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Expensive curtains



Envoy's View of City Is Priceless. The Curtains: ~ \$52,000 for Nikki R. Haley, the American ambassador to the United Nations, in April during a Security Council meeting. The State Department spent \$52,701 in 2017 purchasing customized and mechanized curtains for the picture windows in her official residence as ambassador to the UN, as the department was undergoing deep budget cuts and had frozen hiring.

The residence, in a new building on First Avenue, has spectacular views, and Ms. Haley is the first ambassador to live in it. For decades, her predecessors lived in the Waldorf Astoria hotel. But after the hotel was purchased by a Chinese insurance company with a murky ownership structure, the State Department decided in 2016 to find a new home for its top New York diplomat because of security concerns.

The government leased the apartment, just blocks from the delegation's offices, with an option to buy, according to Patrick Kennedy, the top management official at the State Department during the Obama administration. The full-floor penthouse, with handsome hardwood floors covering large open spaces stretching nearly 6,000 square feet, was listed at \$58,000 a month. A spokesman for Ms. Haley said plans to buy the curtains were made in 2016, during the Obama administration. Ms. Haley had no say in the purchase, he said.

While ambassadors around the world are given residences, there are only two such residences in the United States — one for Ms. Haley and the other for her deputy. Ms. Haley's residence is particularly grand since it is used for official entertaining. But her deputy's is also very nice, having served as the location for Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's intimate steak dinner in May with Kim Yong-chol, North Korea's top nuclear weapons negotiator. During the dinner, Mr. Pompeo used its sweeping views to point out various features of New York City's skyline to the senior official from the world's most reclusive country.

The curtains themselves cost \$29,900, while the motors and hardware needed to open and close them automatically cost \$22,801, according to the contracts. Installation took place from March to August of last year, during Ms. Haley's tenure as ambassador. Ms. Haley's curtains are more expensive than the \$31,000 dining room set purchased for the office of Ben Carson, the secretary of the Department of Housing and Urban Development. That purchase became so controversial that President Trump considered firing Mr. Carson, though the spending rules covering agency chiefs are different from those for ambassadors.

While Ms. Haley's curtains were being ordered and installed, Rex W. Tillerson, the administration's first secretary of state, had frozen hiring, pushed out many of the department's most senior diplomats and proposed cutting the department's budget by 31 percent. In embassies around the world, projects were eliminated, jobs were left unfilled and the delegation to last year's United Nations General Assembly meeting was slashed.

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"How can you, on the one hand, tell diplomats that basic needs cannot be met and, on the other hand, spend more than \$50,000 on a customized curtain system for the ambassador to the U.N.?" asked Brett Bruen, a White House official in the Obama administration. But Mr. Kennedy defended the purchase, saying that it would probably be used for years and that it was needed for both security and entertaining purposes. "All she's got is a part-time maid, and the ability to open and close the curtains quickly is important," Mr. Kennedy said.

Mr. Pompeo will soon receive government housing himself, after the Defense Department agreed to rent him a flag officer's home on a military base in the Washington area. The State Department said the unusual move would save on security costs. Mr. Pompeo is one of the few members of Mr. Trump's cabinet of modest means. While the State Department would not say where Mr. Pompeo's house would be located, a United States official and a former top State Department official said he would live at Fort Myer, a small Army post near Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia.

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