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Reagans Easing Into Private Life as Californians

November 19, 1988 | LAURIE BECKLUND | Times Staff Writer



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WASHINGTON — While all eyes in this city are focused on the move of George Bush down the hall into the Oval Office, the first President in nearly three decades to weather a full eight years in office is quietly preparing to move back to California.

Surely if anyone can go home again, it will be Ronald Reagan and his wife.

Not since Dwight Eisenhower has a President had the chance to ease himself out of office so smoothly. A small army of civil servants and personal friends has been working behind the scenes for up to two years to ensure that the Reagans' transition into private life will be as comfortable--and as private--as possible.

Foundations of Library

When citizens Ronald and Nancy Reagan set foot on California soil after the inauguration Jan. 20, awaiting them will be a gated \$2.5-million Bel-Air home purchased and refurbished to their taste by friends, penthouse offices in a Century City high-rise featured in the movie "Diehard," and the foundations of a library that will house more papers than any other presidential library in history.

"When George Washington left office, he just packed a couple of trunks of papers and took them with him back to Mt. Vernon," said David Van Tassel, supervising archivist for the Office of Presidential Libraries in the National Archives and Records Administration. "Today the volume of material is simply staggering."

Despite his determination to scale back bureaucracy, Reagan will have by far the most official papers of any President in history. As of the end of 1987, he and his White House staff had accumulated 55 million papers. By the end of his term, that number is expected to exceed 62 million, far beyond the previous record of 44 million set by Richard M. Nixon.

The first shipment of official Reaganalia left Washington on Nov. 4 when two C-5A cargo ships--the giant planes Reagan referred to when he said all the arms sent to Iran could fit into a single plane--took off for Los Angeles with more than 20,000 cubic feet of official gifts, ranging from jelly beans to caviar and jewels to saddles. Most of the gifts will eventually be displayed in the Reagan library.

It will take as many as seven such shipments to complete the entire move, according to Ray Fontaine, comptroller of the General Services Administration who has overseen the nuts and bolts of presidential moves dating to Lyndon B. Johnson.

"You can't just call up North American Van Lines and say, 'Move us,'" Fontaine said. "It probably takes about 25 to 30 work years just to move a President these days."

Because of the sheer bulk of his presidential holdings, the distance of his move, the cost of guards for classified documents and inflation, moving this President and setting up his post-presidential operations will cost about \$4 million, another record, Fontaine estimated.

The move is a complex combination of personal, social and official transitions. Involved in virtually all of them is the Reagan "kitchen cabinet" of prominent businessmen, such as industrialists Holmes Tuttle and Earle Jorgensen.

Members of this group are on the board of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library Foundation, which will also be the landlord renting office space to the federal government for Reagan's official office. They will also own the home the Reagans will live in and are expected to advise him informally on the activities that he chooses to pursue in his retirement.

In a statement submitted to the Office of Government Ethics, a corporation calling itself Wall Management Services Inc. said it was composed of 18 "financially independent" friends who wanted to purchase and remodel a home that they would lease to the Reagans with an option to buy. The ethics

office, noting that the arrangement called for rent and ultimate purchase at "fair market value," found no problem with the arrangement.

In August, 1986, the group bought the 7,192-square-foot ranch-style house at 666 St. Cloud Road in Bel-Air for \$2.5 million. In February, the address was officially changed to 668 on city records because of the "mutual concern" of the Reagans that the old number could be construed as a Biblical reference to Satan, according to Elaine Crispen, press secretary for Nancy Reagan.

Nature of Assets

Tuttle, who had participated in a similar purchase of a home by friends for the Reagans in Sacramento after he became governor, declined to be interviewed. A White House spokesman has said the arrangement will enable Reagan to defer making any major real estate decisions until after he learns the exact nature of his assets, which have been kept in a blind trust since he took office. The rental price has not been disclosed.

The home, which has three bedrooms, six baths and servants' quarters, is modest by Bel-Air standards. Next door is the old Kirkeby Estate, which was the setting for the television show, "Beverly Hillbillies" and sold for \$13.5 million in 1986.

1 | 2 | 3 | Next



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(Page 2 of 3)

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New gates, a command post for the Secret Service, a guardhouse and an extensive security system have been installed on the 1.2-acre estate.

Immediate neighbors will include singer Mac Davis, Johnny Carson's ex-wife, Joanna, movie magnate Jerrold Perrenchio, actress Elizabeth Taylor and developer Uri Sheinbaum, who recently bought the estate of former Hustler publisher Larry Flynt.

