

# The Roosevelt who kept them gasping

**A**lice Roosevelt Longworth was always doing something, as one Washington reporter once observed, "that left people gasping."

The eldest daughter of President Theodore Roosevelt liked nothing better than shocking people and making headlines. At age 17, when her father forbade her to smoke in the White House, Princess Alice —



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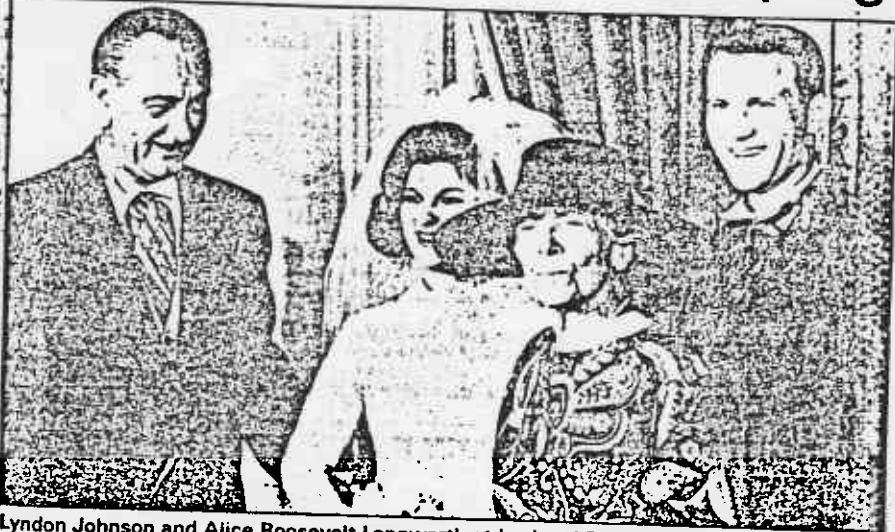
as she was popularly known in the early 1900s — simply smoked on the mansion's roof.

Later, as wife of House Speaker Nicholas Longworth and mistress of Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman William E. Borah, she became one of the most colorful, controversial hostesses in the nation's capital. She liked men with power and sharp minds, and they swarmed around her, often at dinner parties at her Dupont Circle mansion. And Longworth's parties were never dull, Carol Felsenthal writes in *Alice Roosevelt Longworth*:

*Food was first on no one's mind ... Guests anticipated the contacts, conversation, and theatrics — especially the latter. While an ordinary hostess would be horrified if two guests got into a shouting match at her table, to Alice that was a sign of success. She would deliberately seat political or social enemies next to one another ... She would regularly seat Vice President Nixon on one side of her and the Senate minority leader, William Knowland, on the other because she knew they hated one another.*

Longworth's bitchiness and vindictiveness often came out at such gatherings. She detested her cousins Franklin Delano and his wife Eleanor, and perfected a cruel imitation of Eleanor that became standard fare at Longworth parties. And when she learned about the affair between FDR and Lucy Mercer, she delighted in inviting the pair — without Eleanor — to dinner.

Alice "was not very nice," as Eleanor often said. And indeed, by the end of the book, it's hard to still be amused by a woman so spiteful



Lyndon Johnson and Alice Roosevelt Longworth at Luci and Pat Nugent's 1966 wedding.

## ALICE ROOSEVELT LONGWORTH

By Carol Felsenthal, 320 pp., Putnam's, \$19.95.

that she could pronounce it "lovely" when FDR was crippled by polio, who called Stalin her "pin-up boy," and who was so charmed by Fidel Castro and Senator Joe McCarthy that she proudly displayed their photos on her piano.

Felsenthal doesn't attempt to analyze her extraordinarily complex subject. Instead, she has written a mostly anecdotal biography, based on material already available on Longworth, Longworth diaries and family papers, FBI files obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, and some 200 interviews with people ranging from publisher Katharine Graham and the late Clare Boothe Luce to Longworth relatives.

In the process, we learn that Longworth — in spite of her privileged upbringing — probably sought attention as an adult because she got so little as a child. Her mother died soon after she was born, her grieving father ignored her, and her new stepmother — portrayed here as a rather cold woman — soon had her own children to worry about.

Constantly at odds with her parents, Alice became a rebellious teenager who took up with a wild

crowd, dancing half the night and sleeping until noon. Her antics — everything from eating asparagus with her fingers at a White House dinner without removing her gloves to appearing at a railroad station with a boa constrictor around her neck — enraged her father and delighted the tabloids.

She married at age 20, mostly to get away from home. Nick Longworth was charming, but also a boozier and womanizer who preferred nights out with the boys to her company. Her only child, Paulina, died at age 31 of an overdose of barbiturates (but not before Longworth made it a point to tell the daughter on the eve of her wedding that Nick Longworth was not her real father).

In spite of Longworth's disturbed personal life, however, she was a woman of considerable power and influence in Washington for decades, according to Felsenthal. In her youth, she was one of the best lobbyists for her own father, with whom she had a love-hate relationship. Teddy Roosevelt recognized his tart-tongued daughter's political savvy, and relied heavily on her opinions.

Later, she continued to champion Republican politics, but as she grew older, she became less interested in political labels than in personalities. LBJ became one of her favorites ("He is a masterful man, the greatest I've ever seen at getting things done, and I've seen

them all," she once told a reporter for *The Washington Post*), along with both JFK and brother Bobby.

She still maintained her keen sense of humor into old age. In 1970, when she was 86, she called a friend from the hospital where she was having her second mastectomy and announced: "Well, isn't it lucky it's me and not Brigitte Bardot."

At 90, Longworth celebrated what she called her "goddamn birthday" by inviting more than 200 people to her cluttered mansion. The guest list included President Richard Nixon and wife Pat, who arrived with a flurry of secret service men and presented Longworth a music box playing Strauss waltzes and embellished with the presidential seal.

Fiesty to the end, Longworth continued to make headlines until her death in 1980 of bronchial pneumonia. She was 96 years old, and had never worn glasses, false teeth or a hearing aid.

Carol Felsenthal, a writer and newspaper columnist and author of a previous biography of Phyllis Schlafly, has written an entertaining book that should appeal to people who like biographies of colorful characters. An extra bonus for *Alice Roosevelt Longworth* readers is an overall view of American history for much of the 20th century, spanning the administrations of 13 U.S. presidents from Benjamin Harrison to Richard Nixon.