



HISTORY DEPT.

## The Secret Lives of Hillary and Bill in the White House

Broken lamps, shouting matches, sneaking away to the pool—and other scenes from the Clinton residence during the Lewinsky scandal.

By KATE ANDERSEN BROWER | April 07, 2015

 Lead image by AP Photo.

**W**hite House Florist Ronn Payne remembers one day in 1998, after President Clinton had publicly admitted to his affair with a former White House intern, when he was coming up the service elevator with a cart to pick up old floral arrangements and saw two butlers gathered outside the West Sitting Hall listening in as the Clintons argued viciously with each other. The butlers motioned him over and put their fingers to their lips, telling him to be quiet. All of a sudden he heard the first lady bellow “goddamn bastard!” at the president—and then he heard someone throw a heavy object across the room. The rumor among the staff was that she threw a lamp. The butlers, Payne said, were told to clean up the mess. In an interview with Barbara Walters, Mrs. Clinton made light of the story, which had made its way into the gossip columns. “I have a pretty good arm,” she said. “If I’d thrown a lamp at somebody, I think you would have known about it.”

Payne wasn’t surprised at the outburst. “You heard so much foul language” in the Clinton

White House, he said. “When you’re somebody’s domestic, you know what’s going on.”

As a White House reporter for Bloomberg News, I traveled around the world on Air Force One and on Air Force Two—filing reports from Mongolia, Japan, Poland, France, Portugal, China and Colombia—but the most fascinating story turned out to be right in front of me every day: the men and women who take care of the first family, who share a fierce loyalty to the institution of the American presidency.

In the more than 100 interviews with current and former White House staffers, senior advisers, and former first ladies and their children I conducted for my new book, *The Residence*, I had an unprecedented look at what it’s like for those who devote their lives to caring for the first family.

It wasn’t always easy to get them to open up to me; most recent and current residence workers follow a long-established code of ethics that values discretion and the protection of the first family’s privacy above all else. But after lunches and coffees, and hours spent on living room couches, these staffers eventually did share with me many of their personal memories, from small acts of kindness to episodes of anger and despair, from personal quirks and foibles to intense rivalries and unlikely friendships—painting an extraordinary portrait of what it’s like to work in the most famous, and best protected house in the United States.

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**In November 1995, Clinton began an affair** with Monica Lewinsky, a 22-year-old White House intern. He had almost a dozen sexual encounters with her over the next year and a half, most of them in the Oval Office. Though the public did not learn about Monica Lewinsky until January 1998, some residence workers knew about the affair when it was still occurring. The butlers saw the president and Lewinsky in the family movie theater, and the two of them were seen together so frequently that the workers started letting one another know when they’d had a Lewinsky sighting. The butlers, who are closest to the family, zealously guard such secrets, but from time to time they share fragments of stories with their colleagues—because the information could be useful, or sometimes just to prove their access.

One household staffer, who asked not to be named, remembers standing in the main hallway behind the kitchen that was used by East Wing and West Wing aides. “That’s her—that’s the girlfriend,” a butler whispered, nudging her as Lewinsky walked by. “Yep, she’s the one. She was in the theater the other night.”

Hillary certainly knew, too. Nearly two decades later, many residence workers are still wary of discussing the fights they witnessed between the Clintons. But they all felt the general gloom that hung over the second and third floors as the Lewinsky saga dragged on throughout 1998.

The residence staff witnessed the fallout from the affair and the toll it took on Hillary Clinton, but West Wing aides had long suspected the kind of drama that was playing out on the second floor of the executive mansion. “She would have hit him with a frying pan if one had been handed to her,” said the first lady’s close friend and political adviser Susan Thomases in an interview with the Miller Center at the University of Virginia for their collection of oral histories documenting Bill Clinton’s presidency. “I don’t think she ever in her mind imagined leaving him or divorcing him.” (Hillary Clinton’s spokesperson did not respond to requests for comment on this article.)

Betty Finney, now 78, started as a White House maid in 1993. She spent most of her time in the family’s private quarters and remembers well how things changed in those final years. “Things were definitely more tense. You just felt bad for the entire family and what they were going through,” she says. “You could feel the sadness. There wasn’t as much laughter.”

Florist Bob Scanlan was less guarded about the atmosphere: “It was like a morgue when you’d go up to the second floor. Mrs. Clinton was nowhere to be found.”

