

What Will Change Look Like in White House Décor?

EVER since Mary Todd Lincoln overshot the White House decorating budget by \$6,700 (a third of her \$20,000 appropriation), infuriating her husband and delighting a press corps that had already turned against her, the redecoration of the president's house has been a public relations minefield. Some new administrations tiptoe through it unscathed; others are less nimble, and bombs explode.



White House Historical Association

Richard Nixon's blue and gold Oval Office was considered a tad imperial; left, the Nixon family at dinner in the President's Dining Room. [More Photos »](#)

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SLIDESHOW



Stephen Crowley/The New York Times

MOVING DAY There are roughly five hours in between the time the sitting president leaves the White House and the incoming president and his family enter their new quarters; above, a moving truck at

the ready for the Clintons, Jan. 19, 2001. [More Photos >](#)

"It's an old maxim that you can build a billion-dollar highway that's the biggest pork barrel in the world and no one will say anything," said William Seale, a White House historian, "but if you're in public office and you try and change your desk, you're going to end up on the front page. In presidential décor, one must remember the public eye is fixed on everything you do."

[Barack Obama](#)'s transition team has not responded to inquiries about his interior design plans, so one can only speculate about how the Obamas will make their stylistic mark on the White House. Perhaps they will choose [Nate Berkus](#), the engaging puppy dog of a decorator beloved by [Oprah](#) and other Chicagoans, to assist them.

Or perhaps, as the comedian Andy Borowitz suggested on the phone last week, they will follow the template the president-elect has laid out for his cabinet appointments. "That whole team-of-rivals approach," Mr. Borowitz said, "so instead of one decorator there will be eight: four Republicans and four Democrats, none of whom can stand each other, and he'll make them each do a room."

However the Obamas decide to proceed, they'll have to follow a few basic rules. For starters, they will have to pay for their own movers. And while Congress budgets \$100,000 in household transition costs for

every new administration, if the Obamas spend more than that — and most first families do — they will have to cover the expense of decorating their private quarters with private donations. In addition, they can't change the public rooms without the approval of a committee of preservationists.

They would also be wise to remember that appearances do matter: [Jimmy Carter](#)'s earth-toned Oval Office read as both homespun and dreary (never mind that his predecessor, Gerald Ford, had chosen the décor and Mr. Carter was saving money by not redecorating), and the cost of [Nancy Reagan](#)'s china (\$210,399) was seen as wildly extravagant (though the china was a private donation and considered a necessity — before then, state dinners were served on a mishmash of patterns because there wasn't enough of any one set to go around). The Kennedy White House was too French; the Clintons', too Arkansas. In recent history, only the Waspy Bushes (both 41 and 43) have escaped decorating derision.

Some stories about decorating missteps are apocryphal, like that of Nancy Reagan's plan to tear down a wall in the Lincoln bedroom or that of the Clintons' decorating costs running over budget (mentioned by the former deputy White House counsel, [Vincent W. Foster](#), in a note shortly before he died in an apparent suicide). The bad press in both cases accrued to the president's wife.

Attacking the first lady, said Carl Sferrazza Anthony, the author of a dozen books on first wives and their families and the historian of the National First Ladies Library, "is a way of not directly attacking a popular president." Mr. Anthony ticked off a few of Nancy Reagan's perceived sins, including that she asked the Carters to move out early so she could start redecorating and that she was decorating the private quarters in an inappropriately lavish way in a time of recession.

"Conscious of that, she used private funds" to shore up the house, Mr. Anthony said, "fixing floors, redoing hardware. The place was falling apart. Much of the money went to this, rather than the red decorating everybody remembers, because that's what got reported. There's a saying that in Washington, no good deed goes unpunished."

The Clintons were savaged for packing up rugs, furniture and lamps given to them during their White House tenancy, and for soliciting donations of household objects for their post-White House residences (a house for her in Washington, and one for him in Chappaqua, N.Y.). They had always lived in public housing, Mr. Anthony said, and "in an effort to get up to speed, they put the word out that people could make donations."

Money has historically been tight for White House families. Mr. Seale noted that James Monroe had a kind of pawn-shop arrangement, whereby he would finance diplomatic tours by selling pieces of the Directoire furniture he had collected in France to the United States government. "When he'd finished touring, he'd buy it back," Mr. Seale said. "Then, of course, there was Mrs. Lincoln, who bought that famous Lincoln bed."

When her husband was presented with the bill, Mr. Seale said, "He blew up.

