but the servants come and occasionally go.

“We’re renters here,” President Obama has said. It’s a house, not a home. The rooms seen by tourists are like model homes—the deadness of too much decoration and redecoration, lots of taste and very little style. One senses an atmosphere of impersonal privilege in the manner of a VIP lounge at an airport. Only the Kennedys could make the White House seem glamorous. Only they wanted to. Or knew how to, with their concerts and dinners and celebrities.

The staff adjusts its routines as the presidential door revolves. It’s these routines that Ms. Brower inventories. On Executive Chef Walter Scheib: “After serving the Clintons haute American cuisine . . . he didn’t know what the Bushes expected. Almost overnight, he had to go from preparing layered late-summer vegetables with lemongrass and red curry to serving up Tex-Mex Chex and BLTs.”

The author loves this stuff, the tiny details of housekeeping and homemaking: Hillary Clinton’s shampoo, the precise methods for dusting Nancy Reagan’s Limoges boxes, the search
for Caroline Kennedy’s lost hamsters, the obsessive quest of Lyndon Johnson for higher water pressure in his shower, the three White House calligraphers producing Christmas invitations, the placing of flowers even in rooms that will be empty that day, and the making of the sleigh bed in Room 328. “That was a hard, hard job trying to get that thing neat,” says maid Betty Finney, who worked at the task for the Clintons and the Bushes. “We all knew it had to be done, we just dreaded it.”

Dreaded it? That’s how important these things are to the staff, the author and any readers who will enjoy this book, readers who collect tiny facts as if they were souvenir spoons, readers who may already have consumed the staff-centered movie “Lee Daniels’ The Butler” (2013). Or the 1979 TV series “Backstairs at the White House,” inspired by the memoir of staffer Lillian Rogers Parks. Or books like “Upstairs at the White House: My Life With the First Ladies” (1973) by Chief Usher J.B. West, “My First Ladies: Twenty-Five Years as the White House Chief Floral Designer” (2011) by Nancy Clarke, or “Dog Days at the White House: The Outrageous Memoirs of the Presidential Kennel Keeper” (1975) by Traphes Bryant, said to be the first staffer to note John Kennedy’s erotic shenanigans.

The details keep on coming. A French cuff incorrectly fastened. John Kennedy asking doorman Preston Bruce to open a window. Barbara Bush not recognizing a maid. A houseman, Linsey Little, playing horseshoes with George H.W. Bush—and usually winning. Mrs. Reagan once complained to a florist that the lights were not on. “I thought to myself,” he remembers, “There’s a light switch right here. Do I turn it on and make her look like an ass, or do I say, ‘I’ll call the electrician?’ ” He hit the switch. Mrs. Reagan said, “Thank you.”

Those who do not find these things important will have to wait till page 141 for the book’s first jolt of excitement. Chapter five, on the Clintons, begins: “There was blood all over the president and first lady’s bed.”

That’s a fine opening line, a fine lead, as they say in the newspaper business, where the famous rule is: If it bleeds, it leads. But Ms. Brower, though a journalist, has chosen to flatter the gentility of her readers by postponing the sort of scenes that made women faint in the 19th century.

This blood flowed not long after the Monica Lewinsky sex scandal had gone public. President Clinton claimed that he had walked into a bathroom door. The staff knew better. “We’re pretty sure she clocked him with a book,” one worker said.

The Clintons provide squalid and scandalous material—some of the least genteel and most entertaining stuff. Usher Skip Allen said the Clintons never fully trusted the residence staff: “They were about the most paranoid people I’d ever seen in my life.” Their paranoia infected the staff with fears of firings. So many scandals to be leaked: Travelgate, the use of the Lincoln Bedroom to woo big-money contributors, the staff gift-wrapping a present for Ms. Lewinsky, Mrs. Clinton calling Mr. Clinton a “goddamn bastard,” Chelsea confronting Secret Service agents and calling them “pigs.”
The Clintons were squalid. The Kennedys were decadent. President Kennedy’s adventures with secretaries in the swimming pool have a droit du seigneur arrogance.

This being Washington, haunted by ghosts of its Southern past, there is a theme of race in the book. I don’t recall seeing a percentage, even in the chapter titled “Race and the Residence,” but blacks are heavily represented on the staff.

In 1987 Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev was about to join President Reagan on the South Lawn. Suddenly, a downpour—the White House butlers, mostly black, scrambled to keep them dry. Chief usher Gary Walters said: “I can’t have all these African Americans holding umbrellas for these world leaders. It will look terrible.” Walters asked two white ushers to hold umbrellas so that the White House would not look like “the last plantation,” as one of them said.

The better-paid jobs—ushers, florists, executive chefs, head housekeepers, carpenter and plumbers—have been given to white workers. The domestic jobs, such as butler and maid, have been filled mostly by blacks who were once paid far less.

