H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Whitcomb, Claire Whitcomb. *Real Life at the White House: Two Hundred Years of Daily Life at America's Most Famous Residence.* New York and London: Routledge, 2000. xxi + 511 pp. $40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-92320-0.

Reviewed by Eric Rauchway (Modern History Faculty, Oxford University)
Published on H-Pol (June, 2001)

Home Improvement on Pennsylvania Avenue

Home Improvement on Pennsylvania Avenue

For authors John and Claire Whitcomb, "real life" is shorthand for "interior decorating decisions"–in other words, not real life at all, but crafted lifestyles. Had they called the book "window treatments and floor coverings at the White House" it might have complied more nearly with truth-in-advertising codes. It would even suggest a fruitful avenue of inquiry, because the decisions about household presentation that Presidents, their families, and their staffs make surely say something about the personae they wish to adopt–if not the characters they actually possess. But the reader hoping to find a history of the politics of ordinary life in the Executive Mansion will be disappointed: in the Whitcombs' story, the poor old house is simply better or worse treated as the presidencies pass.

The political importance of presidential domesticity is not merely a modern fixation. In his *History of the United States* (written in the early 1880s) Henry Adams detailed how Thomas Jefferson had used the incidents of dress, dining protocol, and decoration to give expression to his democratic ideas–for better and (Adams tended rather to believe) worse. To Adams, the choices Jefferson made about clothing and speech were data for interpretation, and in his narrative the President's appearance in threadbare slippers to receive the British Minister Anthony Merry adumbrated Jefferson's prickly diplomacy. To the Whitcombs, the slippers are simply there, the stuff of a fine domestic anecdote. To be sure, sometimes a shoe is only a shoe–but perhaps not on the foot of a calculating President receiving Britain's first-ever full emissary.

Jefferson's house-shoes are one of a number of missed opportunities to explain just what the Presidents thought they were up to when they dressed up themselves and their White House for domestic occasions. John Adams's wish that "may none but honest and wise men ever rule under this roof," appropriated by Franklin Roosevelt as an engraved motto for the State Dining Room, could speak volumes on two subjects: Adams's 18th-century conception of masculine domestic rule–a subject of some vexation to his wife Abigail–and Roosevelt's twentieth-century conception of the President as a ruler–a subject of some vexation to his contemporaries (including his wife Eleanor). But to the Whitcombs the phrase is merely a hopeful homily.

The taste for personalities–as opposed to characters–that pervades the Whitcombs' account leads to bizarre disjunctions in tone. The truly tragic tale of Franklin Pierce's gloomy ascent to the White House, which was a disaster for the man and the nation alike, jars with the Whitcombs' enthusiasm for the way Pierce–"a hard worker" and "a detail person" (p. 120)–oversaw the installation of a bathtub with hot and cold running water in the Executive Mansion.

The generally known good stories are almost all present and accounted for, from Theodore Roosevelt's swarming domestic brood of children and pets to Nan Britten's sex with Warren Harding in the Oval Office coat-closet. Jack and Jackie Kennedy still have splendid tastes in decorations, including both furniture and persons, and Jack's sex life makes a required appearance–though the Whitcombs assure us that he never fell in love with his casual conquests.

Though full of sometimes entertaining raw material, the book lacks an overall narrative or interpretive purpose. As Henry Adams's example suggests, an examination of Presidential domesticity may prove enlightening, and historians like Scott Casper have recently done similarly illuminating short work on the relation between Presidential households and Presidential politics. Readers hoping for a book-length treatment of the topic will have to wait.

Copyright 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for

nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Eric Rauchway. Review of Whitcomb, John; Whitcomb, Claire, *Real Life at the White House: Two Hundred Years of Daily Life at America's Most Famous Residence.* H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. June, 2001.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5218

Copyright © 2001 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.