

IT'S A WOMAN'S WORLD

March 27, 1935

Description: Eleanor Roosevelt discusses the White House's budget.

Participants: Eleanor Roosevelt

Being left alone for a few minutes/ in the green room of the White House/ with the Chief Usher/ Mr. Ike Hoover,/ whom I had known as a young girl/ when my Uncle Theodore Roosevelt/ was president/ I turned to him and said/ "Oh, Mr. Hoover/ can you tell me anything about running the financial side/ of the White House-?"^{2/} 'Twas³ thus I faced the problem/ of the practical side/ of being in a house/ the size of the White House/ with its multitudinous public functions./

My predecessor,/ Mrs. Herbert Hoover,/ had just very kindly/ shown me around the house/ with the aid of her housekeeper/ and secretary./ I was feeling bewildered,/ but it was not the mere size/ which was so appalling,/ but a sense of the traditions/ which would make it extremely difficult/ to make any changes/ and the realization/ that there were endless rules/ and customs/ which would complicate housekeeping/ to a great degree./ I knew in a general way/ that servants' wages were paid for/ by the government/ and the number of servants/ was more or less prescribed by custom,/ but my husband had decreed/ that anything not absolutely necessary/ must be curtailed./ I also knew/ that there was some kind of a fund/ for the official entertainments,/ but what it actually covered/ was a mystery./

Mr. Ike⁴ Hoover,/ who had doubtless explained to many Presidents' wives before,/ tried to make it clear to me./ He told me/ that the President,/ out of his salary/ pays for all the food/ for all the servants/ and the family/ with their unofficial guests,/ but anything/ which is an official entertainment,/ where both political parties/ ~~wea~~⁵re represented,/ ~~was~~ is⁷ paid for out of a government fund,/ so that if the President/ invites a number of Senators for breakfast or lunch,/ he must be sure/ not to have them all of one political faith,/ otherwise/ he will pay for the meal out of his own pocket!/
And now for a little history of the White House./ As you know, it was rebuilt in 1817,/ after the British had burned it./ While numerous repairs and changes have been made since then,/ it is substantially the same building/ that was built in 1817./ In a building over 117 years old/ maintenance/ becomes a constantly increasing item./ Strange though it may seem,/ pipes will leak at frequent intervals/ and rats/ and mice like old buildings,/ regardless of tradition./ Two friends of mine/ sitting on the south porch at breakfast one summer morning/ tried to reassure themselves/ that a squirrel ran across the floor/ and refused to admit/ until they were safely upstairs/ that they had seen a large and stout rat!/
These have since been exterminated,/ but one has to keep constantly doing it!/
An appropriation is passed by Congress/ covering the salary of all personnel/ - gardeners,/ guards,/ plumbers,/ carpenters,/ etc./ and the budget is made yearly,/ using the past experiences for estimating as closely as possible/ what will be needed for the maintenance of the house,/ the purchase of furnishings,/ rugs,/ linens,/ curtains,/ glassware/ and china./ As a matter of fact,/ there is usually little left out of the appropriation for refurnishing/ when the repair/ and maintenance items/ have all been taken care of./

Practically every two years/ the White House has to be completely painted/ and this is no task to be undertaken lightly/ and is a tremendous expense./

We found, to our horror,/ the first year that we occupied the White House/ that the stone cornice/ was loose all the way around/ and for the safety of those who might walk below/ it was absolutely necessary/ that it should be repaired./ Such things as that/ swell the cost of repair very rapidly/ and leave a very narrow margin/ for new things of any kind./

Anything bought for the White House in the way of linen/ is marked with the shield-intials^{8/} of the United States U.S. on a shield.^{10/} The White House china is marked/ with the President's shield

seal¹²/ and the silver is all of the same pattern/ and marked/ as it originally was,/ “The President’s House”./

We have found it necessary/ to buy inexpensive doilies and napkins/ and plated spoons/ for large entertainments,/ but this is a purely practical item/ and costs very little./

In addition to this yearly appropriation,/ Congress usually appropriates/ every four years/ a special fund/ so that an incoming administration/ may overhaul the house/ and make some definite improvements/ which need to be made./ This fund/ is about the only one/ that one can really spend [unclear word]¹⁴ for replacing furnishings./ The height of the ceilings,/ and therefore the size of the windows,/ makes curtains/ and draperies/ an extremely expensive item/ and all the little economies/ practiced/ in any private home/ are practiced/ in the White House/ - curtains are turned,/ rugs which are worn are sent to be re woven or mended/ and much darning and general repair work/ goes on in the sewing room/ on the third floor,/ all done by the maids/ four in all¹⁶,/ who have charge of the [unclear word, possibly “upstairs”]¹⁷ rooms,/ two of whom these maids²¹/ have been in the White House/ for a great many years./

The maintenance of the White House/ is under the supervision/ of the Department of the Interior,/ National Park Service./ Repairs/ and furnishings,/ supplies/ and payment of personnel/ are accounted for/ in the records of the Park Service.

