

The White House's protective bubble can offer too much insulation against ordinary life

Barack Obama says his family already is feeling the effects, but watchers of First Families believe the kids may help keep him grounded as president

By Colleen Mastony | Tribune reporter
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George H.W. Bush supposedly marveled at a grocery price scanner. John F. Kennedy never carried cash. And Dwight D. Eisenhower, after years of having others place calls for him, didn't know how to make a simple telephone call.

Stepping into the role of President means saying goodbye to the humdrum errands and responsibilities of everyday life. For presidents, there are no traffic jams, no airport lines, no late-night runs to the store for milk.

"They lose touch with simple little complications that normal people have to cope with every day," said Bonnie Angelo, author of the book "First Families: The Impact of the White House on their Lives." "The things that normal people cope with, the things that sometimes drive us all mad, they have been spared."

Barack Obama once talked about how small moments—such as a call from Michelle Obama asking him to pick up ant traps on the way home—helped keep his life in perspective. But next week, the Obamas move into the 132-room White House, where they will be catered to by scores of household staffers and guarded by a small army of Secret Service agents. Shortly after the election, Barack Obama commented on the dramatic changes in his day-to-day life.

"There's still some things we're not adjusted to," he said on "60 Minutes" in an interview in November. Asked for an example, Obama replied: "Me not being able to take a walk. I'd love to take [Michelle] for a walk."

Harry Truman called the White House a "glamorous prison." Bill Clinton said it was the "crown jewel of the federal penitentiary system." William Howard Taft thought it was "the loneliest place in the world."

"There can be a bubble around the president and most presidents fight that on a daily basis," said Ann Stock, a social secretary in the Clinton administration. "The First Families try to make sure they keep their regular routines and see people they knew before. I think the presidency could be very isolating if you let it be."

For his part, Obama has fought to hang on to his BlackBerry, so he can at least send and receive messages on his own. But aides have said that he will likely have to give up the device, because of concerns about e-mail security and the possibility of subpoenas and public review.

Asked in an interview on NBC's "Today" show last week whether the issue had been resolved, Obama said, "I'm still in a scuffle around that," adding: "How do you stay in touch with the flow of everyday life?"

Each First Family finds a way to push against the bubble in 1600 Pennsylvania Ave.

"Jackie Kennedy had a wonderful understanding of the shortcomings of the White House. It is

long in glamour but short in practical things. She was the one who converted a bedroom suite into a beautiful family dining room," said Angelo, the author of "First Families." "The Clintons put a cozy nook in the kitchen. A storage cabinet was taken out and they had a nice table with three chairs."

Still, the families often must fight to maintain autonomy over day-to-day tasks. Shortly after moving into the White House, Chelsea Clinton wasn't feeling well and Hillary Clinton went to the kitchen to whip up some scrambled eggs.

"The kitchen staff were completely undone at the thought of a First Lady wielding a frying pan with no supervision!" Hillary Clinton wrote in her autobiography "Living History."

"It's a truncated form of regular life," said Carl Sferrazza Anthony, a historian with the National First Ladies' Library. "You can slip in and out of that bubble. But you're mostly in the bubble."

The raising of children, of course, cannot be delegated to a top aide, and most agree that having children in the White House will help keep the Obamas grounded.

"The kids sort of normalize you right away," said Claire Whitcomb, co-author of "Real Life at the White House." "They'll go to parent-teacher meetings and they'll be more plugged into the community because of ... their kids."

Obama will no longer have to stop to buy ant traps.

"But I think it's good we spare them most of that," Angelo said.

cmastony@tribune.com