

Obama's tobacco habit hardly a White House first

He vows to quit in an office that's held many smokers

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WASHINGTON — Once a heavy smoker, President-elect Barack Obama recently admitted he's fallen off the wagon and puffed a few cigarettes on the campaign trail.

It's a habit he intends to break and one he vows to keep out of the White House.

Margaret LaCroix, a spokeswoman for the American Lung Association in Connecticut, hopes he succeeds and sets a good example.

"We know this is going to be very difficult for him, and we hope he takes the necessary steps to succeed," she said.

LaCroix said that it is especially important for Obama to give young African-Americans a strong anti-smoking role model because the tobacco industry "targets young African-Americans to smoke."

"Offering himself as a role model not to smoke is really very important," she said.

If Obama should find the urge too great, he may be able to avoid the paparazzi eagerly awaiting that first public drag. Others have done it.

Smoking rumors

Laura Bush said she quit smoking around 1994, but rumors have persisted that she occasionally bums a cigarette from friends and might step outside on the White House Truman Balcony to take a few puffs. However, there is no credible evidence supporting the rumor, said Carl Sferrazza Anthony, historian for the National First Ladies' Library.

"(Patricia) Nixon did smoke, but there are no photographs to my knowledge of her smoking," Anthony said. "She never dared to do it except in the private quarters."

President Richard Nixon, an avid pipe smoker, signed legislation in 1969 requiring cigarette packs to carry a warning label that "Cigarette Smoking May be Hazardous to Your Health" after the surgeon general released an official report linking smoking to low birth weight.

Smoking wasn't officially banned in the White House until President Bill Clinton took office, but there had been an unwritten prohibition under President George H.W. Bush. His son has continued the ban for the last eight years.

Personal battle

Anthony, who quit smoking nearly six years ago, understands how difficult it may be for Obama to kick the habit and wonders if the public is focusing too much on his personal battle with tobacco rather than his public stance.

"Ultimately, aren't his legislative initiatives that can affect millions of lives more important than the personal choice he makes for himself?" Anthony asked.

At the U.S. Capitol, a smoking ban was first imposed in 1993 by then-Speaker Tom Foley, D-Wash., who prohibited it in the hallways and public areas. The ban has since been extended to within 25 feet of the entrances to House office buildings. Smoking is also prohibited on the Senate floor and nearby public areas.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., extended the smoking ban to the Speaker's Lobby when Democrats regained the majority two years ago.

There is, however, at least one indoor smoking area on Capitol Hill. Smoking is allowed inside a designated room within the cafeteria of the House Longworth Building.

Nearly half of all living adults who ever smoked have quit. The anti-smoking campaign is a major public health success with few parallels in the history of public health, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Still, more than 45 million American adults smoke, more than 8 million are living with a serious illness caused by smoking and about 438,000 Americans die prematurely each year as a result of tobacco use, according to the CDC.

History of lighting up

The wives of Presidents Andrew Jackson and Zachary Taylor were both ardent pipe smokers. Dolly Madison also enjoyed an occasional pipe, although she preferred snuff and often used it publicly during her tenure as first lady, wrote Cassandra Tate in her book *Cigarette Wars*.

The Roaring '20s brought a freer spirit to the White House.

First lady Grace Coolidge was known to light up, and later Eleanor Roosevelt smoked but only at the end of an official dinner. When the men had gone off to light up their cigars, she would light up a cigarette as a signal to the women guests that they could indulge.

"It was more of an equal rights issue," Anthony said.

Henry Franklin Graff wrote in his book *The Presidents* that President Warren G. Harding smoked two cigars a day, interspersed with a pipe and cigarettes.

"Harding also chewed, although he tapered off, somewhat, after entering the White House because of his wife's nagging," Graff wrote. "To many, chewing was a filthy habit, but not to Thomas Edison. Harding once shared a plug of tobacco with the former inventor, causing Edison to remark: Harding's all right. Any man who chews tobacco is all right."

The most infamous White House smoker was President Teddy Roosevelt's daughter, Alice.

Teddy Roosevelt wasn't a fan of cigarette smoking in the White House — particularly when it involved his daughter. She was told in no uncertain terms that he would not allow smoking under his roof. She took that to heart — puffing away on the rooftop in defiance, Anthony said.

Biographer Stacy Cordery wrote that Alice Roosevelt went on to shill for Lucky Strikes, delivering a radio advertisement on the virtues of the "light smoke" for politicians in need of a healthy voice. Cordery also noted

that President Franklin D. Roosevelt's iconic cigarette holder was a gift from Alice Roosevelt, who was a cousin of Eleanor Roosevelt's.

Bess Truman was known to smoke. And Mamie Eisenhower had cigarettes made in her signature "Mamie Pink" with her initials on them.

Jackie Kennedy had official White House cigarettes available to guests after formal dinners. She was a heavy smoker but was conscious to avoid being photographed with a cigarette in her hand.

President Lyndon B. Johnson quit smoking after a heart attack in 1955 but relapsed in 1969.

"On Inauguration Day in 1969, Johnson saw Nixon sworn in, then got on the plane to fly back to Texas," wrote presidential historian Michael Beschloss. "When the front door of the plane closed, Johnson pulled out a cigarette — first cigarette he had smoked since his heart attack in 1955. One of his daughters pulled it out of his mouth and said, 'Daddy, what are you doing? You're going to kill yourself.' He took it back and said, 'I've now raised you girls. I've now been president. Now it's my time.' "