

SOCIETY

A Palm Beach Power Hostess Prepares for Trump's Washington

By **Laura M. Holson**

Feb. 11, 2017

Every presidential administration needs a grande dame to smooth relations between rival factions and serve as a bridge to society. In the 1970s and '80s, Sally Quinn, then married to Benjamin C. Bradlee, executive editor of The Washington Post, was known for the high-I.Q. salons held at their Georgetown townhouse. Roughly a decade later, Georgette Mosbacher, a cosmetics executive and philanthropist, became Washington's hostess supreme as a result of the round-table dinner parties she hosted with her then-husband, the oil tycoon turned commerce secretary Robert A. Mosbacher.

Who will take on that important but unofficial role under President Trump? A strong candidate is Hilary Geary Ross, 66, a fixture of Palm Beach and New York society and wife of the 79-year-old multibillionaire investor and industrialist Wilbur L. Ross Jr., who is likely to be confirmed as commerce secretary as early as next week.

C-Span cameras captured Ms. Ross as she sat behind her husband when he testified before Congress on Jan. 18. At one point she had a laugh with Senator Marco Rubio of Florida. On Jan. 27, Daily Mail photographers on a stakeout

caught the arrival of Ms. Ross and her husband as they made their way into a Shabbat dinner held at the Washington home of Ivanka Trump and Jared Kushner.

As Ms. Ross prepares to become a significant social presence in the capital, she is overseeing the remodeling of a 10,000-square-foot mansion, complete with a movie theater and staff quarters, on a portion of Woodland Avenue known as “billionaires’ row” in the city’s Massachusetts Heights enclave. The couple purchased the home not long after the election, for a reported \$10 million.

Given Mr. Trump’s bumpy start in the Oval Office and his unpopularity even among certain Republicans, Ms. Ross will face the challenge of bringing together the president’s ardent supporters, the Never Trump-ers and the pragmatic insiders who oil the machinery of government.

A case in point: S. Christopher Meigher 3rd, the publisher of Quest magazine, was at a dinner at the Rosses’ Manhattan apartment not long after the election. That night, he said, tempers briefly flared. “I’m sitting next to the cultured wife of a shipping tycoon,” Mr. Meigher recalled, “who wanted to know, ‘Is Trump really an adaptable leader?’ It was a reasonable question. She was curious. And before I could say, ‘Yes,’ another heiress across the table, who was eavesdropping by the way, started screaming about how we are in for a rough ride.”

Ms. Ross was a few seats away, watching. She turned on the charm. “She said, ‘Now, now, children,’” Mr. Meigher recalled. “‘We need to play in an ecumenical sandbox.’ She diffused everything.”

As the novelist Jay McInerney, who has known Ms. Ross for more than two decades, put it: “If any one couple can help socially lubricate the new Washington social scene, it will be Hilary and Wilbur. They’ve always mixed Republicans and Democrats, like myself, at their dinner table, and we could use some of that spirit more than ever at this fraught moment.”

A Hamptons Wedding

Before the Rosses' nuptials at the St. Andrew's Dune Church in Southampton, N.Y., in 2004 — it was the third wedding for both — Mr. Ross was married to Elizabeth McCaughey, a Republican star of the 1990s, and Ms. Ross was married to the British investor Peter Green, following a romance with former Senator Alfonse M. D'Amato, Republican of New York. The ceremony was followed by a party for 300 guests at the Rainbow Room in Midtown Manhattan, which was attended by tout New York, including the financier Carl C. Icahn and Ms. Mosbacher.

Ms. Ross and her husband, a onetime Democrat, have collected many such friends over the years, including the former New York mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani, the Democratic donor Robert Zimmerman, the sugar baron Pepe Fanjul, the financier Stephen A. Schwarzman and the Park Avenue power couple Julia and David H. Koch. Now and then Ms. Ross writes about her circle for New York Social Diary, a society blog, or for Mr. Meigher's Quest, a magazine "devoted to Society with a capital S," where she holds the title of society editor.

In collaboration with the photographer Harry Benson, Ms. Ross has also written two coffee-table books, "New York New York" and "Palm Beach People." She is active in New York's Central Park Conservancy, the Preservation Foundation of Palm Beach and other philanthropic organizations.

In previous decades her closest connection to the Trump family seems to have been through her friendship with the president's former sister-in-law, Blaine Trump. In the 1980s, Ms. Ross (then Hilary Geary) appeared in Bill Cunningham's Street Fashion and Evening Hours columns in The New York Times. At a 1991 party for the opening of the store Galeries Lafayette on West

57th Street, she and her first husband, John W. Geary II, were part of a contingent that included Mr. Trump and his daughter Ivanka, who was 9 at the time.

In 2008, Ms. Ross was a chair, along with Melania Trump and the socialite Pauline Pitt, of a luncheon and fashion show held at the Trumps' Mar-a-Lago resort in Palm Beach, Fla., which is three miles from a waterfront home owned by Mr. and Ms. Ross.

