

# Diplomacy and the White House



## INTRODUCTION

The President of the United States isn't just the Commander-in-Chief, but also the country's Chief Diplomat. From the young nation forming relations with its first allies, to gifts of friendship and State Dinners, the White House continues to play a role in managing international ties around the world. Explore the history of U.S. engagement with the world through the lens of the White House.

## CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

### *Early American Diplomacy*



*Image 1. Portrait of Marquis de Lafayette. The framed piece hangs on the left wall in the Entrance Hall of Blair House and is the first work of art guests observe upon entering the house.*

During the American Revolution, the United States sought the aid of France to gain independence from Great Britain. Marquis de Lafayette, a French military officer seen in **Image 1** to the left, fought in the Continental Army and commanded American troops in several battles. Decades after the end of the war, President James Monroe invited Lafayette to the United States as an official guest. During his stay, from 1824-1825, Lafayette visited the White House twice. Americans welcomed Lafayette to the United States as a hero and named the public park to the north of the White House in his honor. View **Image 2**, in the chart below, to see a modern painting of Lafayette Square and the White House. The addition of a Lafayette statue in the southeast corner of the park in 1891, seen in **Image 3** below, further solidified his legacy in the President's Neighborhood.

In a speech to Congress in 1823, one year before Lafayette's official visit to the United States, President James Monroe warned European powers not to further colonize territories in or interfere with the Americas. Later known as the Monroe Doctrine, this principle proclaimed the U.S. the "protectors" of the Western Hemisphere and shaped American foreign policy for decades. Refer to **Image 4**, in the

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chart, to see a replica of the mahogany desk upon which President James Monroe drafted what became known as the Monroe Doctrine.

President James Buchanan met with the Japanese diplomatic delegation in the East Room of the White House in 1860. This was the first visit of Japanese representatives to the United States. The treaty ratified during their visit, opening trade between the nations, remained in force for the next forty years. **Image 5**, in the chart, is an illustration depicting President James Buchanan meeting with the Japanese Delegation in 1860.



*Image 6. An engraving of King Kalakaua of Hawai'i visiting President Ulysses S. Grant on December 15, 1874. Both men greet each other with a small bow in the Blue Room (1874).*

In 1874, President Ulysses S. Grant held the first State Dinner, hosting King David Kalakaua of the Kingdom of Hawai'i (present-day Hawaii). **Image 6**, above, is an engraving of King Kalakaua and President Grant greeting each other in the Blue Room. The king had royal food testers to sample each of the more than twenty courses served. While conflicts sometimes resulted in failed or difficult diplomacy, presidents in the early 1900s still attempted to use the White House to build diplomatic relations.

## *American Diplomacy, 1901-1945*

In 1901, President Theodore Roosevelt assumed the presidency and steered the United States further into world politics. He liked to quote a favorite proverb, "Speak softly and carry a big stick." Aware of the strategic need for a shortcut between the Atlantic and the Pacific for American ships, President Roosevelt facilitated the construction of the Panama Canal by sending naval ships to support the Panamanians' independence. Once Panama gained independence from Colombia, the new government gave the U.S. control of the canal for \$10 million and a yearly payment. President Roosevelt considered the construction of the Panama Canal to be his most important presidential act abroad. In 1906, he

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visited the construction site of the Canal and became the first president to leave the United States while in office. **Image 7**, in the chart, pictures President Theodore Roosevelt passing through the Canal Zone in 1906. For his role in mediating the peace process that ended the Russo-Japanese War, a bitter conflict between the Russian and Japanese empires that focused on the area around the Korean peninsula, President Roosevelt also won a Nobel Peace Prize, making him the first American president to receive this honor. At the White House, he renovated and enlarged the State Dining Room to make more space for international and domestic visitors. **Image 8**, below, is a photograph of the State Dining Room in 1904.

President Roosevelt's successor, President William H. Taft, followed a foreign policy referred to as "dollar diplomacy"—a form of diplomacy that prioritized the exertion of economic power abroad over that of military power. Dollar diplomacy significantly increased U.S. investments in Latin America and East Asia, but often heightened international tensions and rationalized military occupations, especially in Latin America. A legacy of the Taft administration's foreign policy remains visible in Washington, D.C., however.