During the height of the drama, Hillary routinely missed afternoon appointments. The details of running the executive mansion, understandably, took a backseat to saving her husband’s presidency and their marriage. For three or four months in 1998, the president slept on a sofa in a private study attached to their bedroom on the second floor. Most of the women on the residence staff thought he got what he deserved.

Even Butler James Ramsey, a self-proclaimed ladies’ man, blushed when the subject came up. He said Clinton was his “buddy, but ... come on now.” As usual, during the Lewinsky scandal Ramsey said he kept his “mouth shut.”

Some on the staff have said that Hillary knew about Lewinsky long before it came out, and that what really upset her was not the affair itself but its discovery and the media feeding frenzy that followed.

The first lady’s temper was notoriously short during those difficult months. Butler James Hall remembers serving coffee and tea in the Blue Room during a reception for a foreign leader. Suddenly, the first lady approached him while he was still standing behind the bar.

“You must have been staring into space!” she upbraided him. “I had to take the prime minister’s wife’s cup. ... She was finished and looking for some place to put it.” Hall was dumbfounded—other butlers were working the reception with trays collecting drinks, and his job was to serve the drinks—but he knew that defending himself would be pointless. Clinton complained to the Usher’s Office, and Hall wasn’t asked back for a month.

“Working there during the impeachment wasn’t bad,” said former storeroom manager Bill Hamilton, but he agreed that working with Mrs. Clinton in those difficult months was a challenge. “It was just so overwhelming for her and if you said something to her she’d snap,” Hamilton recalled, shaking his head. Still, he says that he loved working for the Clintons, and although he retired in 2013, he sometimes wishes he had stayed at the White House, knowing that Hillary Clinton might one day return as America’s first female president. He says he would love to work for her again, even after the tumult of her eight years in the residence.

He is entirely sympathetic toward the first lady in those darkest days. “It happened and she knew it happened and everybody was looking at her,” Hamilton said.

Pastry Chef Roland Mesnier said he wanted to help Hillary feel better in any way he could. Her favorite dessert was mocha cake, and at the height of the scandal, he recalls, “I made many, many mocha cakes. You better believe it,” he said, chuckling. In the late afternoons, Hillary would call the Pastry Shop. In a small, unassuming voice—a far cry from her usual strong, self-confident tone—she’d ask, “Roland, can I have a mocha cake tonight?”

One sunny weekend in August 1998, just before the president made his confession to the country, the first lady called Usher Worthington White with an unusual request.

“Worthington, I want to go to the pool but I don’t want to see *anybody* except *you*,” she said.

“Yes, ma’am, I understand,” he replied sympathetically.

White knew exactly what she meant. She did not want to see her Secret Service detail, she did not want to see anyone tending to the White House’s extensive grounds, and she certainly did not want to see anyone on a tour of the West Wing. “She wasn’t up for any of that,” he recalled. She just wanted a few hours of peace.

White told her he would need five minutes to clear the premises. He ran to find her lead Secret Service agent and told him they would have to work together to make it happen. And fast.

“It was a twenty-second conversation but I know what she meant. ‘If anybody sees her, or she sees *anybody*, I’m going to get fired, I know it,’” he told the agent. “‘And you probably will too.’”

So the Secret Service agents assigned to protect the first lady agreed to trail her, even though protocol calls for one agent to walk ahead of her and one to walk behind.

“She’s not going to turn around and look for you,” White told them. “She just doesn’t want to see your face. And she doesn’t want you looking at her face.”

He met Clinton at the elevator and escorted her to the pool with the agents walking behind them and no one else in sight. She was wearing red reading glasses and she was carrying a couple of books. She didn’t have on any makeup and her hair wasn’t done. To White, she seemed heartbroken.

They didn’t exchange a single word on the walk to the pool.

“Ma’am, do you need any butler service?” White asked her after she got settled in.

“No.”?

“You need anything at all?”?

“No, it’s just a beautiful day and I want to just sit here and enjoy some sunshine. I’ll call you when I’m ready to go back.”

“Okay, ma’am,” White replied. “It’s twelve o’clock now, and I get off at one and someone else will be in.”

Clinton looked intently at him. “I’ll call *you* when I’m done.”

“Yes, ma’am,” White replied, knowing that that meant he would have to stay until whenever she chose to leave. He didn’t get the call until nearly three-thirty that afternoon.

