



BRUCE WHITE FOR THE WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

# The White House *Navy* MESS HALL

*The Hidden Narrative of  
Those Who Serve There*

ROBERT A. RONSCKA





ELEGANT STATE DINNERS OF LOBSTER TAILS and expensive cuts of meat are probably among the first things that come to mind when imagining meals at the White House. While these images hold some truth, there exists a lesser-known yet incredibly significant component of dining within the Executive Mansion—the White House Mess Hall. The White House Mess Hall is an integral part of daily food preparation rich in history and military tradition.

Located near the Situation Room in the West Wing basement, the Mess seats about fifty and caters to senior White House officials, such as cabinet secretaries and their guests. There is also a take-out window for White House staff. In this small dining room the tables are set with linen

tablecloths and fresh flowers, and meals are served on White House china. Historically, the United States Navy ran the White House Mess Hall, and true to these roots the walls are covered, says the White House website, in “wood paneling, nautical trim, and ship paintings.”<sup>1</sup>

Navy involvement in food services for the president and White House staff can be traced back to 1880, when Rutherford B. Hayes employed navy stewards aboard his presidential yacht. The navy has continued to provide the commander in chief with its finest culinary specialists, regardless of his location at sea. President Franklin D. Roosevelt naturally entrusted navy stewards from his presidential yacht to provide food service at his

**PREVIOUS SPREAD AND ABOVE**  
Views of the Navy Mess wood paneled dining room capture the nautical decor. The tables are set with fresh flowers and custom china produced for the mess by Lenox, 2024.

**LEFT**  
The threshold to the dining room is embellished with a reminder of the year the White House Navy Mess was established, 1951.

BOTH IMAGES THIS PAGE: BRUCE WHITE FOR THE WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

**LEFT**  
The Navy Mess was first installed in the West Wing by President Harry S. Truman, seen here heading the “chow line” provided for him by the navy at Fort Jefferson in the Dry Tortugas. Lieutenant Commander Leo V. Roberts, to the President’s left, was selected to command the newly installed mess.



presidential retreat, Shangri-La (now Camp David), thus establishing the precedent for navy personnel to serve the president and his staff onshore.<sup>2</sup> At the recommendation of Rear Admiral Robert L. Dennison, President Harry S. Truman installed a Commissioned Officers Mess in the White House under the command of Lieutenant Commander Leo W. Roberts. Today the White House Mess Hall continues to be operated primarily by U.S. Navy culinary experts, in conjunction with culinary specialists from other branches of service.

However, the Navy Mess Command is so much more than the operating body of an elegant dining hall. The men and women who serve are integral to the safety and well-being of the commander in chief. To assure that only the best military personnel are selected for this command, a rigorous process is in place.

According to Navy Public Affairs Officer Lieutenant Commander Sean Brophy, the initial qualifications for nominees include a strong recommendation from their commanding officer; they must also be highly motivated and have an impeccable record. The screening process takes fifteen to eighteen months, with an extensive background check that needs to result in the highest security clearance, Yankee White. Once selected for Presidential Food Service, service members start

their “culinary adventure,” says Brophy, at Fort Gregg-Adams in Prince George County, Virginia, with Advance Culinary Training, “a six-week fast-paced, high-intensity course where members endure stresses unlike ever before in the kitchen.” This training allows prospects to work alongside talented military culinary specialists, in the hopes of attaining a Professional Chef Certification, level 1, 2, or 3.3

The White House Mess Hall menus are high quality and varied, curated to accommodate the patrons’ preferences, dietary restrictions, and allergies. John Raymond Lara, who worked at the White House Mess from 2001 to 2005, at first as a navy mess executive chef and then as an advance travel lead, explains that menu craft is something you develop over time. During his tenure, he says, the Mess team always considered the classics. For example, White House crab cakes, with roasted new potatoes, grilled asparagus, and a side of remoulade sauce, were on the menu every Friday. Thursday was “Tex-Mex,” and every day would showcase a shrimp, fish, and steak “of the day” along with other seasonal entrees. Senior Chief Lara even had his own special: “John Lara Chicken Mole.”

In addition to menu preparations, essential tasks and duties performed by the White House Mess Hall include daily food preparation of breakfast

HARRY S. TRUMAN PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY



and lunch, catering support for events, plus 24/7 valet support for the president and first family. Food safety is another vital mission that the White House Mess oversees. According to Lara, while the president is traveling, members of the Mess work closely with Secret Service to ensure the president and first family have food and beverages safe for consumption.

Members of the Mess must perform a myriad of duties that go beyond just meal service and safety. “On many occasions the Navy Mess has to step in and serve (put on a waiter uniform),” says Lara. When he served as a travel lead, he would transport luggage and other essentials belonging to the president from *Air Force One* to the hotel. The Navy Mess is also responsible for placing water at podiums during speaking engagements, loading the limousines with essentials, and shadowing the president with a cooler carrying refreshments.