*President Richard Nixon and First Lady Pat Nixon strolling among the cherry blossoms planted along the Tidal Basin on April 14, 1969.*

In 1910, Mayor Yuki Ozaki of Tokyo gifted 3,000 Japanese cherry trees to the capital city as a "memorial of national friendship between the U.S. and Japan." First Lady Helen Taft ceremonially planted the first of these trees in the Tidal Basin in West Potomac Park. By the 1920s, cherry trees were planted throughout the Washington area and the Tidal Basin. To continue celebrating the friendship between the U.S. and Japan, civic groups organized the first "Cherry Blossom Festival" in 1935. Since First Lady Helen Taft's involvement, the first ladies have supported the cherry blossom celebrations and all first ladies in recent years have served as the Honorary Chair of the festival. View **Image 9**, to the left, and

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**Image 10**, in the chart, to see photographs of cherry blossom season during the Nixon and Carter administrations. The Cherry Blossom Festival remains one of Washington, D.C.'s most anticipated annual springtime events.

During World War II, the number of White House State Dinners significantly increased. The U.S. government purchased Blair House—seen in **Image 11** below—as a guest house to accommodate the large number of visiting foreign dignitaries. In 1939, President Franklin D. Roosevelt held the first state dinner for a British monarch, King George VI. Throughout the war, President Roosevelt invited many other leaders of Allied-recognized exiled governments including France, Greece, and Poland to dine at the Executive Mansion. British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was a frequent visitor to the White House during the war years. Refer to **Image 12**, in the chart, to see a photograph of President Franklin D. Roosevelt seated with Prime Minister Winston Churchill in the Rose Garden in 1943.

## *Post-World War II American Diplomacy*

After World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union found themselves in a heightened state of suspicion, tension, and fear—a Cold War. Presidents attempted to use the White House as a platform to ease international tensions. In 1959, President Dwight D. Eisenhower and First Lady Mamie Eisenhower invited Nikita Khrushchev, Chairman of the Soviet Union, for a dinner at the White House. This marked the first state visit of a Soviet leader to the United States. During the Kennedy administration, however, tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union escalated.



*Image 13. President John F. Kennedy and Peace Corps Director R. Sargent Shriver during a ceremony for the first group of departing Peace Corps volunteers in the Rose Garden at the White House (August 28, 1961).*

In October 1962, the Soviet Union began installing missile sites in Cuba, just 90 miles off the coast of the U.S. This event, known as the Cuban Missile Crisis, brought

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the two superpowers to the brink of nuclear war. President Kennedy and his advisors spent late nights at the White House as they considered possible responses. Letters exchanged between the White House and the Kremlin opened a resolution—Chairman Khrushchev agreed to remove Soviet missiles from Cuba if President Kennedy promised that the U.S. would not invade Cuba. Amidst Cold War international tensions, President Kennedy also established a new government agency dedicated to promoting “peace and friendship” abroad—the Peace Corps. The Peace Corps sends American volunteers abroad to provide technical assistance for projects in health, sanitation, and education. **Image 13**, above, is a photograph of President John F. Kennedy sending off the first group of Peace Corps volunteers in the Rose Garden at the White House in 1961.

Nearing the end of the Cold War, President Ronald Reagan held a State Dinner for General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, leader of the Soviet Union, and his wife Raisa in 1987. The dinner followed the signing of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, an arms control treaty that reduced the Cold War military buildup. **Image 14**, below, features President Reagan and General Secretary Gorbachev shaking hands on the South Lawn during the official visit. The White House has hosted many important heads of state in recent years. Typically, the president and first lady join the visiting leader for official talks, leisurely activities, and, in many cases, a State Dinner. View **Images 15, 16, and 17**, to see photographs from official visits during the Clinton, Bush, and Obama administrations.

Presidents practice diplomacy in many ways. Some presidents are associated with “doctrines” that sum up their approaches to foreign policy. White House State Dinners honoring visiting heads of government or a reigning monarch have long been some of the most glamorous White House affairs and effective diplomatic tools. Some instances require mediation and negotiation. The White House serves as a stage for presidents to meet and work with foreign leaders and bolster diplomatic relations across the globe.

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## IMAGES

*Click on web link to access online and for larger viewing*

Source	Title	Date	Created By	Courtesy Of	Thumbnail	Web Link
1	Marquis De Lafayette	Unknown	Unknown	Bruce White for the White House Historical Association/ Blair House		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Blair%20House/1113205.jpg_info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Blair%20House/1113205.jpg_info</a>
2	Depiction of 1902 Lafayette Square and White House	2010	Peter Waddell	White House Historical Association		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital-Library/Main%20Index/Views/9486.tif_info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital-Library/Main%20Index/Views/9486.tif_info</a>
3	Statue Honoring Marquis de Lafayette	2014	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/President's%20Neighborhood/1111537.tif_info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/President's%20Neighborhood/1111537.tif_info</a>
4	Mahogany Desk	1932	Morris W. Dove	White House Historical Association		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/832.tif_info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Decorative%20Arts/832.tif_info</a>
5	President Buchanan Meets with Japanese Delegation	1860	Unknown	White House Collection/ White House Historical Association		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/James%20Buchanan/3393.tif_info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/James%20Buchanan/3393.tif_info</a>