In his first State of the Union address, President Johnson declared his “war on poverty.” Back then the poverty line was around $3,000 a year and the White House had hired two maids at $2,900 a year. The threat of bad press got them raises.

The revelation of this book is that life inside the White House is quite ordinary. Birthday candles are blown out. White House children smoke dope. People die, people marry. The head chef and the pastry chef feud. First families came and went. Life goes on, the republic survives, and the staff abets and abides.

—Mr. Allen, a former writer and editor for the Washington Post, won the Pulitzer Prize for criticism in 2000.

Interview with Kate Andersen Brower

The Private World of Public Servants

In her book ‘The Residence’, former White House correspondent Kate Andersen Brower looks not to the First Family themselves, but to the staff charged with the running the world’s most famous political household. She spoke with butlers, maids, chefs, florists, doormen and other staff members about their role in the White House. She talked about her book at the John Adams Institute on March 21.

By Katherine Oktober Matthews.

Who are the people behind the scenes at The Residence?
The book starts with the presidency of the Kennedys and goes through the Obamas, but it’s about the resident staff. I interviewed more than fifty of them for the book, mostly former staffers, and I was catching a lot of people at the end of their lives. Some of them even started in the Eisenhower administration. In the two years that it took me to report the book, a lot of them unfortunately passed away. I try to quote them very directly, to keep evidence of their idiosyncratic ways of speaking.

Even though the White House is in many ways a ‘public domicile’, it’s the closest that the family is going to get to privacy during their time in office. What can this look at the space of the White House offer that a more traditional biography could not?
It catches them at their most private moments. Such as Pat Nixon, during Watergate, crying in the elevator with the doorman. Jackie and Bobby Kennedy crying in the elevator with the doorman after JFK’s assassination. There are these moments when they’re the most fragile and vulnerable, and the only people who see them are the staffers. I did talk to a few presidential advisors and family members, but they are so much more guarded. A maid is more of a ‘regular person’.

The book is also about trying to find out what the First Families are really like, their personalities. The President and the First Lady are icons, you feel like you don’t know them at all. I covered the White House for Bloomberg News, and I had no sense of what they were really
like even though I had asked them questions before. I thought that talking to the people who serve them would be the best way to get at it.

**Can you give us an example of one of the staffers you spoke with?**

I went to Forestville, Maryland, which is about a half an hour outside DC, to visit a butler at his house a couple of years ago. He’d retired in 2012, and he had this really modest, one-bedroom condo. But what was incredible, was that on his walls were pictures of him with Nelson Mandela, with Obama, with the pope! And he was a very down-to-earth guy, he’d done his thirty years but I don’t think he realized how amazing it was that he got to meet all these people.

The book is a way to pay tribute to these folks. A lot of them were African-Americans in their seventies or eighties when I interviewed them. The butler I visited, James Ramsey, grew up on a tobacco farm in North Carolina. He never went to college, never graduated from high school, and then he found himself on a first name basis with the President and the First Lady. When he died, Laura Bush even flew from Texas to go to Ramsey’s funeral. The First Families feel a great loyalty to these staffers who make their lives easier.

**Are these jobs a lifetime commitment?**

Oh yeah, they don’t leave. After 9/11, for example, a lot of them were worried, because it was so scary, and they thought they were the bull’s-eye. When I interviewed Laura Bush, she said it meant so much to her that none of them left. This is their life. A lot of the butlers get divorced because they work such long hours. Someone said, ‘White House flex-time’ is whatever 85 hours you want to work in the week.

I couldn’t believe how dedicated they were and how much they love their jobs. Not one person I interviewed left before the thirty years was up. Also they get a good retirement, so they want to stay.

**Were they willing to gossip with you?**

A lot of the book is about their discretion. They really do not say anything negative if they can help it. They’re also not partisan. For example, when I ask them who they liked best, almost every single one said George and Barbara Bush. Most of them were probably Democrats, from what I could gather, but they still felt like Bush Senior was the sweetest. They would play
horseshoes with the staff, they knew everyone’s names. The Clintons were harder to warm to, they wanted a lot of privacy.

The most interesting stories were from the transition from the Kennedys to the Johnsons, after JFK’s assassination. One usher told me it was like having a close friend die, but because they all saw how strong Jackie was, they never wanted to cry in front of her.

**What are they saying about the upcoming election?**
The staffers are watching the 2016 election race and wondering who’s going to win, because that’s their new boss. Nobody watches the elections closer than the resident staffers. They all told me they were on the edge of their seats in 2004 because they thought Teresa Heinz Kerry was going to be coming into the White House as First Lady, and they had heard rumors about her being a tyrant. So they are probably very concerned about what’s going to happen with Donald Trump, and I’m actually talking to some of them today to try to figure out what they think about Melania as First Lady.

http://www.john-adams.nl/interview-kate-andersen-brower/