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# UPSTAIRS AT THE ROOSEVELTS'

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# Upstairs at the Roosevelts'

Growing Up with Franklin and Eleanor

CURTIS ROOSEVELT

Potomac Books

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Set in Iowan Old Style by Rachel Gould.

To my dear wife, Marina



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## INTRODUCTION

Because my sister and I often lived with these close relatives, I came to know my Roosevelt grandparents, Franklin and Eleanor, well. Indeed we lived in the White House for many years as youngsters, and as teenagers as well, and also at the family's home at Hyde Park. One forgets that FDR was elected four times as president, and Springwood at Hyde Park—the Big House, as the family referred to it—was my grandfather's home, in which he was born and to which he often returned, if only for a long weekend. Leaving Washington late in the evening, he could be home by early the next morning.

These chapters, only a few of the many that form my recollections, are my memories. So of course they are opinionated. My sister might well have different views. But I believe I am a better observer than she is. And I know I have a better memory!

The chapters cover a lot of ground, and much of it has been written about by FDR's biographers. I have the advantage of actually having been present in the scenes I describe. And indeed I am opinionated.

What you will read here has been written over the past ten years, although I have had trouble applying myself to the task in the past couple of years. Had it not been for the encouragement of my editor, Sarah Harrison, I do wonder if I would ever have completed them. Life in my mid-eighties does slow me down!



# UPSTAIRS AT THE ROOSEVELTS'

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# 1

## My Twelve Years in the White House

The question most frequently asked of me is, “What was life like in the White House?” A response saying that it was “wonderful, fantastic, unforgettable and yet a disaster” only provokes a host of other questions. Until I wrote my book *Too Close to the Sun: Growing Up in the Shadow of My Grandparents, Franklin and Eleanor*, I hadn’t thought too closely about this extraordinary experience of mine. But then I had to buckle down and think it through. I did, and a lot of illusions went out the window.

Twelve years is a long time in the life of a child.

In 1933 I was a toddler, three years old, when we went to live in the White House. By 1945, when my grandfather, President Roosevelt, died, I was just fifteen. The White House had proved a steady series of events, punctuated by an equally steady stream of visitors. During those twelve years, circulating within that hothouse of bustling politics, I met a lot of people. By the age of fifteen, I had met everybody from Winston Churchill to Mary Martin!

I listened and absorbed, especially when I was old enough, at age nine, to be included with the adults at mealtimes. It was my education—far more important than any formal one I have had. By fifteen I was quite sophisticated politically. I could converse easily with the many guests at the dining table. But usually I was “seen and not heard,” as was consid-

ered courteous and proper for my age. Knowing your place was a dictum drummed into me from early childhood.

When doing the research for my book—which included a lot of dredging through my exciting and often difficult memories—I realized the extent to which I had been shaped by my years in the White House and by being President and Mrs. Roosevelt’s eldest grandson, and it is a “shaping” that has continued throughout my life. It is in fact a distortion compared to a more normal upbringing. It is difficult to explain except in broad terms.

Power is very attractive. Everyone is to some degree drawn to it, but when you live within the walls of a place like the White House, it matters hugely, especially if you are a youngster. And, as I have noted, when everyone singles you out as an exception because of being the president and first lady’s grandson, it is or becomes your identity, a part of who you are. When I first went to a public school and was introduced to my second-grade classmates, my teacher announced, “This is Buzzie. He has been living with his grandparents, the president and Mrs. Roosevelt, in the White House.” The relationship with my future classmates was thus marked.

Buzzie (either with a *y* or an *ie*) was my nickname. Eleanor, my older sister, was known as Sistie. In 1933, in the midst of the Great Depression, the press picked up on these two little darlings living in the White House and had a grand time with us. Sistie-and-Buzzie became one word. We were featured in newspapers, magazines, and newsreels all over the country. Complicating that exposure for me was my grandmother and mother’s dictum that we “do not like” having our picture taken; we do not like publicity! My sister echoed them and a barb could be thrust at me, “Buzzie *likes* having his picture taken!” I ducked my head and tried to adjust to this contradictory party line. But of course I enjoyed the fuss; and most young boys might feel the same. Nonetheless, it brought conflict for me.

I liked the attention given me by the White House but-

lers and maids, as well as the Secret Service men guarding my grandfather. I was a kind of mascot. I enjoyed being included in pictures with my grandfather or grandmother. I loved being a part of their entourage. Living in the White House as we did, many opportunities daily presented themselves for being recognized. Even when Sis and I traveled on the train to New York, on our way from Washington to Hyde Park, we would be pointed at, “There’s Sistie-and-Buzzie!” As if we were a single entity. My sister would duck her head; I’d look up and smile, enjoying the recognition. Our nurse then would hurry us on to the waiting Secret Service car.

But all this, and especially the conflict presented by my mother and grandmother, was not the best way for a child to grow up and mature. Indeed, life in the White House gave me a very complicated sense of identity, one that took years to work out of. “Watch your step!” was my byword.

My memories of those early days in the White House are filled with many activities, mainly with me as an observer. I liked parades, especially of soldiers and sailors. The marines had the best uniforms, I would pronounce, but quickly shut up when I saw that my keen interest was not conforming to the expected modesty at which my sister excelled. Still, my enthusiasm could not always be contained. I liked living in the White House, even though, as my mother frequently declared, “It’s not good for Buzzie!”

As a small child, I found our daily routine to be marvelous. Every morning my sister and I would be brought to our grandfather’s bedroom. We would burst in, completely unaware that we were interrupting his morning staff meeting. Papa, as we called our grandfather, would be propped up on pillows in his bed and was very welcoming. Up we would jump and roughhouse for a bit. “What are you going to do today?” would be the usual question. FDR was a wonderful grandfather, but soon, within five minutes, the work of the president of the United States had to continue. So we then would be whisked out by our waiting nurse.

A visit to our grandmother was much more subdued, more regulated, with my sister answering most questions. When with our mother, her attention was focused on our nurse who was instructed about where we should be, and at what time, what we should wear, and any other practical details that seemed necessary. Each day usually had an event that requiring Sis and me to be prepared. But my sister would opt out of standing in receiving lines where my grandmother would be shaking hands with several hundred people. I liked the recognition—“This is Buzzie,” I’d be introduced—then correctly extending my hand to be shook. Even at age five I considered this as part of the game, one at which I was soon adept.

When I was seven, we moved from the White House to a new home in Seattle. Leaving it was painful, and I mourned not being daily in that atmosphere I’d so thrilled to. Life in the White House had been a mixture of the wonderful and the disastrous. However, I wouldn’t fully grasp the latter until I reached midlife.

My memories are richly filled with those days in the White House. It was marvelous, a lark, brimming with unique experiences, ones I will never forget.