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PRESIDENTIAL SWAG AND THE GIFT HORSE

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The most famous gift from the Obamas was to the youngest recipient—who got to play with it.

In 1862, Abraham Lincoln wrote to King Mongkut of Siam (the “King and I” king) to gently reject his gift of “a supply of elephants” to populate America’s forests. “This Government would not hesitate to avail itself of so generous an offer if the object were one which could be made practically useful,” Lincoln wrote.

“Our political jurisdiction, however, does not reach a latitude so low as to favor the multiplication of the elephant, and steam on land, as well as on water, has been our best and most efficient agent of transportation.”

Lincoln could not legally accept the elephants, in any case. The Founding Fathers were sufficiently concerned about foreign corruption of their young democracy that they enshrined a ban, in Article I of the Constitution, on U.S. officials accepting “any present, Emolument, Office, or Title, of any kind whatever, from any King, Prince, or foreign State.” George H. W. Bush faced a similar dilemma when the President of Indonesia presented him with a flesh-eating Komodo dragon. The present—not a good match for Millie, the First Dog—ended up at the Cincinnati Zoo, where he sired more than thirty little Komodo dragons.

Ceremonial gifts have been a part of diplomatic protocol since ancient times. To this day, the thought that goes into each offering is deemed a reflection of relations and respect. Saudi Arabia has recently taken gifts to extremes. In 2014, the late King Abdullah gave Michelle Obama two diamond collections—one with emeralds, the other with pearls, each set including a necklace, a ring, a bracelet, and earrings—totalling more than a million dollars. He gave the Obama girls diamond collections of their own, worth eighty thousand dollars.

“The jewelry is not worn,” Peter Selfridge, the chief of protocol at the State Department, told me. “More often than not, a gift is viewed by the First Couple and admired, but goes directly to the Gift Office and then a National Archives warehouse.”

Other U.S. officials have been generously treated as well. In 2014, King Abdullah gave Bvlgari and Rolex watches—ranging in value from four thousand to seventy-one thousand dollars—to at least twenty senior officials or their spouses, according to the Federal Register, which publishes a list of hundreds of gifts annually. The same year, the already wealthy wife of Secretary of State John Kerry received various jewels fashioned from diamonds, emeralds, and sapphires, plus a Bvlgari watch with mother-of-pearl face, altogether valued at more than nine hundred thousand dollars. They had to be turned in, too. Perishables and perfumes—such as the Guerlain Homme, Lacoste, and Ralph Lauren colognes given, in 2014, to General Martin Dempsey, the former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, by the chief of Qatar’s Armed Forces—are simply tossed.

Recipients are only allowed to keep gifts that are worth more than three hundred and seventy-five dollars—up from a hundred and eighty dollars during the Reagan Administration—if they pay the United States government the appraised value. Few do. Selfridge, the protocol chief, has himself received pricey watches from foreign governments. “They’re beautiful,” he said. “We look at them for a few minutes and then hand them over for recording.” Even a ceramic dog dish given to Bo, the First Puppy, by the Czech Prime Minister had to be surrendered, as it was part of a package of gifts that exceeded the limit.

Just where all the Presidential swag is stored is a secret, for security reasons. “I’d like to picture a place like a ‘Raiders of the Lost Ark’ facility,” Selfridge said. “But it’s not like that.” Gifts to Presidents are eventually transferred to their official libraries—which are still under the mantle of the National Archives and Records Administration—after they leave office. The same rules on personal use apply. Gifts are only for display.

For American Presidents, deciding what to give foreign leaders as tokens from the world’s mightiest power has often proved even more awkward. Choice is limited by layers of laws and regulations. The President is allowed to spend no more than two thousand dollars on a gift, the Vice-President fifteen hundred dollars, and the Secretary of State a thousand dollars. “We can’t compete, nor would we ever be able

to compete, with a seventy-thousand-dollar gift for a foreign leader,” Selfridge said. As a result, Washington occasionally comes across as cheap.

Six weeks after President Obama took office, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown came to Washington with three gifts. The first was a pen holder crafted from the wood of the H.M.S. Gannet, a British warship that helped stamp out the slave trade. It was a sister ship to the H.M.S. Resolute, whose timbers were made into an ornate desk that Queen Victoria gave to the White House. (She had a twin made for herself.) That piece of furniture, known as the Resolute Desk, has been used by all but three of the past twenty-five Presidents, including Obama. The second gift was the framed commission of the H.M.S. Resolute. The third was a first edition of a seven-volume biography of Churchill.