Ms. Ross is not the only one in the couple to have standing with the Trump family. Her husband's relationship to the president goes back to when Mr. Trump was a struggling casino owner, and the prospective commerce secretary was a bankruptcy specialist working for Rothschild Inc. In the early 1990s, Mr. Ross made a deal with Mr. Trump that allowed him to maintain control of his bankrupt Taj Mahal casino in Atlantic City.

Ms. Ross grew up in New York City and Southampton, a descendant of the wealthy clan headed by Thomas E. Murray, a prolific inventor who earned his fortune developing power stations in New York. The family is most identified with Southampton, where it once owned huge swaths of land. Ms. Ross's mother, Patricia Murray Ney, wrote a weekly society column for The Southampton Press.

"Hilary was always interested in clothes and beautiful things," said Amanda Haynes-Dale, a hedge fund investor who has known Ms. Ross since they were in their teens. "Her mother set an example. She was very old school and taught her daughter to be a lady and how to dress."

Ms. Ross declined to comment for this article, as she awaits her husband's confirmation. But she is clearly at ease in Mr. Trump's world. There she was, along with the president and first lady, at the 60th annual Red Cross ball at Mar-a-Lago on Feb. 4. With the theme "From Vienna to Versailles," the party was an exercise in over-the-top 18th-century glamour. There were harp players wearing

tiaras and corseted pink gowns, and waiters were made to wear powdered wigs that weighed four pounds. The ballroom was transformed to resemble the Versailles Hall of Mirrors, the room in which Louis XVI married Marie Antoinette, and fireworks lit up the night sky. Adding to the let-them-eat-cake vibe was a crowd of some 300 protesters chanting outside the walls.

Mr. and Mrs. Trump greeted guests at tables draped in gold and festooned with feathery white plumes. Ms. Ross wore an Oscar de la Renta gown in crimson lace, her shoulders wrapped in white fur. She had already been to a number of parties with the Trumps, including the New Year's Eve bash at Mar-a-Lago and a fund-raiser at the Rosses' Southampton home. Ms. Ross swanned through the crowd before taking her seat at a table with them.

Ms. Ross's first husband was a wealthy Wall Street executive who died in 1995. They had two sons. Nancy Geary, Mr. Geary's daughter from a previous marriage, typically spent the month of August with her father, Ms. Ross and their sons. "She and my father were out every night," Ms. Geary recalled. For soirees at the family estate, Ms. Ross hired an after-hours chef to prepare omelets for late-night partygoers. "We got to play at being grown-ups," Ms. Geary said. "Hilary loved to entertain."

'She Creates a Symphony'

Ms. Geary, a lawyer, said that ultimately she tired of that kind of life. In 2001 she wrote a novel, "Misfortune," which skewered the Hamptons set. The plot involves a villainous socialite who is murdered, but Ms. Geary said the book was not about her stepmother. "At the time it caused pain," she said, adding that Ms. Ross had "made my father really happy."

After her marriage to Mr. Ross, Ms. Ross hired the designer Mario Buatta to redecorate the couple's mansions in Southampton and Palm Beach. Both were featured in Architectural Digest. They lent paintings from their \$125 million art

collection, heavy on Rene Magritte, to the Museum of Modern Art, and society magazines chronicled her ascendance.

“Her parties are well produced, with people from different backgrounds,” said Jacqueline Fain Duberstein, a former television producer for “Charlie Rose” who lives in Washington. “In Washington, parties are one-note. She creates a symphony.”

A coffee-table book by Annie Falk, “Palm Beach Entertaining,” devoted a chapter to one such affair, a dinner hosted by Mr. and Ms. Ross for the Duchess and Duke of Marlborough. Guests were seated at a long table with a stripe of tulips down the center. The French doors of the dining area were cast open. The menu included pistachio-crusting Chilean sea bass and coconut and macadamia ice cream balls with raspberry sauce.

“She gave Wilbur’s life glamour,” said David Patrick Columbia, founder of the website New York Social Diary. “He gave her security. They have a successful partnership as a marriage. They each brought something to the relationship.”

Now the question is what Ms. Ross can bring to Washington. Anita McBride, who served as chief of staff to Laura Bush, said there has been an unraveling of social discourse in recent years as politicians of both parties became more isolated from each other.

“It’s been building,” Ms. McBride said. “It was a bruising election, and people are having a tougher time than they should. If you keep mining the vitriol, at some point, it doesn’t yield results.”

The photographer Mr. Benson, whose subjects have included the Reagans and the Clintons, noted that hostesses like Ms. Ross have long played a key role behind the scenes. “Women in Washington have always been very important to politics,” Mr. Benson said. “The Clintons cultivated them. The only one who didn’t was Richard Nixon.”

Mr. McInerney believes that Ms. Ross is made for the part.

“Hilary will undoubtedly bring some glamour to the Washington social scene,” he said. “From what I’ve heard, they can use it.”