

Dinner at the White House

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THE most important address in Washington, DC is 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. It is where the White House is located. It is both the official residence and office of the president of the United States. Every president since John Adams, the third president, has lived in the White House. In 1814, the White House was burned to the ground by British troops and it had to be rebuilt. This occurred during the now-forgotten war between England and the United States which began in 1812.

A White House state dinner is a grand occasion, combining pomp, elegance and symbolism. US President and Mrs Barack Obama will host a state dinner in honour of Prime Minister and Mrs Lee Hsien Loong on Tuesday, Aug 2. PM Lee is on an official visit to the US from July 31 to Aug 5. The last time a Singapore prime minister was hosted to a White House state dinner occurred in 1985 when President and Mrs Ronald Reagan hosted a state dinner in honour of Prime Minister and Mrs Lee Kuan Yew.

During his eight years as president, Mr Reagan hosted 35 state dinners. In contrast, President Obama has hosted only 12 state dinners to date. The reason is that he prefers to entertain at lunch and have dinner with his two teenage daughters. The state dinner on Aug 2 is, therefore, very significant. It reflects the high regard which the President of the US has for the Prime Minister of this small country.

Lee Kuan Yew's 1985 visit

I was the Ambassador of Singapore in Washington, DC in 1985. I would like to share some reflections about Mr Lee Kuan Yew's visit that year, about the elegant dinner at the White House and about his address to a joint meeting of the US Congress. I would also like to compare and contrast the political situations in the US in 1985 and 2016.

Mr Reagan and Mr Lee Kuan Yew were mutual admirers. This surprised many people because they seemed so different. Mr Lee was cerebral, Mr Reagan was intuitive. Mr Lee was a workaholic, Mr Reagan was not. People forget, however, that they were similar in some important ways: they were strong leaders with vision and conviction and they trusted each other.

In 1985, I advised Mr Lee to fly from Singapore to London and from London to Boston before going to Washington. I wanted Mr Lee to overcome his jet lag by spending the weekend at Harvard University. I arranged for several professors to brief him on aspects of America that he was interested in. It also gave him an opportunity to reconnect with several professors he had befriended during his sabbatical at Harvard in 1968.

Mr Lee and his delegation flew from Boston to Washington on Monday, Oct 7, 1985, in a US aircraft, landing at the Andrews Air Force Base. That evening, Mr Lee's good friend, Dr George Shultz, the US Secretary of State, hosted him and his delegation to an early dinner on a boat. We cruised along the Potomac River and had a beautiful view of the city and its monuments.

The big day

TUESDAY, Oct 8, was the big day. The ceremonial welcome for Mr Lee took place on the lawn of the White House with President Reagan and Prime Minister Lee standing on a dais. It was a beautiful autumn day with a clear blue sky and very comfortable temperature and humidity. There were some celebrities at the function, including actor Sylvester Stallone. I had to explain to Mr Lee who he was.

Following the ceremony, the two delegations held a meeting. I remember that on that occasion, President Reagan's mind was focused on only one issue, the crisis in the Philippines over protests against President Ferdinand Marcos. He listened very carefully to Mr Lee's advice.

Secretary of State Shultz hosted a splendid lunch for PM Lee and his delegation at the US State Department. In the afternoon, Mr Lee called on the Vice-President, Mr George H.W. Bush. Mr Bush would succeed Mr Reagan as the 41st President of the United States.

Entertaining in style

PRESIDENT and Mrs Nancy Reagan liked to entertain and they did it with style and elegance. Mrs Reagan would take personal charge of the dinner, supervising the menu, choice of wine, flower arrangement and entertainment. She had asked whether Mr and Mrs Lee had a favourite singer. Mrs Lee requested Frank Sinatra. He was unfortunately not available and Mrs Reagan chose Peggy Lee to sing for us.

The evening began with cocktails for the Reagans and the Lees at a room on the second floor.

At the appointed hour, they came down a spiral staircase and formed a receiving line. All the guests invited to the dinner would be greeted by President and Mrs Reagan and Mr and Mrs Lee before being escorted to their seats in the dining room.

The dinner was attended by a microcosm of the American elite: leaders of government, Congress, judiciary, business and culture. Because President and Mrs Reagan began their careers as actors, there were many guests from the world of entertainment. I remember Mr Lee asking me who were the actor, Michael J. Fox, the singer, Natalie Cole, and the model and actress, Raquel Welch. President Reagan proposed a toast to Mr and Mrs Lee. Mr Lee reciprocated with a toast to President and Mrs Reagan. The toasts were warm, personal and witty.

After the dinner, we adjourned to an adjoining room where we were serenaded by Peggy Lee. The concert ended at 11pm.

Before the dancing began, Mr and Mrs Lee and the whole delegation departed for their hotel, leaving Mr Kishore Mahbubani (at that time Singapore's Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York) and me and our wives to defend the honour of Singapore on the dance floor. The party ended at midnight.

Next morning at breakfast, Mr Lee asked me whether it was important for an ambassador to know how to dance. I said it was very important. He was not convinced and asked why. I said that on the previous evening it gave me an opportunity to embrace some of the most powerful women of Washington.

Address to congress

OCT 9, 1985 was a proud day for Singapore. On that day Prime Minister Lee was invited to address a joint meeting of the US Congress.

In 1985 as today, America was suffering from a protectionist fever. Today, China is viewed as the enemy. In 1985, Japan was the enemy. There were over 300 Bills in the US Congress dedicated to protecting the US market.

Showing great courage, Mr Lee argued that free trade contributes to world peace and protectionism will lead to conflict and war. He said: "Protectionism and retaliation will shrink trade and so reduce jobs. Is America willing to write off the peaceful and constructive developments of the last 40 years that she had made possible?"

Mr Lee concluded with the following appeal: "It is inherent in America's position as the pre-eminent economic, political and military power to have to settle and uphold the rules for orderly change and progress... In the interests of peace and security America must uphold the rules of international conduct which rewards peaceful cooperative behaviour and punishes transgressions of the peace. A replay of the depression of the 1930s, which led to World War II, will be ruinous for all. All the major powers of the West share the responsibility of not repeating this mistake. But America's is the primary responsibility, for she is the anchor economy of the free- market economies of the world."

The US today

MR LEE's message to the US Congress is even more important today than in 1985. The US is suffering from another bout of protectionist fever. Globalisation, free trade and trade agreements have become dirty words in America. It is very worrying that the two candidates for the US presidency, Mrs Hillary Clinton and Mr Donald Trump, have declared their opposition to the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

It is unprecedented for the Republican Party, which has historically championed free trade and globalisation, to choose a presidential candidate who is opposed to both.

The future prospects of the world, not just in trade and commerce but also for peace and stability, will be greatly affected by the outcome of the US election in November.

The writer served as Singapore's ambassador to the United States from 1984 to 1990.