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6	King Kalakaua Visiting Ulysses S. Grant in the White House	1874	Unknown	White House Collection/ White House Historical Association		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/1931.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/1931.tif.info</a>
7	President Roosevelt Passing Through the Canal Zone	1906	William A. Fishbaugh	Library of Congress		<a href="https://www.loc.gov/item/2009633767/">https://www.loc.gov/item/2009633767/</a>
8	State Dining Room in 1904	1904	Detroit Photographic Co.	Library of Congress		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/622.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/622.tif.info</a>
9	President and Mrs. Nixon Stroll Among the Cherry Blossoms	1969	Unknown	Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Richard%20Nixon/1113232.jpg.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Richard%20Nixon/1113232.jpg.info</a>
10	President Jimmy Carter with the Cherry Blossom Princesses	1979	Unknown	Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Jimmy%20Carter/1113228.jpg.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Jimmy%20Carter/1113228.jpg.info</a>
11	Blair House	2013	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/President's%20Neighborhood/1111542.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/President's%20Neighborhood/1111542.tif.info</a>


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12	Roosevelt and Churchill Meet with Chiefs of Staff	1943	Unknown	Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Franklin%20Roosevelt/10.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Franklin%20Roosevelt/10.tif.info</a>
13	Visit of the First Peace Corps Volunteers to go Overseas	1961	Unknown	John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum		<a href="#">Visit of the 1st Peace Corps Volunteers to go overseas, 4:10PM   JFK Library</a>
14	President Ronald Reagan with General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev	1987	Unknown	Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Ronald%20Reagan/6242.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Ronald%20Reagan/6242.tif.info</a>
15	Clinton and State Visitor at Welcoming Ceremony on South Lawn	1996	Unknown	William J. Clinton Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/4094.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/4094.tif.info</a>
16	State Dinner for Queen Elizabeth	1991	White House Photo	George Bush Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/George%20H%20W%20Bush/597.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/George%20H%20W%20Bush/597.tif.info</a>

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17	Mrs. Gursharan Kaur and President Obama During the State Dinner of India	2009	Pete Souza	Official White House Photo by Pete Souza		<a href="https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Barack%20Obama/9881.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Barack%20Obama/9881.tif.info</a>
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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Collections

- A Cultural Connection by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Diplomacy with our Northern Neighbors by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- The Hospitality of Diplomacy by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Italy in the White House by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)

### Essay

- “The White House State Dinner” by Betty C. Monkman for the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)

### LibGuide (a collection of primary and secondary sources)

- Diplomacy and the White House by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)

### Podcast

- “The White House: 1600 Sessions: Blair House and the Chief of Protocol” by the White House Historical Association. [Listen here.](#)

### Video

- “The Moscow-Washington Hotline: Avoiding Nuclear War with Russia” by Untold History. [Watch here.](#)

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## SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

### For all learners:

- Invitations to a State Dinner at the White House are very exclusive and sought after. Work in a group or individually to create an invitation list for a State Dinner. Who should be invited to showcase the best of what the United States has to offer to a foreign dignitary? Provide a reason for why these individuals made the list. Remember to think of more than just celebrities—incorporate scientists, artists, and others from around the world.

### For older learners:

- The United States and the United Kingdom maintain very friendly diplomatic relations today. Create a class discussion about the differences between the two governments (a representative democracy and a parliamentary monarchy) and consider how Queen Elizabeth II has reigned as their ceremonial head-of-state through over ten different presidential administrations.
  - Use the White House Historical Association's photo essay showing Queen Elizabeth II visiting the White House and presidents throughout the decades. [Click here.](#)
- At the White House, many State Dinners contain food relevant to the visiting country's cuisines. Assign students a country and have them create a menu of what the White House might serve for that country's leader. View the White House Historical Association's gallery of State Dinner desserts for inspiration. [Click here.](#)
- Have students write a journal entry reacting to the news of Theodore Roosevelt leaving the country to visit the Panama Canal in 1906, the first time a president left the U.S. while in office. Do the diplomatic advantages of such trips outweigh the risks?

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- Enhance the activity and learn more about Roosevelt’s trip by reading the article “Off for the Ditch” by Catherine Forslund on the White House Historical Association’s website. [Click here](#).

## For younger learners:

- Music provides an important form of expression, and the United States is home to many musical styles that contribute to our diverse culture. Consider as a class how music has been used to share U.S. culture with the world.
  - Find more information about music at the White House in the Classroom Resource Packet—Music and the White House. [Click here](#).