

White Housekeeping

By RUSSELL BAKER

OBSERVER

WASHINGTON, Feb. 14 — Dear Spiro:

Have stepped out for a while. Over to China for a few days to see Chou and Mao and that strange bunch of Commies. Remember? I told you about it several weeks ago. Anyhow, would you be a real pal and keep an eye on the White House while I'm out? If you get hungry, all you have to do is pick up the telephone and tell the operator you want to order some food. Same thing if you want to go out. Get the operator and say, "I want to go out."

She'll say something like, "Do you want to go bowling, or do you want to go to the Azores to see Pompidou, or what?"

The thing is, Spiro, she has to know whether to order the limousine or the helicopter or one of the big jets, so don't tell her it's none of her business where you want to go. She is just trying to be helpful.

Now about using my desk. . . . When you sit down at the desk you'll see a lot of buttons. Whatever you do . . . and I really mean this, old buddy . . . don't push any of those buttons. Okay?

I mean, really, Spiro, keep your fingers off the buttons, okay? We don't want to have any nuclear mistakes. On second thought, it might be a good idea if you didn't use my desk. Get the White House operator and ask her to have somebody set you up a little desk of your own by the window without any buttons. There's a terrific view of the Washington Monument from the window. If you want to be photographed for the newspapers there, just get the operator and say you want your picture in the papers, and she'll do the rest.

About the Hot Line: If the Hot Line rings, pick it up and say, "Hello-ovich, Gospodin. Have you got bad news for me?" If the voice on the other end says "Nyet," you can quit worrying because they are just playing around again. If the voice says, "Da," you've got a problem.

The best thing is to see if you can get hold of Mel Laird. Also it might be a good idea to go to the air-raid shelter. Pick up the phone. Get the White House operator and tell her you want to go to the air-raid shelter and she will arrange for you to be taken down there.

Oh, almost forgot Congress. There's a Congress going on at the Capitol. A Congress is a big swarm of Democrats who are running for President. Whatever you do, don't let them into the White House. They have places of their own—the Capitol, New Hampshire and Florida.

If they come around and start tormenting you while you're out walking on the White House lawn, don't argue with them. Just tell them, "If you don't like me here, why don't you go back to New Hampshire?"

If they insist on coming right on into the White House, just get hold of the operator and tell her the Democrats are giving you trouble and she'll get hold of somebody who will have them removed.

Incidentally, Spiro—Congress loves to get messages from the White House. It makes them feel important, as though somebody still needs them. If you've got some spare time, send them a White House message on something and urge them to pass an important new bill.

If you want to send a message to Congress, all you have to do is get the White House operator and tell her what you have in mind and she will send in some message-to-Congress writers.

I can't think of much else that might go wrong before I get back, although there's a possibility that a certain fast-buck roofing contractor will drop by and give you that line about how he was working in the neighborhood and just happened to see some loose shingles around the White House chimneys and thinks you ought to have him go up there and see if you don't need some roof work done. What he does then is go up there wearing hob-nailed boots and kick holes through the tar paper, which I then have to pay him to patch up. If this character takes advantage of my absence to show up, just pick up the phone and get the White House operator. She will know how to have him put out quietly.

That's about all I can think of, Spiro, except don't let any hippies in.

You don't have to worry about any routine foreign crises. If you get a sudden crisis, the National Security Council will meet and tell you what to do. Of course, you don't have to accept their advice. If you're in doubt about whether to do it their way or not, get hold of the White House operator and tell her your problem and she'll work it out for you.

Last thing: "What do I do if I pick up the phone and the operator isn't there?" you're going to ask. Don't worry about it, Spiro. Believe me, I've lived with the same question for three years now, and I can assure you, the operator is always there, always.

See you on the telly.

Dick