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WHITE HOUSE LETTER

A Pest Looks for, and Gets, Handouts

By ELISABETH BUMILLER

It has been a White House problem for 200 years. Some presidents have confronted it head on, with pre-emptive action. Others have fought in self-defense. The hawkish Bush administration, curiously enough, is following a Clinton-era policy of appeasement, with mixed results.

The adversary is the small Eastern gray squirrel, a notorious garden pest throughout much of the United States. But the gray squirrels at the White House are noticeably fatter, sleeker and bolder than their suburban cousins. Their threat is bigger, too: they destroy not just property but history.

Last fall, enterprising White House squirrels ate their way through the bark of an 80-foot century-old buckeye tree on the North Lawn that had been planted in the Theodore Roosevelt administration. The squirrels stripped so many of the top limbs, White House officials said, that the tree died and groundskeepers had to cut it down. Two years earlier, the squirrels destroyed a younger buckeye that graced the south grounds.

So it is with some surprise that one learns that these very squirrels continue to enjoy official government handouts of peanuts on the White House grounds, a policy begun in the Clinton administration. The welfare-without-work program was intended to lure the squirrels away from the tens of thousands of tulip bulbs planted each fall.

"The squirrels were digging them up and actually having a meal," said Irvin Williams, the chief superintendent of the White House grounds, in an interview last week. Mr. Williams, 77, has been a gardener at the mansion since the Truman administration, in 1949, when he first began battling gray squirrels.

Six years ago, when the squirrels had become so aggressive that they were eating hundreds of tulip bulbs and ruining the perfect rows of spring plantings, Mr. Williams decided to try enticing them away with peanut feeders placed in White House trees.

"I was hoping they would eat enough peanuts that they wouldn't need to eat the tulip bulbs," Mr. Williams said. "But a couple of them liked both."

Mr. Williams said that his peanut-feeding program, which is in effect from the November bulb-planting until the tulips bloom in the spring, had cut

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down considerably on the loss of bulbs. But he also acknowledged that the feeders — there are seven in trees on the South Lawn and near the Rose Garden — were a solution that might have created a new problem: more squirrels.

"The word could go out, yes," he said.

A 1980 National Park Service study of squirrels in downtown Washington (commissioned by the Carter administration), found that feeding peanuts to squirrels, as tourists were doing, had in effect turned the area into a squirrel food festival. "That would be common sense," said Larry W. VanDruff, a co-author of the study who is emeritus professor of wildlife ecology at the State University of New York in Syracuse.

The problem was especially intense in Lafayette Park, across the street from the White House, where the study found that the density of squirrels was the highest reported in the study — more than 100 in an 8.2-acre park, several times the norm.

"There were so many squirrels there, some of them didn't even have a home," Mr. VanDruff recalled. "They were just resting in the crotches of trees."

At the White House, which is now on a direct, traffic-free squirrel path across Pennsylvania Avenue from Lafayette Park, Mr. Williams said he could not tell for certain if the squirrel population had increased. "Without labeling, you really wouldn't know, and they pretty much look alike," he said. Nonetheless, he admitted, "there are an awful lot of squirrels here."

Presidents have taken them on in different ways. Dwight D. Eisenhower despised them because they destroyed his White House putting green, so he had them trapped and deported to the Maryland countryside, eliciting an outcry from squirrel lovers. Jimmy Carter also tried to relocate the squirrels, to a similar outcry.

Ronald Reagan, much to the outrage of serious gardeners, famously took an opposite approach. He went so far as to feed the squirrels acorns that he kept in his desk drawer after collecting them on weekends at Camp David. On warm, sunny days, Mr. Williams recalled, the squirrels would gather outside the Oval Office and wait expectantly for the presidential largess, perhaps an earlier case of compassionate conservatism.

"One afternoon I counted 20 squirrels," Mr. Williams said. "They'd look right in the door."

The first President Bush, scrapping the Reagan policy, not only put a stop to such handouts but also sent his dog Millie to chase them. The squirrels, he said proudly, "were history."

The Clinton administration pets continued the chase, as have the Bush II dogs, Barney and Spot. But in another sign of a softening of attitudes, the White House this past holiday season featured a papier-mâché squirrel among the first-family pets on display as part of its "All Creatures Great and Small" decorating theme. The squirrel, the first lady's office said, was a tribute to those that had been "both pets and pests" to White House families for the past two centuries.

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"They're not starving, that's for sure," Mr. Williams said.

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