In exchange, President Obama presented Brown with twenty-five DVDs of old American movies, including “Psycho,” “The Wizard of Oz,” and “Some Like It Hot.” He might as well have given a Netflix subscription. “A gift about as exciting as a pair of socks,” the Daily Mail griped. “The kind of thing the White House might hand out to the visiting head of a minor African state,” the Telegraph sniffed. “Appalled,” the Guardian noted. A month later, in London, the Obamas called on Queen Elizabeth—it was their first meeting—and gave her an iPod loaded with photos of U.S. visits and some Broadway tunes. That apparently didn’t go over well, either, according to the British media. Her Majesty already had an iPod. She’s also not short on photographs.

Presidential gifts are usually a closely held secret—the list and costs shown only to the House Oversight Committee—unless the recipient discloses them. “We don’t want foreign leaders to know how much we paid for them,” a State Department official told me. Presidents frequently rely on a kind of regiving. In 1972, General Motors donated a Cadillac Eldorado to the White House, which President Nixon gave to the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. (Brezhnev, a high-end-car buff, already had a Maserati given to him by France; he totalled a Rolls-Royce Silver Cloud, from Britain, when he drove it into a truck.)

In choosing its gifts, the State Department’s Protocol Gift Unit considers a recipient’s hobbies, tastes, policy priorities, and cultural norms. “With gifts to Muslim leaders, we’re careful not to include anything in human form,” the State Department official said. “Some countries have color no-nos. In Asia, white is a funeral color.”

At President Obama's first meeting with Pope Francis, in 2014, the President gave the Pope seeds from the White House fruit-and-vegetable garden. "These, I think, are carrots," Obama told His Holiness, holding up a seed pouch. "Each one has a different seed in it. The box is made from timber from the first cathedral to open in the United States, in Baltimore." The White House noted that "in keeping with the spirit of the gift, Thomas Jefferson's Monticello will donate seeds that will yield several tons of produce to a charity of Pope Francis's choosing." To France's President François Hollande, Obama gave a custom-designed table that included wood from a fallen oak tree at George Washington's Mount Vernon estate.

The most famous gift from the Obamas was to the youngest recipient. In 2013, the State Department's Protocol Gift Unit contacted Jackie Wilson, a self-described Oklahoma cowgirl. She's been drawing horses since she first picked up a crayon, and riding them since she was twelve—more than half a century ago. "God outdid himself when he created the horse," she told me recently. Her first horse, a pinto, was named Chiquita. During a pregnancy in 1979, Wilson read a magazine article about rocking horses and decided to make one for her baby. It was the beginning of a one-woman business making handcrafted rocking horses, initially sold by word-of-mouth, and now on the Web. She makes four different styles, including the Chiquita, in a small workshop in the woods behind her home, in Edmond, Oklahoma.

The State Department asked Wilson to make a rocking horse, but wouldn't reveal the identity of either the giver or the recipient. "The woman said, 'Don't tell anyone in your family. Don't tell your friends. If you do, then we won't send the gift—we can't proceed,'" Wilson recalled. She worked on the horse for weeks and, although she hadn't voted for Obama—and still wouldn't—she donated the materials and labor. The Protocol Office had the leather saddle embossed with the Presidential Seal, and added a miniature mallet crafted from a fallen oak branch on the White House South Lawn. The horse, a four-foot-long dapple gray on gliders, was the Obamas' gift to Britain's Prince George at his birth.

The gift remained a secret—the Protocol office never confirmed to Wilson that her rocking horse was for the little prince—until it went on display at Buckingham Palace, in 2014, during an exhibit of royal toys from over the generations. Wilson and five members of her family scrambled to get to London for three days just to see it. "We went through the Palace and, by golly, there was the horse!" she told me. "They wouldn't let us take pictures, but they can't take the memory from me."

Last month, at a dinner given by Prince William and the Duchess of Cambridge at Kensington Palace, the Obamas got to see bonny Prince George, now almost three, actually put a Presidential gift to good use. Afterward, the Palace released official photographs. “It grabbed my heart,” Wilson said. “He was really on the horse!” And he got to keep it.