History of State Dinners at the White House

As part of an official State Visit, the **White House State Dinner** is an opportunity for the president and first lady to honor a visiting head of state. In addition to expressing goodwill and hospitality, the State Dinner showcases global power and influence and sets the tone for the continuation of dialogue between the president and the visiting head of state.

The tradition of State Dinners originated in 1874, when President Ulysses Grant hosted King David Kalakaua of the Kingdom of Hawai‘i. In 1902, President Theodore Roosevelt expanded the State Dining Room as part of a larger White House renovation, allowing for larger gatherings. While the White House underwent a complete interior reconstruction from 1948 to 1952, President Harry Truman lived at Blair House and State Dinners took place in local hotels.

The current traditions and formalities of State Dinners were solidified during the 1950s and 60s. The first lady and her staff are responsible for the elaborate planning and attention behind the ceremony of the State Dinner. The event involves the creation of invitations and carefully selected guest lists, menus, flowers, table settings, seating arrangements and entertainment for the evening. The first lady works closely with her social secretary, the executive residence staff, and the State Department to coordinate every detail of the night.

**Examples of State Dinners throughout history:**

- **December 1874:** First State Dinner for a foreign head of state King David Kalakaua of the Kingdom of Hawaii. Hosted by President Ulysses S. Grant, the king had royal food testers to sample the more than 20-course White House dinner.

- **1902:** The Roosevelt renovation included a major expansion of the State Dining Room from entertaining approximately 40 guests to the accommodation of 120 people. The first dinner held in the renovated White House was in honor of the cabinet members and their wives.

- **June 1939:** A State Dinner hosted for King George VI, the first visit to the United States by a British monarch.

- **1941-1945:** During World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt held many State Dinners for heads of Allied-recognized exiled governments under Axis rule, including Greece, Yugoslavia, Poland, and the Netherlands.
• September 1959: Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Soviet Union Nikita Khrushchev was a guest of honor hosted by President Dwight Eisenhower and First Lady Mamie Eisenhower during the height of the Cold War. This was the first State Dinner hosted for a Soviet leader.

• November 1961: President John F. Kennedy and First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy host the first State Dinner for an Indian leader, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru.

• June 1964: First State Dinner held outside on the White House grounds, a dinner hosted by the President Lyndon Johnson and First Lady Lady Bird Johnson for Chancellor Ludwig Erhard of West Germany in the Rose Garden.

• July 1976: President Gerald Ford and First Lady Betty Ford hosted a tented State Dinner in the Rose Garden honoring Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh during the celebration of the bicentennial of the American Revolution.

• September 1977: President Jimmy Carter and First Lady Rosalynn Carter hosted a State Dinner with 18 Latin American Heads of State following the signing of the Panama Canal treaties.

• March 1979: A State Dinner hosted by the Carters was held for Prime Minister Menachem Begin of Israel and President Anwar Sadat of Egypt after the signing of the Camp David Accords between the two countries.

• November 1985: Although it was not an official State Dinner, the event hosted by President Ronald and First Lady Nancy Reagan in honor of Great Britain’s Prince Charles and Princess Diana created a worldwide sensation when actor John Travolta danced with the Princess.

• December 1987: State Dinner between General Secretary Mikhail S. Gorbachev of the Soviet Union and President Ronald Reagan and First Lady Nancy Reagan after the signing of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, decreasing the Cold War buildup of intermediate range missiles.

• October 1994: President William J. Clinton and First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton hosted a State Dinner for Nelson Mandela, the first black president of South Africa.

• May 2007: President George W. Bush and First Lady Laura Bush hosted a white-tie State Dinner for Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh to mark the 400th anniversary of the English settlement of Jamestown, Virginia.

• January 2011: President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama hosted a dinner for President Hu Jintao of China as part of his final trip to Washington as China’s leader.
• October 2011: President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama hosted a State Dinner honoring South Korean President Lee Myung-bak and First Lady Kim Yoon-ok.

• April 2018: State Dinner for President Emmanuel Macron of France, hosted by President Donald J. Trump and First Lady Melania Trump.

• December 2022: President Joe Biden and First Lady Jill Biden hosted a dinner for President Emmanuel Macron of France.

• April 2023: President Joe Biden and First Lady Jill Biden held a State Dinner for the president of the Republic of Korea, Yoon Suk Yeol and First Lady Kim Keon Hee to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the U.S.-ROK Alliance.

For more information or to schedule an interview, please contact press@whha.org or Jessica Fredericks, Assistant Vice President of Communications, at JFredericks@whha.org.

About The White Historical Association
The White House Historical Association was founded in 1961 by First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy to support her vision to restore and preserve the Executive Mansion and its legacy for generations to come. Mrs. Kennedy sought to inspire Americans, especially children, to explore and engage with American history and its presidents. Supported entirely by private resources, the Association is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that has contributed more than $100 million to the White House in fulfillment of its mission. To learn more about the White House Historical Association, please visit WhiteHouseHistory.org.

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