

Behind the Scenes: Preparing for the Pope

[MUSIC]

ELLIE SCHAFER: We're a week out from the pope's state arrival, and things are very exciting around the White House.

We have 13,500 people coming to visit us. We started to plan around April about the pope event. We've been holding meetings since June.

OLIVIA O'NEIL: So now it's just finalizing the guest list, collecting that additional security information, and then the big parts come. Starting this Sunday we'll be doing the buildout. Three bleachers, press risers, bike rack, snow fencing, rope extension, chairs, ADA sections, water stations, all that stuff. It will start coming together on Sunday.

PETE SELFRIDGE: There are so many entities involved which I don't think a lot of people realize. You obviously have the White House entities, the State Department. The city gets involved in putting a lot of flags out on the streets and on the routes of the pope will travel. So we work with them.

OLIVIA O'NEIL: A big thing that we're doing here is training about 250 volunteers, so 250 people that we have to train in the next week.

MALE SPEAKER: Welcome!

Everyone excited for the pope.

AUDIENCE: Yes!

MALE SPEAKER: Thank you guys for volunteering to help out. For those of you -

ELLIE SCHAFER: So the state arrival with the pope will be the largest state arrival that this administration has had.

OLIVIA O'NEIL: We've been working with everyone from National Security Council who is running point for some of the more technical invites - people who will be part of the U.S. Delegation.

CHARLIE FROMSTEIN: We take the logistics out of it and we let our policy people focus on what they need to do. In an arrival ceremony for someone like Pope Francis will be certainly one of the coolest things, most exciting things that I may ever work on.

PETE SELFRIDGE: I never dreamed I'd be this close to seeing two figures of their stature, you know, meeting and then discussing world affairs so actually having a role that's like a part of that is just really exciting.

ELLIE SCHAFER: Beginning on Monday, we will actually start full dress rehearsals for the pope visit. So we will actually run through the visit a few times before the pope actually even arrives to the United States.

OLIVIA O'NEIL: So this is Monday, and we are 48 hours out from the event. A lot is going on today. Today we had dress rehearsal, we're still in the middle of doing a pretty extensive buildout here.

LAUREN KELLY: We know that all the guests are so excited for it, so we just want to make sure that they all get in and that they all have a good experience. And then there's that whole piece and then there's the piece of making sure that for The President, The First Lady, and The Holy Father, everything is perfect and they know what to expect and they're prepared, and everything just goes smooth.

OLIVIA O'NEIL: I think the key to a good event is that someone comes and their whole experience - they don't think once about what went into the experience.

ELLIE SCHAFER: This is the first time also that we've had two state arrivals back to back in 48 hours of one another. So we have the pope coming on Wednesday and then the President of China coming on Friday.

PETE SELFRIDGE: Literally the pope's plane is taking off as President Xi's is on approach. So combining those two make this unprecedented.

LAUREN KELLY: A state dinner is huge on its own so to put a state dinner two days after the pope and this huge arrival ceremony is just -- it's a once in a lifetime thing that's going to happen.

[APPLAUSE]

PRESIDENT OBAMA: It is so nice to see you. Welcome. So glad to have you here in the United States.

[APPLAUSE]

PETE SELFRIDGE: And so it begins.