“Let me see if I can get his quote right: ‘It would stink in the nostrils of the American people to have it said that the president of the United States had approved a bill over-running an appropriation of \$20,000 for *flub dubs* for this damned old house, when the soldiers cannot have blankets.’ ”

“Flub dubs,” Mr. Seale repeated, savoring the words. “Isn’t that a great phrase?” (Mr. Seale included it in his two-volume history, “The President’s House,” which was just published by the White House Historical Association.)

DECORATING the White House is the first lady’s job; she presides over the Committee for the Preservation of the White House, a board of appointees that includes her decorator and the White House curator, as well as art historians, furniture and decorative art experts and other advisers on historic preservation. ([Laura Bush](#)’s decorator, Kenneth Blasingame, a Fort Worth designer, has been steadily reworking rooms like the Lincoln Bedroom, which were revealed, to not much comment, in *Architectural Digest* last March.)

Renovations of the public rooms, additions to the formidable collections of art and furniture, and any restoration work is overseen by the committee and financed by the White House Endowment fund, which now has assets of about \$27 million.

When it comes to the private quarters, on the second and third floors, and the Oval Office, though, the décor is the “personal decision of the first family,” said Tom Savage, director of museum affairs at Winterthur in Delaware and a member of the Committee for the Preservation of the White House during the Clinton administration. “But there are so many safeguards. The misconception of the public is that a first family can make very dramatic changes, and that’s just not so.”

There is drama on moving day, however. Gary Walters, who retired last year after 21 years of overseeing the 132-room mansion as chief White House usher, explained that on [Inauguration](#) Day it was his job to help the first families move, in the scant and hectic period between the time the exiting president departed for good (about 10:45 a.m., after greeting the president-elect under the North Portico and having a cup of coffee with him in the Blue Room) and the new president and his family left the inaugural parade in the late afternoon.

That leaves about five hours for the usher and 93 assistants, including household staff, painters, carpenters, florists and even calligraphers, Mr. Walters said, along with the new decorator and his or her staff, to unpack the family’s things and put everything away. “The goal is no unopened boxes,” said Mr. Walters, who used to move into the White House for a week before Inauguration Day, sleeping on a cot in the basement.

“It can be extremely difficult,” he added. “When Bush 41 was elected, for example, we expected to have the normal amount of time, until after the parade, but there were grandchildren and they got cold and came in about two hours early.”

Moving day is highly choreographed, the culmination of exhaustive prep work. After the ceremonial, post-election tour given to the president-elect and his family by the outgoing president and his wife, the chief usher meets with the new family. He presents them with floor plans and a book detailing the furniture and art owned by the White House and stored at a facility in Maryland.

"I asked questions like 'What rooms do you want to use, and what beds? What would you like and where would you like us to put it? Do you have favorite foods?' For the president, it's 'Which desk would you like?' The questions are to elicit dialogue about things they might not have thought of," Mr. Walters said.

Linens and mattresses are replaced, or "put out of service," as he put it. "The new president will not have the linens of the previous president."

This wasn't always the case. Mamie Eisenhower complained that the linens were all mended, said Claire Whitcomb, co-author of "Real Life at the White House: Two Hundred Years of Daily Life at America's Most Famous Residence" (Routledge, 2002). "And Eisenhower hated Truman so much, he didn't bother to go on the tour. So when he woke up on his first day in office, he didn't know where his office was." Also, Ms. Whitcomb continued, the movers lost his suitcase.

Every family leaves something behind, intentionally or not. When the Fords moved in, Betty Ford found one of the Nixons' boxes. "It was marked, 'Tapes, Do Not Touch,'" Ms. Whitcomb said. Turns out, it was filled with the former president's Mantovani recordings. And [Ronald Reagan](#) left a note in his desk drawer for [George H. W. Bush](#), she added, that said, "Don't let the turkeys get you down."

Washington observers like [Arianna Huffington](#) predict no decorating pitfalls for the president-elect and his family, just another "teachable moment" for the rest of us.

"There have been a lot of these with the Obamas," Ms. Huffington said, "like learning to get along with your mother-in-law and not holding grudges." She imagines organic cotton curtains and nontoxic cleaning supplies.

For his part, Mr. Borowitz wondered if [Michelle Obama](#) might take "that victory dress and upholster a couch with it."

"By repurposing it," he said, "she could show how thrifty she was."

"Money is important," he continued. "Whatever furniture the Clintons didn't take, the Obamas could auction off to pay down the costs of the auto industry bailout. Then they could get some modest things from [Ikea](#) or [Craigslist](#). I'm sure there are some other people who have lost their presidents' jobs in other countries who are putting their things on Craigslist. If [Hugo Chávez](#) gets defeated, maybe they could have his stuff."