WASHINGTON — Top figures from business, sports and ***politics*** — including an ex-president — turned up for Wednesday's state dinner honoring Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida as the White House served up its maximum dose of pomp to honor a close U.S. ally.

Bill and Hillary Clinton were on familiar turf for the event, the former president declaring it “feels great” to be back before casting an appreciative eye at a portrait of his wife from her first lady days that was on display nearby.

Guests in bright spring colors and lots of shimmery gowns chatted ***politics*** and talked shop as they strolled in — that meant eclipse chatter from NASA Administrator Bill Nelson (“fabulous” view in Ohio!) and an assessment of President Joe Biden’s electoral prospects in Wisconsin from Gov. Tony Evers (looking good!).

But on a day when the inflation news from Washington was less than encouraging, Fed Chairman Jay Powell shot past without stopping to chat. Olympic figure skater Kristi Yamaguchi, in a purple gown, said she didn’t expect to be out campaigning for Biden but nonetheless seemed bullish on his reelection. Actor Robert DeNiro supplied the Hollywood quotient for the night.

On a warm spring evening, the Bidens came outside on the North Portico to welcome Kishida and his wife, Yuko, who stood out in a flowing royal blue gown on the red carpet.

Inside, [*Jill Biden*](https://apnews.com/hub/jill-biden), wearing a beaded sapphire gown, had transformed the State Floor of the White House into what she called a “vibrant spring garden” for the evening. The floor of the famous Cross Hall was decorated with images giving the nearly 230 guests the feel of walking over a koi pond, a nod to fish that symbolize “friendship, peace, luck and perseverance,” the first lady said at a media preview Tuesday.

A [*state dinner*](https://apnews.com/hub/state-dinners) is a tool of U.S. diplomacy, an honor doled out sparingly and only to America’s closest allies. In the case of Japan, the president has granted that honor for just the fifth time to an ally that he sees as a cornerstone of his policy toward the Indo-Pacific region.

Kishida is on an official visit to the United States this week. The state dinner is Biden's first this year.

The guess included plenty of Biden family members, including granddaughter Naomi and her husband, Peter Neal. There were also business moguls in force, including JP Morgan Chase CEO Jamie Dimon, Apple CEO Tim Cook, Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, as well as labor luminaries UAW chief Shawn Fain and United Steelworkers President David McCall. Both unions have endorsed Biden for reelection.

Dry-aged rib eye steak, cherry blossoms and the music of [*Paul Simon*](https://apnews.com/hub/paul-simon) are also part of the evening.

Guests will dine on a meal that was designed to highlight the “bounty of spring” in Japan and the United States: a first course of house-cured salmon that was inspired by a California roll and an entree of dry-aged rib eye steak with shishito pepper butter, fava beans, mushrooms and onions. Dessert is salted caramel pistachio cake with a matcha ganache and cherry ice cream.

Some of Jill Biden’s favorite flowers, including sweet peas, roses and peonies, are arranged alongside imported cherry blossoms to decorate a mix of round and rectangular dinner tables in the East Room in shades of pink. A few floral centerpieces top out at 6 feet (1.8 meters) tall.

Tables were set with a mix of place settings representing the administrations of Presidents Lyndon B. Johnson and George W. Bush. Glass and silk butterflies will dance over the tables.

After dinner, Simon will perform. He is one of Jill Biden's favorite artists, the White House said, adding that she chose him as a special tribute to Kishida because the prime minister also admires Simon’s work.

Simon’s career spans six decades, including performing as part of a duo with his childhood friend Art Garfunkel. The 82-year-old New Jersey native has earned numerous accolades, including multiple Grammys and a place in the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.

Also providing entertainment are “The President’s Own” Marine Band Chamber Orchestra, the Army Rolling Strings and the Air Force Strings.

Kishida is the fifth world leader Biden has honored with a state dinner following counterparts from [*France*](https://apnews.com/article/biden-jill-united-states-macron-state-dinners-73f5a0d51b4058c7b96ec1e43c59a3e1), [*South Korea*](https://apnews.com/article/biden-south-korea-white-house-state-dinner-c7753825aa0d45ae4b3c6389b57d0067), [*India*](https://apnews.com/article/biden-modi-india-state-dinner-76fd29bd3d5f06454f47aee52bf30d17) and [*Australia*](https://apnews.com/article/biden-australia-albanese-white-house-state-dinner-c142f6a5a246a9035a65e7400d8aa1db).