

## **Presidential Gifts**

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The surprising ins-and-outs of gift giving when you're the president of the United States.

The Obamas have been under scrutiny for their recent gifts to world leaders: an iPod for the Queen of England; a set of American movies to British prime minister Gordon Brown, and toy models of Marine One, the White House helicopter, for his kids. Not very inspired choices, some have observed.

But the Obamas are hardly the first First Couple to have trouble with state gifts. Many foreign dignitaries thought horses would be the ideal present for Ronald Reagan during his presidency. But Reagan didn't want any more horses, and at one point a gifts officer had to figure out a gracious way to decline Arabian steeds from the King of Morocco. "Oh my gosh, it's so nice of His Majesty to bring these horses," the officer blurted to her Moroccan counterpart, "but we have a policy that anything over \$160 has to be turned over to the government....The only way we can keep them is to shoot them and stuff them and put them in the library." The monarch decided to give something else.

The latest uproar over state gifts provokes the question of why gift-giving by the president and first lady even matters. Yet gifts do serve a diplomatic purpose far beyond good manners, says etiquette expert Letitia Baldrige, who worked as social secretary for First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy. Diplomacy is ultimately about relationships, and carefully selected gifts can help build bonds between leaders and the nations they represent. Such gifts can influence, however subtly, the feelings of one government for another.

"When you have a thing that's been beautifully researched and has meaning to the very hearts of the people of that country, it's going to resonate for centuries," Baldrige says. One example: The Kennedys gave French president Charles de Gaulle a historic letter, written by George Washington which offered thanks for French help during the American revolution. "It was incredible what (the gift) meant to the French people."

Sally Quinn, the journalist and Washington social observer, calls gift giving among heads of state a "language all its own—it says, 'we don't want war, we want peace.'" And she underscores the importance of the ritual by stressing its ancient beginnings. "Really, you can go back to Jesus' birth. 'They come from afar giving gifts.' It is a sign of respect and a sign of honoring somebody." During state visits, she adds, we offer gifts to leaders who aren't necessarily friends. "You're not giving it to the person—you're giving it to the people of the country."

The annual budget for state gifts is a touchy subject – the State Department's Protocol Office declined to provide a figure when contacted for this story – but gifts officers do have to work within a budget. (The exception may have been the Kennedys, who were known to send bills for especially pricey state gifts to Joseph Kennedy, the president's wealthy father.) In the Reagan

White House, Chief of Protocol Selwa Roosevelt found it challenging to choose inventive gifts on a budget. “We tried to deal with purveyors who were discreet, who would not discuss the gifts before they were given or their cost,” she writes in her memoir, *Keeper of the Gate*. The purveyors included Tiffany, Lenox, Steuben, Williamburg craftsmen, and American artists such as Wheatley Allen of California and Walter Matia of Virginia. The Reagans also gave crafts, including Appalachian quilts.

The First Couple offer gifts not just when they travel abroad but also when heads of state and other foreign dignitaries visit the White House. And the giving sometimes gets fairly bountiful. If the Queen of England comes calling, her entourage of butlers, maids, chefs and others who make the trip typically receive small gifts, too. In some families, these become cherished mementoes passed down through the generations. In others, they’re auctioned off. (Among the items recently on eBay is a piece of the Oval Office cork floor from 1934-1969, encased in Lucite opposite a drawing of the White House. The gift, which includes an inscription from Ronald Reagan, was selling for \$2,250.00 )

And what an assortment of gifts have been given through the years. Jack Kennedy commissioned replicas of George Washington’s battle sword for several world leaders, says James Wagner with the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library. Jacqueline Kennedy matched her husband for creativity. She invited New York jeweler David Webb to develop a series of paperweights made of minerals and gems mined from different parts of the United States.

Lady Bird and Lyndon Johnson liked to give historic volumes, including sets of American literature, poetry, and history. They traveled with a planeload of silver gifts and an engraver who could personalize them, writes Roosevelt. But the Johnsons also took advantage of the latest technology. At a time when satellites were fresh and new, they gave framed photos of a visiting leader’s country taken by satellite.

President Nixon liked another form of technology – he gave a Lincoln Continental with black velour upholstery to Russian leader Leonid Brezhnev. Brezhnev, who loved luxury autos, had asked for this gift prior to a meeting at Camp David. Nixon halted the talks so he could surprise Brezhnev with the car, which staffers had hidden. The Russian leader was so thrilled he insisted on taking Nixon for a joy ride then and there. “Without warning, he waved Nixon into the front seat, took the wheel and roared off as Secret Service men looked on aghast,” Time wrote in Brezhnev’s obituary. “He and Nixon hurtled down a narrow, twisting Catoctin Mountain road at high speed, ran a STOP sign at the bottom of the hill and careened out onto a highway, Brezhnev looking neither right nor left.”

