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Key fund-raiser for Blair House

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By The Washington Times

Wednesday, October 9, 2002

President and Mrs. Bush took a major step to dispel their "party pooper" image last week. The first couple, whose scaled-back state dinners and low-key entertaining of mostly Texas pals has been decried by the wannabe-invited, bravely stood in line for more than an hour at the White House Thursday night to chat up and charm 200 strictly social guests.

Okay, the event was a "thank you" for \$2,500-and-up contributors to the ongoing restoration of Blair House, the presidential guest residence just across the street. But no matter. The bipartisan crowd was pleased to be there and happy to see the president in such a good mood despite talk of war.

"It looks like he's enjoying himself. He probably needs to take his mind off his worries," businessman Jonathan Ledecy observed, beaming after waiting patiently in line for his Green Room photo op.

The Bushes' 5-7 p.m. reception was the highlight of a daylong extravaganza that included a private luncheon-cum-tour of Blair House (which is never open to the public) as well as a sumptuous dinner hosted by Secretary of State Colin L. Powell in the State Department's Diplomatic Reception Rooms.

"We're so grateful that all three venues were available on the same day it's never happened before," said gala chairwoman Mary Ourisman, who had had just a month to put it all together after all the official OKs came through.

The occasion was a major success for the Blair House Restoration Fund, which has responsibility for purchasing and maintaining priceless American antiques and art and other furnishings in the four-building, 110-room dwelling that Mr. Powell deemed "an essential tool" of U.S. foreign policy. (The government pays only for maintenance, staffing and security.)

Making sure the complex remains properly appointed to receive such world figures as Nelson Mandela, Lech Walesa and Queen Elizabeth II is the top priority for Blair House Restoration Fund trustees, including former State Department official Richard Fisher (who underwrote the entire gala), former protocol chiefs Selwa "Lucky" Roosevelt and Lloyd N. Hand, Brittain Cudlip, Barbara Allbritton, Alexandra de Borchgrave, Carol Laxalt, Donna McLarty and Mary Weinmann, among others who were there.

Mr. Powell's announcement of six \$500,000 contributions (from Roger and Victoria Sant, Federal Express, Coco-Cola, American International Group Inc. and the Annenberg and Catherine B. Reynolds foundations) to the fund's recently established endowment buoyed spirits at the dinner every bit as much as the U.S. Air Force Strolling Strings playing upbeat show tunes and a delicious dinner of lobster and crab timbale, crown roast of lamb and apple charlotte.

The American delicacies reminded old Blair House hands of certain sticky situations regarding the somewhat unusual dietary preferences of various heads of state who had stayed there over the years. The "dictator-president of a sub-Saharan African state," for example, who arrived during former protocol chief Joseph Verner Reed's tenure with a huge container of dead monkeys that he fully intended to roast and consume on the spot.

"I got this emergency call from the secretary of agriculture, who told me it was absolutely imperative that the monkeys be confiscated and incinerated immediately," Mr. Reed recalled with a laugh before noting that the hungry statesman adamantly objected to his request to do so. "He insisted that a guest should be permitted to eat whatever he likes and initially refused to relent, but I finally talked him out of it after we spent half the night drinking beaker after beaker of his favorite beer."
