

## INTRODUCTION

Many guests have traveled to the White House to meet and dine with the president. Some of these visitors were leaders of foreign countries who came to manage international relations. These encounters at the Executive Mansion, combined with different presidents' agendas and goals, have helped shape the international position of the United States over the centuries. From the young nation with its first allies, to gifts of friendship and State Dinners, the Executive Mansion continues to play a role in managing international ties around the world. Explore various moments in United States history when the White House was a site for diplomacy.

## CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

An early act of U.S. diplomacy occurred during a visit from Marquis de Lafayette. During the American Revolution, the United States needed help in breaking away from Great Britain and sought the aid of France. Lafayette became the most famous French friend of American independence, and his popularity is reflected in the public park across from the White House, Lafayette Square (**Images 1 & 2**). In 1824 and 1825, his visit to the United States prompted the naming of the park. As a part of this trip, Lafayette traveled to the Executive Mansion in December



*Image 1*

1824 and again in September 1825. Careful to not offend the restored Bourbon monarchy, the White House presented a diplomatic cover story of an old friend visiting and downplayed the upcoming fiftieth anniversary of independence. Americans welcomed Lafayette as a hero and named the Washington, D.C., park in his honor. In 1891, a statue of him was erected in the square, cementing his legacy in the president's neighborhood (**Image 3**).

One year before Lafayette's first visit, President James Monroe issued his annual message to Congress outlining a diplomatic policy. Known today as the Monroe Doctrine, this created a framework for intervention by the United States to prevent European colonization in the Western

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Hemisphere (**Image 4**). Using the basis of the Monroe Doctrine, succeeding presidents would enhance the United States' international standing. For example, in 1860, President James Buchanan welcomed a Japanese envoy to the White House and opened trade with this Asian country (**Image 5**). Then in 1874, President Ulysses S. Grant hosted the first state dinner for a foreign leader, King



*Image 6*

David Kalakaua of the Sandwich Islands (present-day Hawaii) (**Image 6**). The king had royal food testers to sample each of the more than twenty courses served. While internal conflicts sometimes resulted in isolationist policies, nineteenth-century presidents still attempted to use the Executive Mansion to build diplomatic relations.

Just after the turn of the twentieth century, President Theodore Roosevelt assumed the presidency and further shaped White House diplomacy. His policy grew from the phrase “speak softly, and carry a big stick.” Roosevelt believed that the United States should have an increased role in global affairs and considered the construction of the Panama Canal to be his most important presidential action abroad. In 1906, Roosevelt visited the construction site of the canal and became the first president to leave the United States while in office (**Image 7**). At the White House, he also helped create more space for international and domestic visitors by renovating and enlarging the State Dining Room (**Image 8**).

Following Roosevelt, President William H. Taft envisioned “dollar diplomacy” which encouraged investments in the Americas and the Far East. While the policy saw its share of defeats, Taft’s term produced one international relationship that can still be seen in Washington, D.C. In 1912, Mayor Yuki Ozaki of Tokyo gifted the capital city with 3,000 cherry trees. First Lady Helen Taft ceremonially planted the first of these trees in the Tidal Basin in West Potomac Park. To continue celebrating this gift from Japan, the National Cherry Blossom Festival emerged as an annual

tradition. Later White House residents also participated in the festival, including the Nixons and Carters (**Images 9 & 10**).

Diplomatic relations were especially needed during World War II. To strengthen key friendships, the number of state dinners hosted at the White House increased. In 1939, President Franklin D. Roosevelt held the first state dinner for a British monarch, King George VI. Continuing throughout the war, Roosevelt invited many other leaders of Allied-recognized exiled governments like France, Greece, and Poland to dine at the Executive Mansion. In addition, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill was a frequent visitor to the White House, and this prompted the government's purchase of Blair House to serve as the president's official guest house (**Images 11 & 12**).

Following the end of World War II, tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union began to increase and resulted in a Cold War. Presidents used the White House as a place to ease diplomatic tensions through acts of hospitality. In 1959, President Dwight D. Eisenhower and First Lady Mamie Eisenhower invited Nikita Khrushchev, Chairman of the Soviet Council of Ministers, for a dinner at the Executive Mansion. Toward the end of the Cold War, Ronald Reagan held a state dinner for General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev and his wife Raisa (**Image 13**). This meal followed the signing of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, which decreased the Cold War military buildup.



*Image 13*

Many important heads of state have visited the White House over the years. Typically, an official visit includes an arrival ceremony, meetings, and a State Dinner, providing the president and first lady the opportunity to honor the visiting head of state and his or her spouse (**Images 14-16**). These visits show how the White House serves as an important stage for presidents to meet and work with foreign leaders and bolster diplomatic relations with nations around the world.

## 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%20Library/Main%20Index/Plans/9486.tif_info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Plans/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	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%20D%20Roosevelt/10.tif.info">https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Franklin%20D%20Roosevelt/10.tif.info</a>

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12	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>
13	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>
14	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>
15	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>
16	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>



## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Article: “The White House State Dinner” by Betty C. Monkman on the White House Historical Association website. [Click here.](#)
- Archive: White House State Dinners, 1974-76 (Menus, Programs, Photos, and Selected Other Documents) on the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library & Museum. [Click here.](#)
- Video: Arrival of Gorbachev at White House (1987) from C-SPAN. [Click here.](#)

## SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

- Invitations to a State Dinner at the White House are very exclusive and sought after. Have students work in groups 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 make the list. Remember to think of more than just celebrities incorporate scientists, artists, and others from around the world.
- 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.
- 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.](#)
  
- 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.](#)
  
- 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.](#)