The care, comfort, and safety of the president and first lady are priorities that require constant vigilance. Senior Chief Paul Reyes Jr. served under Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama, starting his tenure in the Mess but then moving on to the extended arm of the

Mess—Valet Service. He emphasizes that the attitude he and his fellow Mess members had was to “treat today as if it was your first day,” to ensure they did not become “complacent with our position and with our job.”

Complacency is not an option. Unexpected occurrences require White House Mess members to be willing to do whatever is required of them. For instance, when the attacks of 9/11 occurred, Lara was told to report to the North End of the White House where he was sworn in to the Presidential Contingency Program and proceeded to the bunker in anticipation of President George W. Bush’s arrival. He then served on many trips in support of 9/11.

During the December 14, 2008, news conference that culminated in Iraqi journalist, Muntadhar al-Zaidi, throwing two shoes at President Bush, Valet Robert Favela was overseeing preparations for the small lunch that had been scheduled immediately following the event. Something seemed off to Favela, so he removed the knives that were to be served and carefully monitored the food preparations, as he always had. When he heard the commotion, he was prepared to pack up and

**OPPOSITE**  
*In addition to operating the lower level dining room in the West Wing, the Navy Mess provides water to the president at podiums (top left), serves meals in the president’s Oval Office Dining Room (top right), and operates the take out window for White House staff, which First Lady Jill Biden is seen visiting in 2024 (below).*

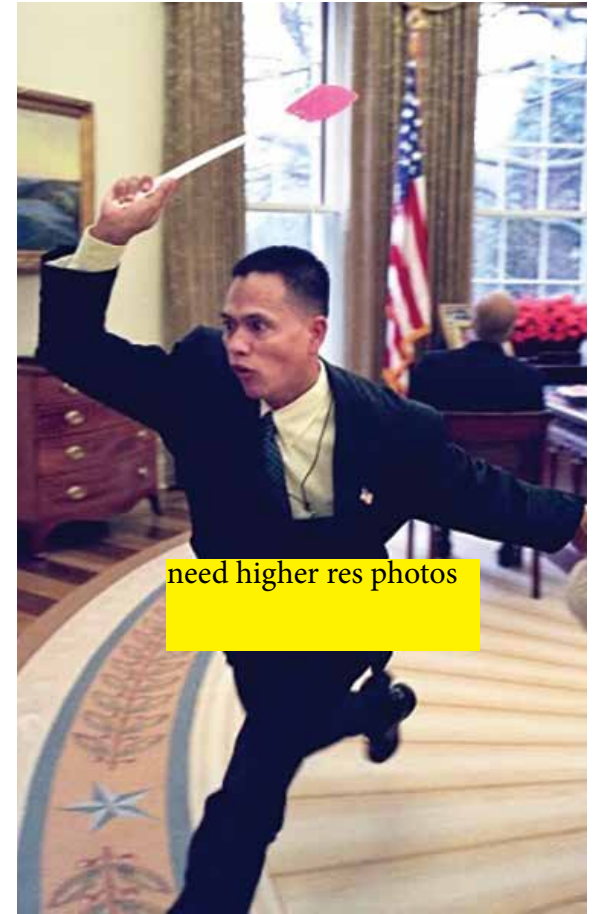
**LEFT**  
*The Navy Mess is also responsible for food service while the president is traveling, including the service on Air Force One. President Ronald Reagan is seen here having lunch aboard Air Force One, 1981.*



WIKIPEDIA

ALL IMAGES THIS PAGE: WHITE HOUSE PHOTOS





depart with the president. However, having avoided both shoes, Bush wanted to continue, causing Favela to think on his feet and become the eyes and ears of the Secret Service inside the event.

Being the stellar military member that he was, Favela was always willing to do whatever it took to serve the mission. In fact, that very trip to Iraq started with a phone call during his son's birthday party. He was told to pack up immediately and make sure to bring his traveling credentials to the White House. Upon arrival he was briefed on the secret trip that was to begin that day. After conferring with the senior staff and the president's military aide, the baseball cap that Favela usually wore to and from work was put into play. Favela left ahead of the team to go to Andrews Air Force Base and make preparations on *Air Force One*. When the timing was right, President Bush took the service elevator and left the Residence in Favela's cap, obscuring his face as he left. When Bush entered *Air Force One*, he tossed the cap back to Favela with a big smile and a thank you for helping him exit unrecognized.

Sometimes the military members of the White

House Mess are the unsung heroes of the president's personal time as well. For instance, President Obama enjoyed the company of his friends and family while taking his well-earned vacations in Hawaii. As Reyna [give his full name] recounts, when friends such as celebrity chef Sam Kass were invited to spend the day with the president and cook a dinner for the first family, the White House Mess obtained and prepped ingredients so that Kass's time in the kitchen was optimized and the time spent in good company was maximized, adding to the president's comfort and well-being.