Memorable gifts can demonstrate the best in American craftsmanship while reflecting the recipients’ interests. When Nixon took his historic trip to China in 1972, he brought porcelain swans by artist Edward Boehm as a gift to Chairman Mao Zedong. “This pair of swans heralded the historic handshake between Chinese and US leaders, the impact of which has been felt ever since,” swooned the China Daily. The gift has been exhibited at the Military Museum of the Chinese People’s Revolution in Beijing.

The Reagans presented a one-of-a-kind Steuben crystal bowl to the Prince and Princess of Wales

as a wedding gift, and an ornate children's chair when their son William was born. To Egyptian president Anwar Sadat, the Reagans gave prints by artist George Catlin, whose portraits of American Indians Sadat was said to admire. The president of Italy, a pipe smoker, received a small humidior. On top it featured a silver map of the United States marked with the cities the president planned to visit, his name and the date inscribed.

How much the first ladies have been involved in choosing gifts has likely varied, though Baldrige claims Jackie Kennedy was the first who took an active role, compared to previous first ladies who were often merely told what the gifts would be. Officially, the Office of the Chief of Protocol is responsible for proposing and purchasing gifts to give foreign leaders on behalf of the president, first lady, vice president, secretary of state and spouses. At different times the chief of protocol and other State Department officials have been involved in gift selection, with discreet inquiries to the country's embassy about what the recipients would enjoy.

"It was the pressure of Christmas Eve, like finding something for your older aunt you didn't know very well, and that was all year long," says Bunny Murdock, a gifts officer in the Reagan administration. But Murdock didn't work alone. "Sometimes Mrs. Reagan was involved. She liked to know what was going on and had some very good ideas."

Of course, presidents and first ladies receive state gifts as frequently as they give them, ranging from exquisite to outlandish. In 2008 the Protocol Office recorded more than 70 entries listing gifts to the president, including a "navy suede robe with gold rope trim and mink lining," the "King Abd al-Aziz Medal of Honor gold necklace," and other items collectively valued at \$32,000, from Abdullah bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud, "Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia." One column lists the reason these and other gifts were accepted: "Non-acceptance would cause embarrassment to donor and U.S. government."

It was Jackie Kennedy who contended with what may have been the strangest pair of gifts ever presented to a first lady. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru of India and President Muhammad Ayub Khan of Pakistan were competing for Kennedy's attention on her 1962 solo trip to the region. Nehru had Kennedy stay at his own home; his gifts included an elephant and two Benegal tiger cubs. When a handler fed the cubs the wrong food, "the female cub died and the male was in bad condition," says Robert Watson, presidential historian at Lynn University. The animals were never shipped, "which saved Jackie from the awkward position of not knowing what to do with cubs and an elephant."

Not to be outdone, Khan gave Kennedy a gelding named Sardar and treated her to a ride in a golden carriage pulled by six horses and accompanied by 40 uniformed riders. So far, so good. But he also took Kennedy to a performance by a snake charmer who raised a cobra out of a basket. The cobra then battled a mongoose. Kennedy was appalled, Watson says. "No one seems to know why she was taken to such a site."

Today, the president, first lady and by extension, their children, can keep only items valued under \$335 from a foreign government or an international organization. They can use the gifts while in office, but after that, Obama's stash will go to his presidential library (if he creates one) or the national archives. It's possible the president may not even open his own gift. Reagan, for instance, preferred for the chiefs of protocols to exchange and open gifts on behalf of their

leaders, Selwa Roosevelt says, to avoid any awkwardness of not being able to get the gift unwrapped with television cameras present.

It's State Department and administration policy not to discuss plans for gift-giving, according to Katie McCormick Lelyveld, press secretary to Michelle Obama – a decision that suggests gifts are a delicate area of diplomacy.

So does a recent misstep in March. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton gave the Russian foreign minister a red button with the word “Reset” written in Russian and English. The button was supposed to symbolize a fresh start in U.S.-Russian relations. But the word was misspelled in Russian and actually says “overload.” During Obama’s visit the button was on display in Pushkin Square, between cardboard cutouts of the U.S. president and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. (The state newspaper borrowed the button from the Foreign Ministry museum, where it will presumably return once tourists and children have had fun pressing it.)

In spite of the early criticism, though, at least First Lady Michelle Obama may not have much to worry about as a gift giver. Some say she made up for any gaffes in Britain with her present of an American Gibson guitar to Carla Bruni-Sarkozy, the singer/songwriter married to French President Nicolas Sarkozy. Obama also gave a leather-bound journal and pen on inauguration day to Laura Bush, as they had talked about Bush’s plans to write on her memoirs. The journal included a quote from writer Louis L’Amour: “There will come a time when you believe everything is finished. Yet that will be the beginning.” It was the first time an American first lady has given a gift to an outgoing first lady.