When he returned, White accompanied the first lady on another wordless walk from the pool to the second floor. Before she stepped off the elevator, the besieged first lady let him know how much his efforts meant to her.

“She grabbed me by my hands and gave them a little squeeze and looked me directly in my eyes and just said, ‘Thank you.’ ”

“It touched my heart,” White said of her gratitude. “It meant the world to me.”

A few of the household workers even found themselves dragged into the unfolding drama. At one point, Houseman Linsey Little was called to the second floor to answer questions about the affair. When he got upstairs, he was met by an intimidating federal agent, who asked him if he'd ever seen Lewinsky before. No, he answered nervously.

"They want to make you feel like they think you know something," he said. He insists that he'd never seen anything untoward, but even if he had, he admits he would have been reluctant to risk his job and end up on the news himself. "They'd have your name up in bright lights," he said.

Mesnier described 1998 as a "very sad time" watching two brilliant people consumed by scandal. And like so many others, he felt terrible for the Clintons' daughter, Chelsea.

In an iconic photograph taken August 18, 1998, the day after her father's embarrassing admission, Chelsea held both of her parents' hands as they walked to the helicopter on the South Lawn. Mesnier shook his head at the thought of what the young woman went through. "Chelsea was absolutely the sweetest person you'll ever meet, and then to see them going through a stupid thing like this? *Stupid*. There was a lot of hardship."

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**In a house where even a minor bit of gossip** could make national headlines, Bill and Hillary Clinton had a difficult time learning to trust the staff. The reason they changed the White House phone system was to ensure that no one could listen in on their private conversations—a move that frustrated the ushers, who had a trusted system in place for the purpose of directing calls.

When a call came in for a member of the first family, an operator would call the call box in the Usher's Office. "If it was a call for the first lady, we'd put a little key in the first lady's slot and it would ring a bell with her code so she could pick up any phone that was up there close by and the operator would connect her," Skip Allen explained. "That went in during the Carter administration because there were so many people living at the White House at the time that everybody had their own specific ring. The president would have just the one ring, the first lady would have two rings, and Chelsea would have three short rings."

The Clintons, Allen said, decided that "too many people could listen in on them" under the old phone system, so they had all the White House phones changed over to interior circuitry so that if the first lady was in the bedroom and the president was in the study she could ring him from room to room without going through the operator. "That kind of negated the security of the phone system. Then anybody could pick up upstairs in any room," Allen said,

still exasperated by the change.

The Clintons' preoccupation with secrecy made relations with the staff "chaotic" for their entire eight years in office, Allen said. At least one residence worker, Florist Wendy Elsasser, attributes their anxiety to parental concerns: "I think protecting Chelsea may have had a lot to do with, for lack of a better term, their standoffishness with the staff."

But it seems clear that the Clintons had little reason to worry about the residence staff leaking any secrets. Even now, years later, most staffers keep quiet when asked about what went on behind closed doors. Discretion is built into the DNA of most of them; they know that their restraint is fundamental to the protection of the presidency—and that, without it, life in the executive mansion would be impossible to endure.

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**Usher Skip Allen admits** that it was easier to serve the families he liked than it was to pretend.

"But we pretend very well," he said.

Allen cannot hide his reservations about the Clintons. Over lunch by the pool at his large home in rural Pennsylvania, he fondly recalled how Mrs. Clinton always asked him to help her by tying bows on her outfits, something she couldn't do herself. But he said the Clintons never fully trusted the residence staff and were particularly suspicious of the Usher's Office. "They were about the most paranoid people I'd ever seen in my life."

Allen isn't the only one with bitter memories of the Clinton White House. Usher Chris Emery, who had been close with the Bushes, remembers feeling unduly scrutinized by the Clintons. In the 14 months he served them, he says, he was subjected to three drug tests and a background check that he was not due to have for several years. He says that some of the questions he was asked—including what church he belonged to—were unusually personal, so he refused to answer them. "I think they were just trying to find something to make it easier [to fire me]." He sighed. And, indeed, when Emery was fired from the White House in 1994, it was in part because of a favor he had done for former first lady Barbara Bush.

During the first Bush administration, Emery had been very helpful to Mrs. Bush. "We were very close. Chris taught me how to use a computer," she told me. After leaving the White House, she was working on her memoir when she lost a chapter, so she called on Emery for help. Emery was happy to oblige—but the favor fueled the Clintons' suspicion that the staff was too attached to the Bush family. When the Clintons saw the usher's call logs, Emery

said, they “came to the conclusion that I was sharing deep, dark secrets with the Bushes in Houston. Which I wasn’t.”

