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Business Leaders Vie for State Dinner Invites

Joe Mont

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WASHINGTON ([TheStreet](#)) -- At the White House's recent state dinner for Chinese President Hu Jintao, politicians and celebrities (among them Barbara Streisand and Jackie Chan) munched on Maine lobster and dry-aged ribeye.

In their midst was a who's who of American business leaders who no doubt lobbied for the chance to be under the spotlight. Among them: **Microsoft**([MSFT](#)) CEO Steven Ballmer; Lloyd Blankfein, chairman and CEO of **Goldman Sachs**([GS](#)); Greg Brown, co-CEO of **Motorola**([MOT](#)); Jamie Dimon, CEO and chairman of **JPMorgan Chase & Co.**([JPM](#)); Robert Iger, president and CEO of **Disney**([DIS](#)); Jeff Immelt, chairman of the board and CEO of **General Electric**([GE](#)); Muhtar Kent, president and CEO of **Coca-Cola**([KO](#)); **United Auto Workers** President Robert King; Andrew Liveris, president and CEO of **Dow Chemical**([DOW](#)) and W. James McNerney, president and CEO of **Boeing**([BA](#)).



There are few seats available to formal state dinners, such events as the Davos World Economic Forum and other diplomatic events, and the jockeying for entry from business can get intense.

There was certainly good reason for the White House to have such heavy hitters of the business world on hand. China has emerged as an important -- if still somewhat enigmatic and troubling -- trade partner. The dinner served as a backdrop to an announcement of Chinese business deals that the White House trumpeted as expected to generate about \$45 billion in export sales and create 235,000 U.S. jobs. Many of those in attendance also had their own international dealings to either celebrate or solidify.

Over the decades, the business world has jockeyed for the proverbial golden ticket that lets them enjoy the cache of being one of the privileged few at such a high-profile event. There are tangible benefits for those able to score an invite.

"First of all, the networking is really unique," says Robert Shapiro, former under secretary of commerce for the Clinton administration. "Not only will you come into contact with dozens of other leading business leaders, but this is a chance to both

become personally known to -- and to have the ear of -- senior members of the president's staff, department heads and cabinet members who ultimately can have a very large effect on your business. You may have contract proposals, or you may have particular regulatory issues. It doesn't mean that because they've had a conversation with you that they are going to take the position that would favor you, but it creates a certain familiarity which allows you to much more easily pick up the phone and speak to them at the appropriate time. Putting a face to the name in the mind of the chief of staff of the president, the secretary of the Treasury, a U.S. trade representative, head of the FCC -- that's something that no lobbyist can buy you."

Beyond domestic contacts, there are foreign relations to develop as well.

"It is not just the foreign leader who is there, but his senior people as well," says Shapiro, also co-founder and chairman of [Sonecon](#), an economic advisory firm. "To be able to call and have the call answered and taken by the top assistant to the president of China or the president of Russia, that again is something that people normally pay former government officials millions of dollars a year to have. That's how Larry Summers earned \$5 million [working one day a week for one year for hedge fund] DE Shaw before he became head of the National Economic Council."

Making a state dinner invite an even scarcer commodity is that the guest list quickly becomes filled with "must-haves," leaving only a few spots open for the "maybes."

Melinda Bates, who headed the White House Visitors Office for all eight years of the Clinton administration, describes how quickly the 130 or so seats in the White House dining room can fill up, making invitations all that much harder to score.

"The list starts with the president and first lady, senior White House staff, the honored guests and their senior staff," she writes on her [website](#). "That's maybe 30 or 40 people. Then there are the members of Congress whose committees deal with the honored country, and their spouses, and a couple of important Congressional chiefs of staff and spouses. Now you're at 50 or more."

Add in a smattering of media, key supporters of the administration and carefully screened figures from sports, entertainment, fashion and the arts, and the room is already near capacity before the businessmen start to make their case.

Adding to the scarcity of those coveted invites is that every administration has its own approach to how many state dinners to hold. During his two terms in office, Ronald Reagan held 57, compared with 24 for the one term of George H.W. Bush. Bill Clinton held 29 such functions during his time in office, while George W. Bush convened a mere six state dinners.

Those who aren't necessarily on par with the Blankfeins and Ballmers of the world may want to ensure the White House's social secretary has them on his or her radar.

Maria Downs held that post during the Ford administration and had a hand in almost every aspect of state dinners at that time.

Every president and first lady has their own approach to these events. For Downs, who now works for [The White House Historical Association](#), setting the guest list -- and pinning down the all-important seating arrangement -- was a team effort. Planning for a dinner started with a briefing with Gen. Brent Scowcroft, head of the National Security Council. He would lay out the details of who was being honored, when and why.

Downs would then confer with senior White House staff, in particular the chief of staff (Dick Cheney at the time) to begin developing a potential guest list. Though names could be suggested by cabinet members (or removed at their request), it was Cheney who had final say of what names would be run by the president and first lady.

She says President Ford would often make suggestions for prominent sports figures he would like to invite; his wife Betty did the same with a focus on the arts.

"They tried to make it as interesting as they could," Downs says. "Mrs. Ford's edict was, 'I want this to be an interesting evening for everybody.'"

It was that pursuit of an engaging social mix that led Mrs. Ford to "insist on using round tables for the seating, so you wouldn't have the formal setting and have your hands tied by a formal protocol."

All administrations usually add guests and entertainers with a cultural connection to the guest of honor or who reflect their interests. Organizing a state dinner for Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, Downs and Mrs. Ford discovered that he was intrigued by the Americana of the Old West. As such, in addition to inviting such countrymen as actor Omar Sharif, they arranged to have Johnny Cash as the entertainment (he was hospitalized before the event, however, and replaced at the last minute by Pearl Bailey). The decorations and centerpieces consisted of artwork on loan for the evening from the Amon Carter Museum of Western Art in Fort Worth, Texas.

Politics, and politicking, is always a fact of life for those planning state dinners. Balancing those demands were all part of the job, Downs says.

The backdrop for her events included a primary fight with Ronald Reagan and an upcoming election, Mrs. Ford's involvement with the campaign for the Equal Rights Amendment and the celebration of the nation's bicentennial.

"Fitting everything in its right place" was a challenge, Downs says. "I'm sure they still take a lot of these things into consideration when they are building a list. Some administrations are more political -- we were. We had to be, with everything that was going on."

When all is said and done, "a state dinner doesn't allow you much leeway for numbers," she adds.

Those who do make the final cut can make the most of the evening. Rules of decorum, however, mean that state dinner discussions typically remain at the networking level, setting more detailed discussions in play for a more appropriate time and place.

"You say, 'I really would like to have five minutes to talk about carried interest,' or 'I think there is a real problem with the U.S./Korea free trade agreement that I'd love a few minutes of your time to discuss sometime next week,'" Shapiro, says. "Even if you don't have a conversation, the people around these leaders take note and don't forget who was invited. The invitation says, in effect, 'This is someone who can have the ear of the president -- this is someone who has political juice as well as economic juice.' After all, most of the relations between the United States and other countries revolves around politics, not business."

-- *Written by Joe Mont in Boston.*

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