

Living Large in the Obama White House

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The hoi polloi aren't welcome, but Marie Antoinette would be at home.

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The First Couple dance at the inaugural ball, January 21, 2013.

We are now firmly ensconced in the brutal Age of the Sequester, and things in America are grave. The federal government, we learned on Wednesday, is so strapped for cash that the president has been forced to cut off the People's access to the home he's borrowing from them. He didn't want to have to do this, naturally — "particularly during the popular spring touring season." But then Congress just had to go and acquiesce in measures that the president himself had suggested and signed into law. How beastly! We axed 2.6 percent from a \$44.8 trillion budget, and now the president can't even afford the \$18,000 per week necessary to retain the seven staff members who facilitate citizens' enjoying self-guided tours around the White House.

The executive mansion is not in that much trouble, of course. It's certainly not in sufficiently dire straits for Air Force One (\$181,757 per hour) to be grounded, or to see the executive chef (\$100,000 per year) furloughed, or to cut back on the hours of the three full-time White House calligraphers (\$277,050 per year for the trio), or to limit the invaluable work of the chief of staff to the president's dog (\$102,000 per year), or to trim his ridiculous motorcade (\$2.2 million). If Ellen DeGeneres wants another dancercise session or Spain holds another clothing sale, the first family will be there before you can say "citizen executive." Fear ye not, serfs: Austerity may be the word of the week, but the president is by no means in any danger of being

forced to live like the president of a republic instead of like a king.

When Calvin Coolidge was president in the glitzy 1920s, he took the republican ideal so seriously that he ended up in a series of tiffs with the White House housekeeper, Elizabeth Jaffray, over the cost of state dinners, and took to admonishing the executive branch for using too many pencils. Such behavior now serves only as a punchline to a joke that is not funny. The current annual cost of the White House — just in household expenses, not the policy operations for which it exists — is \$1.4 billion: Annually, presidential vacations cost \$20 million (the low estimate for one presidential vacation to Hawaii is \$4 million, but the true cost is probably five times that); the first family's yearly health-care costs are \$7 million; more than \$6 million is spent on the White House grounds each year. Transporting the president cost \$346 million last year. But as Michelle Obama might say, America is basically a downright mean sort of place, so the tours will just have to go. One hopes at least that the calligraphers were recruited to sign the docents' pink slips.

It's not just the cost that stuns — it's the pomp, too. The expense is often justified on the grounds of security. But for someone who wishes to remain inconspicuous, the president isn't exactly subtle about things. In the 1930s, Eleanor Roosevelt tried to refuse Secret Service protection but was overruled. Nonetheless, for fear that "their presence made her look more like a Queen flanked by an Imperial Guard," she refused to let the agents who tailed her make themselves known to the public, notes Philip H. Melanson. I was in Washington, D.C., once when George W. Bush's presidential motorcade came past. It was like watching a Michael Bay movie about traffic, but with more special effects. "Imperial Guard" doesn't do it justice. One can imagine Noel Coward: "Dear boy, I simply loved you in Pennsylvania Avenue!"

Like many of his predecessors, President Coolidge recognized that Americans looked up to the president as the only nationally elected politician, and he sought to behave accordingly. His example has been forgotten. John F. Groom, who has written a book about the growth of the White House, contrasts the expectation that presidents "should run their lives as examples to the nation, with frugality and simplicity," with the conduct of President Obama, who, despite constant harping about "income inequality," has displayed "the very height of unbridled personal excess in his own lifestyle." It has been a long while since an incumbent lived frugally or simply. For all his virtues, Ronald Reagan positively encouraged a renaissance of Kennedy's Camelot — bringing Hollywood into the mix for good measure. Fondly as many might remember his years in office, it was not a good look. And by all measures, George W. Bush was as bad as Obama — if not worse. America, "let's not go to Camelot," as Monty Python said. "'Tis a silly place."

There was a reason that the Founding Fathers rejected titles and honorifics in favor of simplicity. Thankfully, the straightforward address, "Mr. President," won out over the pretentious names that John Adams suggested, which included "His Majesty the President," "His Mighty Benign Highness," and "His High Mightiness." (The Senate rather cruelly mocked Adams by suggesting it refer to him as "His Rotundity.") Too

many in our government have forgotten which way around this is supposed to work. Here in America, it's supposed to be small government, Big People. This is the New World, not the Old. And yet, if you could sew Marie Antoinette's head back on and bring her back to life, she would look around at today's White House and nod approvingly. As for the people queuing outside? Sorry, darling, we simply can't afford to invite them in.

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