The laundry of the bedrooms/ and the table linen/ is paid for/ as one of the items of maintenance,/ but personal laundry/ is paid for out of the President’s own pocket/ in exactly the same way/ as food for the family and the servants/ and private guests./ Stamps for personal letters,/ personal telegrams/ and telephone calls/ are all paid for by the President and myself./ Official communications must be signed by a secretary/ and the official mail/ must go out/ through the secretaries./

Any purchase for the White House,/ if it is a large one,/ must be handled through the Supplies and Warehouse Section/ of the National Park Service/ and specifications are prepared/ and formal bids received/ and contracts awarded/ to the low bidders./ For small purchases and emergencies/ the chief of the Supplies and Warehouse Section/ telephones/ or sends one of his assistants/ to the various stores/ to obtain informal bids/ on the articles to be purchased./ The President is authorized/ under the appropriation act/ to buy direct/ without securing bids or going through the Supplies and Warehouse Section,/ if he so desires./ But as neither the President/ nor his wife/ have much time for personal shopping/ the more formal way/ is usually adhered to./

Immediately upon receiving anything for the White House,/ the article is duly recorded/ and entered on an inventory./ All changes in White House property/ are accounted for on the inventory/ and presented annually to the President/ for his approval./ This/ is in accordance with a the²³ provision of in a²⁵ Section 9, 36 of a certain²⁷ Statute, 773-774, which reads:/

“Hereafter the steward,/ housekeeper,/ or such other employee of the Executive Mansion/ as the President may designate,/ shall, under the direction of the President,/ have the charge/ and custody of/ and be responsible for/ the plate,/ furniture,/ and public property therein,/ and shall, before entering upon the duties of the office,/ give bond for the faithful discharge thereof,/ said bond/ to be the sum of \$10,000/ and be approved/ by the Secretary of War./ — And hereafter/ a complete inventory,/ in proper book,/ shall be made annually/ in the month of June/ under the direction of the officer in charge of public buildings/ and grounds/ of all the public property/ in/ and belonging to/ the Executive Mansion,/ showing when purchased,/ its cost,/ condition/ and final disposition./ This inventory shall be submitted to the President/ for his approval,/ and shall then be kept for reference/ in the Office of Public Buildings/ and Grounds,/ which shall furnish a copy thereof/ to the steward,/ housekeeper,/ or other employee responsible for the property.”²²/

You may see by this/ that housekeeping in the White House/ is a little complicated./ When you buy any such things/ as a chair/ or table/ or even new hangings for the formal rooms,/ it is customary to request the advice/ of the Commissioner of Fine Arts./ This is a wise practice,/ as it keeps these rooms harmoniously furnished,/ but it does add/ to the complications/ when so many people are consulted./ Of course,/ gifts are frequently sent to the White House,/ either of furniture/ or china/ or hangings/ or rugs/ or paintings,/ and these are at once referred/ to the Commission of Fine Arts,/ for if they are to be

permanently placed in the White House,/ they have to be approved/ by the Commission of Fine Arts/ and accepted/ by an Act of Congress./
Now,/ as to the less formal duties of housekeeping,/ as far as possible,/ staple articles are bought wholesale/ and as the number of people in the White House is very great,/ a great many things/ are bought in large quantities./ A great many things are also sent in as presents,/ such as hams,/ game,/ fruit,/ candy [unclear word]²⁹ etc./ These are all passed on, of course,/ by the Secret Service/ and nothing is allowed to come to the President's table/ which has not been carefully gone over./ A large storeroom/ houses the supplies/ and the housekeeper keeps a complete list of things/ as they are given out to the kitchen./ She also tries to buy fresh things/ as far as possible from the markets ~~outside of~~ around³¹ Washington/ and she does her shopping herself./
A very careful housecleaning is done during the summer months,/ besides a complete inventory/ of furnishings taken every June,/ so one cannot be a light hearted/ and happy-go-lucky housekeeper/ in the White House,/ for there is the weight of responsibility/ which always goes with handling anything/ which does not belong to you/ and which belongs really/ to the people of the United States./
However,/ there is a certain pride in doing it all/ in a manner which will conform with the dignity of traditions/ and at the same time/ preserve the simplicity/ which should exist/ in a Democracy./

Transcribed by Eleanor Roosevelt Papers Project staff

Proofread by Lee Febos, Matthew Girardi, Margaret Swenson, Olivia Kinhan, and Ikerighi David.

Transcribed from a script held in the Eleanor Roosevelt Papers at the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library

¹ This quotation mark is a handwritten interlineation.

² This quotation mark is a handwritten interlineation.

³ The letter "T" is a handwritten interlineation.

⁴ This is a handwritten interlineation.

⁵ The letter "A" is a handwritten interlineation.

⁷ This is a handwritten interlineation.

⁸ This is a handwritten interlineation.

¹⁰ The words "U.S" through "shield" are a handwritten interlineation.

¹² This is a handwritten interlineation.

¹⁴ This is a handwritten interlineation.

¹⁶ This phrase was circled, and an arrow indicated for it to be moved in front of the phrase "who have charge of the upstairs rooms."

¹⁷ This is a handwritten interlineation.

²¹ The words "these maids" are a handwritten interlineation.

²³ This is a handwritten interlineation.

²⁵ The words "in a" are a handwritten interlineation.

²⁷ The words "of a certain" are a handwritten interlineation.

²⁹ The words "candy [unclear word]" are a handwritten interlineation.

³¹ This is a handwritten interlineation.