The wide reach of the White House Mess's specialized duties, responsibilities, and mission requires that service members have special qualities. Conversations with Favela, Reyna, and Lara suggest that the first attribute that stands out is a can-do attitude. As Favela recalls, when he arrived at the Mess, he was eager to learn and rolled up his sleeves, doing whatever was needed, from cleaning the Mess to doing dishes. He made sure to learn all he could from the best cooks and the best leaders so that he could grow professionally. That attitude

ABOVE  
*Robert Favela prepares to board Air Force One and at work in the Navy Mess kitchen need details to complete captions*

BOTH PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

ABOVE  
*need captions*

BOTH PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

got him noticed quickly, and he was soon picked to serve at the Clintons' personal residence in Chappaqua, New York, and to travel with the first family.

The can-do attitude cannot be separated from the strong work ethic required to serve successfully in the Mess Hall. Favela and Reyna both talked about the hectic schedules, especially during travel periods. Favela recalls that there were times he would return home from a trip with just enough time to shower and repack his luggage before returning to the White House for the next trip. To handle the busy travel itineraries, both Reyna and Favela joked that "Flight time and motorcade time is nap time." But Reyna added that eating was important, too, so he always asked to be awakened at meal service time on *Air Force One*; he ate quickly so he could go back to sleep. Even though the valets all had strong work ethics, Reyna says seeing the commander in chief putting in long hours that continued after members of the Mess left for the evening made an impact on him.

Mess Hall service members are required to

be unwavering in their professionalism. As witnesses to history and the most private moments and conversations, they must be discreet. Reyna recounts that partisan politics and general curiosity prompted people to ask about presidential actions and reactions at certain moments in the hopes of getting some insider information. The trust that is placed in Mess Hall service members is not taken lightly, and they are all proud to never betray it.

Another extremely important characteristic of the service members is humility, accepting that no job is too small, not even waiting tables or swatting flies. They all started their military careers doing the most basic activities. Lara started his naval career as a food service attendant, doing what he called "cranking," meaning he took out the trash and washed dishes. He then worked his way up to vegetable preparation, cook, and baker. All along the way, he took pride in his craft and honed his skills. While serving on the historic battleship *Missouri* (BB-63), a museum ship in Honolulu, he cleaned the deck to make sure it was "looking nice and white." He explains, "That took pride from . . .





BRUCE WHITE FOR THE WHITE HOUSE HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION



LEFT: COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR / RIGHT: JOHN F. KENNEDY PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY

**OPPOSITE**  
*The Navy Mess breakfast menu offers a traditional selection of eggs, hot cakes, and cereals.*

**ABOVE LEFT**  
*need details to complete caption poses with Navy Mess staff during a 20xx visit*

**ABOVE RIGHT**  
*President John F. Kennedy (right) is surprised by West Wing staff gathered to celebrate his birthday in the Navy Mess, May 1963. Note that the white walls have yet to be paneled.*

a team, you know, a village to get those decks clean, to make that battleship shine like it's supposed to shine. So, this is where you know that the value and traditions of the navy carry on." For those serving in the White House Mess, the humility to tackle any job and the pride of doing the job well go hand in hand.

Working so closely with the first families, many valets form relationships that go beyond a president's time in office. Their dedication to their craft and service combined with their unwavering professionalism led many to continue to serve former presidents after concluding their military careers. For instance, Favela now serves as the director of facility operations at the George W. Bush Presidential Center.

While offering refined dining experiences and catering to esteemed White House and government dignitaries is a significant aspect of the White House Mess's mission, the scope of the work extends far beyond. It is a military service steeped in rich tradition that oversees the comfort and safety of the first family. The men and women from



all branches of the military who now constitute the command are dedicated, high-performing, and meticulous individuals who serve in the West Wing and in far-flung locations. Their honorable service to national security is invaluable. They embody the finest qualities of the United States Armed Forces and our great nation.

**NOTES**

This article is based on the author's interviews with Navy Public Affairs Officer Lieutenant Commander Sean Brophy, [add date], who submitted answers in writing, and four [or three?] retired officers who served in the Navy Mess Command: CSCS [please spell out this title] John Raymond Lara, [add date]; Senior Chief Paul Reyes Jr., [add date]; CWO3 [please spell out this title] Robert Favela, [add date]; [add title and first name] Reyna [or is this the same person as Reyes, above? If so, what is the correct spelling?], [add date].

- 1 "White House Mess," White House website, www.whitehouse.gov/info.
- 2 "History of the Presidential Food Service," essay on the back cover of the White House Mess menu.
- 3 "Advanced Culinary Skills Training Division," updated November 20, 2023, U.S. Army Quartermaster Corps and Quartermaster School website, www.quartermaster.army.mil.