If any public servant can feel at home here, it will be Reagan and his wife, the former actress Nancy Davis. "They're locals, after all," said actor Robert Stack, a neighbor and longtime friend. "He was in pictures here. And Nancy Davis came out years ago, of course."

Crispen said the Reagans have already moved in most of their own personal belongings and will spend Christmas at the new home.

They will also be in Southern California for the ground breaking of the Ronald Reagan presidential library in Simi Valley on Monday. If all goes well, the library will be opened Feb. 6, 1991, Reagan's 80th birthday.

By law, presidential libraries must be built by private donors and then turned over to the National Archives to run. Most of the \$43 million it will cost to build this library has already been raised, officials said.

A staff of 22 members of the National Archives will move to Los Angeles over the next several months to begin sorting the millions of presidential papers, gifts, photographs and other items.

Meanwhile, the gifts and about half the records will be stored at the under-utilized Holifield Federal Building in Laguna Niguel, which has undergone a \$1.3-million remodeling, a GSA official said.

Another building, called the "pasta factory" by officials because it used to house a spaghetti and macaroni company, has been rented and remodeled in Culver City to store the other half of the records.

The site was needed so the records can be brought to Reagan's office if he needs them to write his memoirs, officials said. Unlike the Laguna Niguel building, the pasta factory is also considered within commuting distance of the new library for the archivists.

Officials have a slight jump on that job because the Presidential Records Act of 1978 declared that the executive's papers would belong to the public, and archivists have been working closely with the White House since Reagan came into office.

Officials estimated that about 10% to 20% of the papers are classified. In the event of Reagan's death, he has designated his wife to act in his stead as guardian of the papers.

Within reason, former Presidents are also given by law their choice of "suitable" office space for life. Reagan's choice is the top floor of Century City's Fox Plaza at 2121 Avenue of the Stars.

"I wanted him to go to the Federal Building (in Westwood)," said Fontaine, who said he once turned down Nixon's request for \$50-a-square-foot office space in Manhattan's Chrysler Building in favor of cheaper federal office space. "But the Reagan people said no."

In this case, Fontaine added, although the Century City office will be far plusher than anything the federal government has to offer, it will not necessarily be more expensive.

\$27 a Square Foot

The government is leasing 5,000 square feet for a bargain \$27 a square foot from the presidential foundation, which is raising money for the library and will be renting part of the top floor of the building. Renting space in the Federal Building would cost about the same amount, he said.

Nancy Reagan will also have a small office on the same floor, not funded by the government, to carry on her campaign against drugs in connection with Phoenix House, a drug abuse agency.

In his first year out of office, Reagan is entitled to a one-time sum of \$1.25 million to set up an office, employ staff and generally get resettled. Benefits drop sharply after the initial year, but still include round-the-clock Secret Service protection, permanent franking privileges and an annual pension that nears \$100,000.

While the President is gaining some benefits, however, he is losing others. A helicopter pad, for example, will be removed shortly from his Santa Barbara ranch. Although the Secret Service will provide him a car, it will not provide air travel unless it is deemed to be in an official capacity, such as to attend a function as the President's emissary.

However, it is not clear yet just what Reagan plans to do with his newly achieved freedom.

The President has said little about his plans except to indicate that he will write his memoirs and join the "mashed potato circuit" to speak out occasionally on issues such as federal spending.

Former Presidents Richard M. Nixon and Jimmy Carter have adhered largely to long traditions of ex-Presidents, focusing on writing books, speaking engagements and attempting to influence world affairs important to them.

Prev | 1 | **2** | 3 | Next



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(Page 3 of 3)

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Former President Gerald R. Ford, on the other hand, set a tone for a different sort of post-presidency. He signed a \$1-million NBC contract, a commercial endorsement of historical medals and eventually directorships or consulting contracts with a dozen major companies.

Turning 78 within two weeks of leaving office, Reagan will be the oldest retiring President in history. He will also carry into the post-presidency a combination of assets relatively few of his predecessors have managed: health, wealth and popularity.

Hundreds of inquiries already have been received by the White House asking for Reagan's participation in activities ranging from speeches at universities, political events and charity dinners to memberships on boards of directors and television, book and movie deals.

Random House agreed in 1985 to pay \$3 million for Ronald Reagan's official biography to be written by historian Edmund Morris. But publishing sources say Reagan's own personal memoirs, if candid, could bring more. New York lawyer and literary agent Morton Janklow, who represented Nancy Reagan on her memoirs scheduled to be finished next fall, said the President has signed no contract with a literary agent or a book company.

"The President will make no decisions (about such matters) until after Jan. 20," said Fred Ryan, assistant to the President in charge of scheduling who will move to California as Reagan's executive assistant.

Prev | 1 | 2 | 3



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