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The Waldorf Astoria Residences Invites You to Sit on JFK's Rocking Chair

By: Adriane Quinlan

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Photo: Adriane Quinlan

A woman rushing into Thursday night's opening party for the Presidential Library and Bar at the Waldorf Astoria Residences set down her purse on a chair, then realized her mistake. A small brass plaque marked the wicker rocker as belonging to John F. Kennedy, a regular of the hotel's Presidential Suite. "Kennedy had a bad back," said David Freeland, an author who devoted a chunk of his book on the hotel to the presidents who had stayed there. And why did our heads of state like it so much?

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Freeland rattled off facts about bulletproof-glass windows, the private elevator, and a semi-secret train line running beneath the hotel, which was used by FDR. "You can draw a line between every figure of the 20th century and the Waldorf Astoria," he said.



The plaque. Photo: Adriane Quinlan

A good line to borrow for the agents now selling some of the 372 condominiums on the upper floors of the newly reopened Waldorf Astoria Residences. What the Waldorf is marketing as the "First-Ever Presidential Library Amenity" is a private bar and club for residents designed by Jean-Louis Deniot that has pale gray and white couches, brassy accents, and built-ins that hold a library curated by the White House Historical Association. The privately funded nonprofit was founded by Jacqueline Kennedy in 1961 with a mission to preserve the state rooms and educate the public. It will run lectures and other programming out of the club and choose what's on the shelves: biographies on every U.S. president, a section for children, and photo books on White House décor, plus a section devoted to First Ladies — *My Turn: The Memoirs of Nancy Reagan* was turned with its cover facing the room. "I'm in there," said Gahl Burt, Reagan's former social secretary, a blonde as coiffed as her former boss in a matching camel-colored knit by Kobi Halperin and a glittery Loulou de la Falaise necklace. Burt had been to the Waldorf a zillion times with the Reagans while in town for the U.N. General Assembly — visits she remembered as "chockablock with meetings every

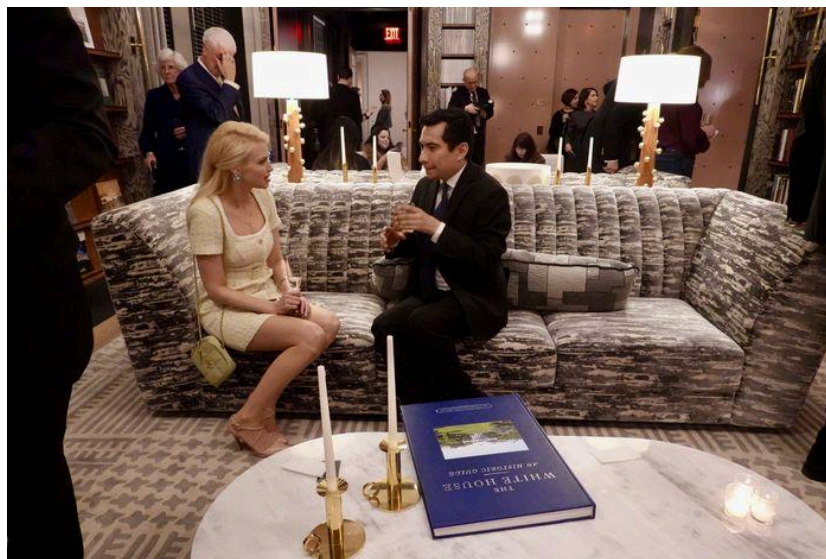
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hour.” Now she’s a trustee of the association, whose mission has become, one might argue, more *relevant* given that the destruction of the White House is no longer just a sci-fi plot.



White House tomes and Waldorf waiters. Photo: Adriane Quinlan



A mix of history buffs and potential Waldorf buyers showed up for bites and Champagne. Photo: Adriane Quinlan

The organization’s president, Stewart D. McLaurin, is an old hat at the Waldorf; he once stayed in the Hoover Suite — a 2,250-square-foot spread that served as a chic retirement home for the 31st president until his death in 1964. Like the old Presidential

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Suite, it has been gutted to become residences, a project funded by the Chinese government, which took over the assets of a Chinese developer and signed a deal with Hilton to run the hotel for 100 years.

It's all quite different from when Margaret Hoover, the PBS host, visited the suite where her great-great-grandfather died. On Thursday night, she showed up in television-ready makeup and a lipstick-red silk pantsuit with her husband, John Avlon, the author, political candidate, and CNN commentator. They had fallen in love after she marked up his first book with a red pen, and they both came alive around a candlelit high-top as they debated the effectiveness of various presidents with the writer Claude Marx, a guest of the association.

Marx revealed that he was working on a biography of William Howard Taft. "He hasn't had one in a while," Avlon said. "So you've been spending time in Cincinnati?" "Oh yes," said Marx, comparing notes on archives from California to Connecticut. Avlon himself is now at work on a book about Teddy Roosevelt's "Man in the Arena" speech, a project bringing him closer to his former CNN buddy Ed O'Keefe, who was standing nearby doling out invitations to another opening: the July Fourth party for his \$450 million project to build a presidential library for Teddy Roosevelt in North Dakota.

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Official White House Historical Association ornaments on a tree. Photo: Adriane Quinlan

Kurt Deion, a history buff who spent his childhood visiting every presidential grave site, approached Avlon as a fan; he'd read his book on Lincoln. At a granite bar, bartenders mixed Harry Truman old-fashioneds (he was a Bourbon guy), though it wasn't clear if there was a presidential connection to the Wagyu-beef sliders or foie-gras crostinis flying by on trays held aloft by busy waiters. A prospective Waldorf buyer took a look at the Christmas tree in the corner — fake, white as Pantone's color of the year, and bedecked with the association's official annual White House-themed ornaments, which included a mini-portrait of a preoccupied JFK.

His chair, too, was apparently under some strain. An hour into the opening, a black velvet rope appeared around the rocker: Too many people had been trying to sit in it. As for why the rocker was there at all, Freeland had an easy answer. In the Presidential Suite, "everyone who stayed there left something behind."

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Behind its velvet rope. Photo: Adriane Quinlan

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