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What Does a Chief of Protocol Do?

Capricia Marshall says she has one of the best jobs in Washington. But what exactly is it?

By Shane Harris

Ambassador Capricia Marshall says she has one of the best jobs in Washington. But, she explains, "when I tell people that I'm the chief of protocol, they say, 'That's wonderful. What do you do?'" We sat down with Marshall, who has been President Obama's liaison to the diplomatic corps since 2009, to find out what protocol officers do when they're not planning official events.

When a lot of people hear the word "protocol," they get an image of formal dinners or events, and people making sure all the place settings are right and everyone is appropriately dressed. What you speak of comes out of the ceremonials division of the Office of the Chief of Protocol. They handle all the ceremonial activities that take place here at the State Department or when the President travels abroad; as when the President went to the United Kingdom as a guest of Her Majesty last year.

But there are several other divisions. The visits division is charged with making sure that from the moment we learn a chief of state, a head of government, or a foreign minister is going to be arriving in our country, we start to work with that delegation. We put together their schedules, work with them on any meetings, particularly with the President or the Secretary of State. Sometimes we have interchanges with the spouses and Mrs. Obama or Dr. Biden.

We also have a Blair House division, which makes sure if there's an offer to stay at the President's guest house that we extend that offer on behalf of the White House and that we work with the delegation. I'll usually speak with the ambassador and extend that offer. We oversee all the operations of the house, from soup to nuts. And when there's not a visit, we use the house for dinners that the Secretary or the President hosts.

And there's a diplomatic affairs division, which oversees the accreditation of ambassadors and assists me as the President's liaison to the foreign ambassadors while they're serving in Washington. I'm the first hand to reach out and welcome them when they arrive in the United States, and I work with them throughout their time here. You must get to know them well. I do. Because not

only do I meet them when they arrive, but I bring them to the White House and introduce them to the President. I engage them in conversation. I read all their biographies and the news from their country, so I know what to engage in-and what not to.

Your office also makes sure that US officials know what's customary and appropriate when they travel abroad. That's right. When the President travels to other countries, we usually have one or two protocol officers go ahead with the advance team from the White House and work with that country's ministry of foreign affairs and the protocol office.

When our officials travel abroad, we will talk to them about what foods may be served at certain events, what greetings are appropriate, and in particular about the receipt of business cards. It's very precise and formal in certain countries, such as Japan. It's important that we don't do something unintentionally offensive. And it's to the great pleasure of the people that we're visiting when we do know a certain custom or manner of greeting. It says, "You've taken the time to learn something about us."

The State of the Union address is one of the events to which the entire diplomatic corps is invited. How do you put that together, and how did the most recent address go?

The last State of the Union address saw the largest gathering to date. We had about 158 people in attendance. That's partly because we've credentialed so many news ambassadors since the last address. [Find more on the credentialing process here.] And I think people were really excited to hear what the President had to say. And you have the opportunity to be on the floor of the House of Representatives and hear it live.

The diplomats start the evening by gathering on the eighth floor of the State Department for a light buffet dinner, because it will be a long evening. They can engage with each other. Generally they separate out into regions, and we seek out opportunities for them to come together as much as possible.

After they've had a bit to eat, everyone boards buses to the Capitol, escorted by diplomatic security and the Secret Service, and they pull right up to the steps. Then we're escorted into the Capitol to a holding room.

How do they proceed into the House chamber before the speech begins?

The diplomatic corps is escorted in and seated. And then the dean of the diplomatic corps, the ambassador from Djibouti, is announced, and I escort him to his seat. Then the Supreme Court follows, then the Cabinet, and then the President.

Outside of formal events, how does your office interact with the ambassadors while they're in Washington?

Today's ambassador could be his or her country's next foreign minister, or the prime minister. We want to create and solidify relationships with them while they're here. We want them to know more about who we are as Americans, the goals of the administration, and how they can connect with the top levels of the administration, as well as the business community and nongovernmental organizations. And how we exchange cultures.

I sought the advice of many of my predecessors about what ideas have worked well, all the way back to the Johnson administration. I took their ideas and then created several programs within a new division—the diplomatic partnerships division. These ideas have become institutionalized as programs with a budget and career employees working in them so they carry on after the political appointees leave.

One of the most successful programs has become Experience America. We take ambassadors outside the Beltway, to other cities and states that have put together host committees to invite the diplomats into their homes or to host receptions for them. We usually bring 40 to 50 ambassadors and their spouses. They pay for their travel and hotel. We've gone to Chicago, Atlanta, New Orleans. The ambassadors get to experience the vastness of our culture and also talk to local business leaders. On a trip to Alaska, the ambassador from the Bahamas talked to the cruise ship lines to figure out how to bring more ships to his country. The Chilean ambassador talked about the fishing industry. The Ugandan ambassador talked about oil, and how they can extract their own natural resources.

You've had some high-profile jobs in Washington. You were a special assistant to Hillary Clinton when she was the First Lady. And then you became the White House social secretary for President Clinton. Where does the job of protocol chief rank in your experience?

I have the best job. The best job. I really love what I do. And it relates to my upbringing. I am a first-generation American. My family was quite a melting pot, so I feel very comfortable among the diplomatic corps. My mother came from Mexico and my father from Croatia, with four dollars in his pocket, literally to come and live the American dream. When he visited me at the White House, and when he comes to the State Department, he gets tears in his eyes, to see that his daughter has worked for two presidents now.

What have you learned about Washington that serves you in this job, for which you have to work with so many people who don't live here? I find Washington to be a community that reaches out to others, invites them, and wants to get to know them. I think we're a very hospitable city. And I'm very proud of that. Some

people have observed that because members of Congress don't live here as much as in the past, a lot of social traditions have disintegrated. Has the social life dissipated in the diplomatic corps?

No. I could go out probably seven days a week and have several receptions and dinners each night. Ambassadors engage quite a bit as well with members of Congress. More recently, I've seen many members at ambassadors' residences for dinners or issue roundtables. That's truly important.

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