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## World: How The U.S. Ranks The Visits Of Foreign Heads Of State

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Washington, 6 August 1997 (RFE/RL) -- Every year in Washington there are an average of six "state visits" where chiefs of state, presidents and royalty from around the globe come to the United States to meet with the American president.

Six? Certainly the U.S. president meets with more than six chiefs of state in any given year?

Yes, he does. But according to the State Department, those guests are not all offered the highest ranking visit -- a state visit. Instead they are granted what are called "official visits" or "working visits" or even "official working visits."

In Washington it seems that nothing is ever simple. This is certainly true when it comes to deciding how best to welcome a visitor from a foreign government.

According to official State Department guidelines, there are five types of visits to be accorded to a ranking member of a foreign government. They are: a "state visit," an "official visit," an "official working visit," a "working visit," and a "private visit."

The guidelines say that the "state visit" is the highest ranking visit and can only be offered to a chief of state -- such as the president of a country or a reigning monarch like Britain's Queen Elizabeth -- and must be at the invitation of the U.S. president.

During a state visit, the guest is offered a room for four days and three nights at Blair House, the President's official guest house, located within walking distance of the White House.

A state visit ensures a meeting with the U.S. president, a state dinner at the White House, a full honors arrival and departure ceremony on the south grounds of the White House, and a 21 gun salute. Gifts may be exchanged and spouses can attend the ceremonies and dinners. Press availability and photo opportunities are plentiful.

The next highest visit is the "official visit." An official visit can only be offered to a head of government such as a prime minister and must be at the invitation of the U.S. president.

The guest is offered quarters at Blair House for three nights and four days. During an official visit the head of the government is entitled to a meeting with the U.S. President, a full honors arrival and departure ceremony on the south grounds of the White House, a 19 gun salute and official dinner at the White House. Gifts may be exchanged and spouses can attend the ceremonies and dinners.

In practice there is little difference between a state visit and an official visit except for the rank of the visitor, the difference in the number of guns fired in salute the visitor receives and the description of the White House dinners -- a state dinner verses an official dinner.

However, there is a big difference between state and official visits and an official working visit or a working visit.

State Department guidelines say that an "official working visit" can be offered to either a chief of state or the head of a government, but it must be extended by the U.S. president himself.

Blair House is then offered for two nights and three days and the guest is entitled to a meeting with the President, followed by a working luncheon at the White House. A dinner or reception is possible, but decisions are only on a case-by-case basis.

The U.S. Secretary of State is a participant at the working luncheon so no separate meeting is arranged. There is no ceremony upon arrival and departure. The press is usually granted some photo opportunities and occasionally there is a press conference. There is no gift exchange and spouses do not attend the luncheon.

A "working visit" is the next in the rank of visits. A working visit is extended to a chief of

state or head of government at the invitation of the U.S. president. A working visit normally consists of a meeting with the president at the White House, but without a luncheon, dinner or formal press availability. There is no gift exchange and spouses do not attend the luncheon.

The last type of visit is the "private visit." A private visit involves a chief of state, head of government, foreign minister or any other government official who arrives in the U.S. without the invitation of the U.S. president.

The visitor may request a meeting with the U.S. president and if it is granted, it is often referred to as a "working session." Blair House is not offered and spouses do not attend the session. There is no gift exchange and no official press availability although photo opportunities may be possible.

To those who deal with these types of issues everyday the whole affair seems rather simple. Mel French, the Director of Protocol at the U.S. State Department, says there is a practical reason why the White House ranks the visits of foreign guests.

"Ranking the visits gives a level to what the [U.S.] president wants to do when he invites someone to this country," she says. "Often they really need an official working visit where they can sit down and work through problems or things that they need to talk about. An official working visit is really a visit of substance and policy. A state visit and an official visit are more of a ceremonial type thing where we are honoring a country."

French adds that there are limits on state visits.

"A country can only have one state visit during a [U.S.] president's four-year term," she says.

French says that the decision of what kind of rank to accord each visitor is made jointly by the National Security Council and the State Department.

When asked if foreign heads of state are ever invited to stay at the White House instead of Blair House, French says that can happen occasionally, but only under unusual or important circumstances.

