

The Washington Post

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WHITE HOUSE NOTEBOOK: Obama slurps stout in ancestral Irish village and ‘The Beast’ is tamed

By Associated Press, Updated: Monday, May 23, 1:09 PM

DUBLIN — Downing a Guinness is a rite of passage for any visitor to Ireland, but too often the VIPs, including some U.S. presidents, disappoint the Emerald Isle.

Not President Barack Obama. He may be criticized for taking too long to make up his mind at times, but he didn't hesitate Monday when offered a pint of the dark brew. Obama downed it in four slurps and won cheers across Ireland for it.

“The president actually killed his pint! He gets my vote,” said Christy O’Sullivan, a government clerical worker who was taking a long lunch break to watch live TV coverage of Obama’s visit to Moneygall, the tiny village where his maternal great-great-great grandfather lived and worked. “He’s the first president I’ve actually seen drink the black stuff like he’s not ashamed of something.”

Previous American presidents didn’t fare as well as Obama.

In 1984, Ronald Reagan rejected the Guinness and instead posed for photographers with a pint of Smithwicks, a locally brewed red ale. He didn’t finish it.

In 2006, George W. Bush, a recovering alcoholic who drinks non-alcoholic beer, wasn’t asked to pose with a pint of Guinness at all.

Many expected more from Bill Clinton, but ended up deeply disappointed. In 1995, Clinton stopped at a Dublin pub bearing his family’s Irish name of Cassidy but barely sipped his stout. Aides said he didn’t want to be photographed drinking anything alcoholic, but the resultant image was hardly an endorsement of the product. Clinton had abandoned his almost full half-pint.

But on Monday, an American president finally savored his pint the way a local expects. Audiences watching the moment — deliciously drawn out by Obama for close to a minute — shouted encouragement at their TVs and cheered as he took a hearty swallow and polished it off. Mrs. Obama drank her half-pint, then got behind the bar herself and pulled two pints.

Obama even ended up with a bit of a frosty moustache, another trademark of tackling a creamy-headed stout. He revealed to pub-goers that it wasn’t his first pint in Ireland either and suspected that the Irish were holding back their best brew for themselves. He said he first drank stout when he flew into the airport in Shannon, Ireland, en route to Afghanistan.

“I tried one of these and I realized it tastes so much better here than it does in the states,” he said. “What I

realized was that you guys, you're keeping all the best stuff here. “

Obama's heavily armored limousine is known as “The Beast” and for good reason: It's designed to be as tough as a tank and about as heavy.

Too heavy, as it turned out, to drive out of the U.S. Embassy in Dublin without getting stuck. The ultra-modified Cadillac sedan, also dubbed Cadillac One, thudded to a hefty halt on an exit ramp as the president and first lady were leaving a lunch at the embassy.

Unable to budge a vehicle reputed to have 5-inch-thick armor, Secret Service agents drove a minivan in front of it to block the public's view. After about five minutes, Obama and Mrs. Obama were transferred to a backup sports utility vehicle to be driven to his helicopter, Marine One, for the flight to Moneygall.

Given a hurley stick after meeting with Ireland's prime minister, Obama immediately suggested one use unrelated to its place in the native Irish sport of hurling.

He bounced the flat-paddled, wooden club in his hands like a Louisville Slugger and suggested it might make a good weapon for spanking uncooperative representatives and senators.

“If Congress doesn't behave,” he said, taking a playful swing with his new toy. “I'm going to give them the bat, a little hurl.”

Prime Minister Enda Kenny and other Irish officials standing nearby just laughed.

Back home in Washington, Obama and a politically divided Congress are at odds on many issues, including spending cuts and immigration policy. Kenny said they discussed immigration during their meeting, including a recent speech by Obama on the issue.

There was no word on whether anyone in Ireland intended to give Obama a shillelagh, the traditional Irish club for doling out a proper bludgeoning.

The president wasn't the only Obama family member to receive a gift from Kenny.

Kenny said he also gave the president a first edition book on myths and legends of Hawaii for his daughters, Malia and Sasha, who did not accompany their parents to Europe. Kenny said the author is a children's literature professor at Trinity College. Obama was born in Hawaii.

“He produced three volumes of children's stories, which I presented ... not to the president, not to the first lady, but to his children, Malia and Sasha, stories of their daddy's birthplace,” Kenny said.

Obama thanked Kenny for what he said was an extraordinary gift. “It just confirms that if you need somebody to do some good writing, you hire an Irishman,” he said.

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