A short time later, Chief Usher Gary Walters called Emery into his office.

“Mrs. Clinton is not comfortable with you,” Walters told him. “What does that mean?” Emery asked, stunned. “It means tomorrow is your last day.” Barbara Bush admits that her phone calls to Chris “caused trouble.” Emery was scolded in public for “an amazing lack of discretion,” in the words of Hillary’s spokesman Neel Lattimore. “We believe the position that he had, as a member of the residence staff, requires the utmost respect for the first family’s privacy.”

Emery says he was devastated at the loss of his job, and his \$50,000 salary. “I was out of work for a year,” he says. “They ripped the rug right out from under me. You wonder what they’d do to someone who’s really powerful.” When he made it home that night, the first call he got was from Barbara Bush’s assistant, saying that the Bushes had heard the news and wanted to help however they could. “The next call I got was from Maggie Williams’s office [she was Hillary Clinton’s chief of staff], saying that if I get any calls from the press I should direct them back to the White House. I immediately thought, ‘Well, of course, that’s what we always do.’ I hung up the phone and I said, ‘Wait a minute. They just fired me!’ ”

All these years later, Emery told me sadly, he understands why he was fired. “She was facing so many pressures,” he says of Mrs. Clinton, “and unfortunately I was a victim.”

But at least one former colleague of Emery’s disputes his claims. This person, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said that the Clintons were right to be paranoid about the residence workers, many of whom had served Republican presidents for 12 years. According to this source, “Everybody in the Usher’s Office was upset when President Bush 41 was not reelected ... and they showed it in front of the Clintons.” Emery, in particular, was a “Republican from the top of his head to the tips of his toes,” according to this source, and Emery himself says that he would have gone to California with the Reagans after they left office if they’d asked him.

Emery may not always have hidden his feelings around the Clintons. According to his colleague, as President Clinton came down from the second floor to attend an event one day, Emery said, “I can’t understand why everybody has an orgasm when he’s around.” He made these kinds of comments loudly enough for Clinton aides to hear, his colleague said.

The Clintons may also have had good reason to be concerned about their security detail. They were still reeling from claims made by Arkansas state troopers assigned to protect



Governor Clinton who later told the press that they had helped facilitate Clinton's extramarital affairs, in what came to be known as "Troopergate."

One incident particularly worried the Clintons. Late one night in 1994, while they were at Camp David celebrating Easter, Chelsea's former nanny and White House staff assistant, Helen Dickey, was in her third-floor room at the White House when she heard noises coming from the family's living quarters one floor below. When she went to see what was going on, she found a group of men dressed in black carrying weapons and rummaging through the Clintons' things.

"What are you doing? You have no right to be here," she yelled. "We're Secret Service doing our job. Get out," they told her. When Hillary returned, she asked Chief Usher Gary Walters for an explanation. He apologized for forgetting to tell her that the agents were sweeping the second floor to see if there were any listening devices. She was livid.

The Clintons cherished their time alone. In a 1993 interview, Hillary Clinton said she loved the second floor of the White House because it was the only place where the Secret Service didn't trail her family. "We can tell the full-time help that they can get off. We don't have to have them up there," she said. "That's a wonderful feeling, because everywhere else we are we've got people around us all the time."

By most accounts, Chelsea Clinton treated the residence staff with respect. Yet Ronn Payne believes that she had internalized some of her parents' animosity toward the Secret Service. In the very beginning of the Clinton administration, agents were stationed on the second-floor staircase landing, right by the president's elevator. Another Secret Service post was at the top of the Grand Staircase across from the Treaty Room on the second floor. (These posts were later moved to the State Floor at the Clintons' request.)

One day, according to Payne, he was walking through the second-floor private kitchen when an agent walked in behind him waiting to escort Chelsea to Sidwell Friends, the private school she attended in northwest Washington. Chelsea was on the phone.

"Oh, I've got to go," she told her friend. "The pigs are here."

The agent turned "crimson," Payne recalls. "Ms. Clinton, I want to tell you something. My job is to stand between you, your family, and a bullet. Do you understand?"

She replied: "Well, that's what my mother and father call you."

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**Additional credits:**

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