

A review of Clarence Lusane's *Black History of the White House*

“More than one in four U.S. presidents were involved in human trafficking and slavery.” That’s the sentence that opens Clarence Lusane’s *Black History of the White House*, and it might as well open this review. Because Lusane wants to make a polemical point—that our idea of the White House will remain incomplete until we account for the many instances of racial injustice that lie behind it.

Most people, Lusane writes, see the White House as “a repository of democratic aspirations, high principles, and ethical values.” But this view simplifies or, worse, ignores the White House’s historical low points. Lusane brings these points into focus less through new research—he relies almost exclusively on the work of other scholars—than through a purposefully narrow perspective. This has become an effective (and popular) approach for historians: take something small and seemingly random, a year, a gun, a kind of food, and use it to open up fascinating relationships and big historical questions.

And so Lusane organizes his book around the White House itself. It’s a great idea. There’s so much historical information on individual presidents—and especially on the ones who seem to get a new biography every year—that you need some kind of structure when your purview includes all of them. And in its best moments, Lusane’s book lives up to its conceit. Other than the presidents’ servants and slaves, the first black person to enter the White House was “Blind Tom,” a child musician who performed there in 1860. Tom’s handlers pitched him as a sideshow freak, but he now appears to have been a genuine talent. It’s a small but telling example of the racism encountered by Lusane’s subjects—and one of his many fascinating examples from the history of black music. (Another White House performer was Joseph Henry Douglass, Frederick’s grandson and a world-class violinist.)

Within its tight structure, *The Black History of the White House* ranges from James Benjamin Parker, the civilian who helped subdue William McKinley’s assassin, to Abraham Bolden, the Secret Service agent whom John F. Kennedy called the agency’s “Jackie Robinson” (and who received enough abuse from his fellow agents to earn the nickname). It ranges from E. Frederic Morrow, who, under Eisenhower, became not only the first black presidential aide but also the first such aide to be mistreated, to Shirley Sherrod and our current moment. Lusane’s layers of history also add significance and sadness to his better-known examples, such as Booker T. Washington’s scandalous White House supper with Theodore Roosevelt. The next day, incidentally, Roosevelt signed the order that officially named the White House “The White House.”

Unfortunately, Lusane does not offer such parallels and insights as frequently as he might have. For every example that fits his book perfectly—as when he describes the Virginia slaves, subcontracted to help build the White House, who every day must walk past the “robust and active slave market” on Pennsylvania Avenue—Lusane seems to include three that detract from it.

This stems, in part, from his lack of precision. Should a history of the White House focus on the building? on the symbol? on the complex administrations within (e.g., “Today, the Obama White House announced that . . .”)? on all of the above? Lusane never says. Instead, he indulges in long and superficial discussions of well-worn historical events like the Amistad affair, the Dred Scott decision, and the Civil Rights debate. These accounts undercut Lusane’s claim that much of his book’s content never makes it into pop history. (Actually, you can’t read a newish Founding Father biography without running into several anxious passages about the subject’s relationship to slavery.) More importantly, they trip up Lusane’s story. It’s hard to see how several pages on Nixon’s “Southern Strategy” ties into this topic, other than the fact that he happened to live in the White House for a time.

The problems with *The Black History of the White House* are compounded by Lusane’s style. He writes clearly, but not engagingly. He has the exasperating habit of summarizing a historical episode in a paragraph and then, just as you’re ready to move on, launching into a fuller version that will stretch to several pages. When he reaches Reagan, Lusane adopts a harshly and, in many cases, pointlessly partisan tone. It all adds up to a 481-page book that would have worked much better at half the length.

Still, there is much to value here. *The Black History of the White House* is highly uneven, but in many places it is also highly rewarding. And then there’s the book’s first sentence. It might feel odd to dwell on America’s slave-owning past when we have a black president and when, over time, Lusane’s “one in four” ratio will gradually fall. (The hard data: 12 presidents were “enslavers,” in Lusane’s phrase, and six of them kept slaves at the White House.) But gradual change does not change the past, nor remove its influence on the present. On issues as wide-ranging as these, we need continued debate and historical perspective. That’s how our democratic conversation works. *The Black History of the White House* may not be perfect, and it may require more readerly effort than it should, but the points it makes are worth hearing.