



THE WHITE HOUSE  
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

**CLASSROOM | 4-8 Lessons : “Making History at the White House”**

***The White House in Crisis***

***Impeachment***

The Constitution gives the people’s elected representatives, Congress, the power to remove presidents from office who have committed serious crimes or abused their power. This happens in two stages. First, the House of Representatives votes to impeach the president, then the Senate serves as a jury when the case goes to trial. The chief justice of the Supreme Court acts as judge at the Senate trial. In the years since the president’s office was established, two presidents have been impeached: Andrew Johnson in 1867, and Bill Clinton in 1998. Johnson (1865-1869) made the White House his headquarters for fighting charges made against him. Radical Republicans and the Democrat Johnson disagreed about Reconstruction, or how the federal government would bring the southern states back into the union after the Civil War. In order to stop President Johnson from blocking their Reconstruction plans, the Republicans passed two laws. One of the laws stated that the president could not fire certain government officials without the Senate’s approval. When Johnson fired his Secretary of State, Edwin Stanton, the House of Representatives impeached the president, claiming he broke the law. Several of the country’s best lawyers agreed to defend Johnson, and they used space in the White House as an office. By one vote in the Senate, Johnson survived. He celebrated at the White House with his lawyers and friends. In the case of President Clinton (1993-2001), one of the charges made against him was that he lied about how he had behaved inside the White House. Clinton denied having a personal relationship with a young woman while she worked there. Later he admitted that he had misled the country and his family about the relationship. Many members of Congress believed that Clinton had been dishonest, but some felt that his behavior was not serious enough to remove him from office. After a Senate trial, Clinton was found not guilty of perjury and obstruction of justice on February 12, 1999





*President Johnson is summoned to his impeachment trial. Harper's Weekly*



*Edith Wilson helped her husband govern while he was ill. Harris and Ewing*

### ***Illness Strikes the President***

On October 2, 1919 President Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921) suffered a stroke that made it difficult for him to use the left side of his body. While he would partially recover, and walk with the help of a cane, he was so exhausted he found it very difficult to work. The White House became a kind of hiding place for Wilson. First Lady Edith Wilson and the president's doctors would not tell the public about the seriousness of the illness. They tried to protect the president, and thought that if he heard about bad news, it might make his illness worse. Those who visited Wilson at the White House could stay for only a short time. Wilson's staff arranged the visits so that it would be hard to tell how much the stroke had drained him of his energy. For four months, the United States did not have a president capable of performing his job and Americans did not know that information. Because of this, rumors spread about why the president never left the White House. Was he going insane? Was he dead? While Wilson was still able to communicate with others after the stroke, his poor health made him impatient and unwilling to try to understand why some members of Congress disagreed with his ideas. His illness came at an important time for the country. Congress was discussing whether or not the United States should enter an organization called the League of Nations. The First World War had ended the year before, and Wilson hoped that the League would be able to keep countries from going to war in the future. The president did not have the energy or the patience to work with Congress on this issue and the United States decided not to join the League. It is impossible to say for certain that World War II began because the League of Nations was weakened without the membership of the United States. But Wilson certainly saw that his presidency ended in failure. A few months after his stroke, he told his doctor, "It would probably have been better if I had died . . ."



## ***The Cuban Missile Crisis***

One of the most frightening moments in modern American history occurred during a tense two weeks in October 1962. On October 14, a United States Air Force plane discovered that nuclear missile bases had been built on the island nation of Cuba. President John F. Kennedy (1961-1963) learned that the Soviet Union was preparing to place nuclear missiles in Cuba. Both the Soviet Union and Cuba were communist countries. Because Cuba is just 90 miles from Miami, Florida, Americans feared that the missiles could easily and quickly strike the United States. Kennedy wanted to avoid a nuclear war, but he also needed to make sure that the missiles were not allowed in Cuba. The president set up a special executive committee (called Ex-Comm for short) that was made up of top experts. They met at the White House to discuss how the United States would respond to the threat. On October 22, Kennedy announced a warning to Soviet leaders that they should not send missiles to Cuba. In a live television speech from the White House, Kennedy said that he was sending Navy ships to block the Soviet ships from landing in Cuba with their missiles. Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev responded that he would not stop. The nuclear missiles were on their way. For several days, a nervous world watched and waited. Would nuclear war begin? On October 26, a message was sent to the president. The Soviet ships would turn around and go home if the United States agreed not to attack Cuba. Kennedy agreed, and the crisis had ended. For two weeks the world was on the brink of nuclear war and all eyes were on the White House.



*President Kennedy's advisors work to respond to the Cuban Missile Crisis, 1962. John F. Kennedy Library*



*After resigning, Richard Nixon (right) leaves the White House with his family, 1974. National Archives*

## ***Watergate***

It began with the arrest of seven burglars and it ended with the first and only resignation of a United States president. On June 17, 1972, seven men were caught breaking into an office in the Watergate building in Washington, D.C. The office was the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee and the burglars were hired by those who were working to have Republican President Richard Nixon (1969-1974) re-elected.

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It looked like the burglars were trying to steal information that would help Nixon defeat the Democratic candidate, George McGovern, in the 1972 election. There was no proof that President Nixon had ordered the burglary, but it was shown that the president of the United States used his power to tell the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to stop investigating. One of Nixon's staff also stated that the president gave an order to pay the burglars money so they would not tell the truth about the break-in. In summer 1973 it was revealed that Nixon secretly taped private conversations that he had in the Oval Office. One year later, the tapes were given to Congress and they proved Nixon's guilt. Congress discussed the impeachment of Nixon. Rather than face that, Nixon resigned. He announced his decision to leave office in a television address on August 8, 1974. The next day he left the White House. Vice President Gerald Ford was sworn in as president and later pardoned Nixon so that the nation's healing could begin.

