



INTRODUCTION

For more than 100 years, Americans have used the White House as both stage and an audience to exercise their First Amendment rights of free speech, assembly, and petition. Taking many forms and advocating for various social and political causes, protests give voice to the American public and have the power to influence legislation and encourage government action. Explore the history of protest at the White House—from nighttime vigils to picketing to marches—as activists fought for women’s suffrage, civil rights, expressed their disdain with the Vietnam War, advocated for LGBTQ+ rights, and more.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

The First Amendment of the United States Constitution grants Americans freedom of speech and the rights “to peaceably assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.” Lafayette Park, located on the north side of the White House in the center of Lafayette Square, became an important site for the public exercise of the First Amendment. Refer to **Image 1**, in the chart below, to see a photograph of the White House from Lafayette Park. Due to its proximity to the White House, advocates of a wide variety of causes gathered in Lafayette Park and, in some cases, encouraged government action.

Women’s Suffrage Protests

In the early 1900s, women’s suffragists held the first protests outside of the White House. In 1916, the National Woman’s Party (NWP) moved their headquarters to Cameron House, located on Lafayette Square, to be closer to the White House. Suffragists challenged President Woodrow Wilson’s stance on women’s voting rights by delivering speeches, marching with banners, and picketing with signs in front of the White House gates. View **Image 2**, in the chart below, to see a photograph of suffragists picketing outside the White House in 1917. **Image 3**, below, pictures suffragist Alison Turnbull Hopkins standing outside the White House gates with a banner addressing the president. **Image 4**, also in the chart, features a photograph from an NWP “watchfire” demonstration in 1919. Watchfire

demonstrations were a form of protest in which suffragists burned copies of President Wilson's speeches to show their disapproval of his lack of support for their cause and policies.



Image 3. Suffragette Alison Turnbull Hopkins standing outside the White House with a banner that reads: "Mr. President how long must women wait for liberty" (circa 1917).

While supportive onlookers cheered, others criticized these actions. Hundreds of suffragists were arrested by White House policemen and charged with unlawful assembly and blocking the sidewalk. Some were even fined or sent to workhouses and prisons. Prompted by a banner labeling the president as "Kaiser Wilson," anti-suffragists threw eggs and tomatoes at the National Women's Party headquarters in August 1917, and a bullet was fired through a second-floor window. View **Image 5**, in the chart below, to see a photograph of the "Kaiser Wilson" banner. Despite backlash, suffragists continued to fight for the right to vote. Demonstrations continued until suffragists received the support of the president and Congress. In 1920, the 19th Amendment was ratified granting women the right to vote.

Civil Rights Protests

In the following decades, the White House continued to serve as a stage for demonstrations focused on various domestic and international issues. **Image 6**, in the chart below, is a photograph of the "Children's Crusade"—a group that protested for the release of political prisoners convicted under the Espionage Act of 1917. During the 1960s, however, the White House and Lafayette Park played a pivotal role in the Civil Rights Movement. Although the 14th and 19th Amendments guaranteed African American men and women the right to vote, racial discrimination, voter intimidation, and violence prevented Black Americans from fully exercising this right. On March 7, 1965, police violently beat peaceful demonstrators marching for African American voting rights in Selma, Alabama. Americans were horrified as they watched these events, known as "Bloody Sunday," on television. In response,

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some of the largest civil rights protests took place at the White House as demonstrators gathered and demanded that President Lyndon Johnson send federal troops to protect the marchers in Alabama. **Image 7**, below, is a photograph of African American demonstrators outside the White House in March 1965, just days after “Bloody Sunday.” Refer to **Image 8**, in the chart below, to see another photograph of protesters in front of the White House in 1965. If you look closely, you can see signs that read “Stop Brutality in Alabama.”

On March 11, 1965, a group of twelve protesters staged the first White House sit-in on the Ground Floor of the Residence and announced that they would not leave until they could talk to President Lyndon B. Johnson about the events in Selma. **Image 9**, in the chart below, features a photograph of the twelve young protesters sitting inside the White House. Although President Johnson’s White House diary suggests that the sit-in was



Image 7. Civil rights demonstrators in front of the White House on March 12, 1965.

a frequent topic of conversation that day, he did not meet with the demonstrators personally. Activists also used Lafayette Park to stage additional sit-ins, vigils, marches, and prayer meetings. On March 20, 1965, almost two weeks after “Bloody Sunday,” President Johnson sent federal troops to Alabama to ensure that the peaceful protests could continue.

On March 15, 1965, President Johnson introduced his proposed voting rights act to Congress and recognized the efforts of dedicated protestors across the country in encouraging the White House to pass federal legislation: “The real hero of this struggle is the American Negro. His actions and protests, his courage to risk safety and even to risk his life, have awakened the conscience of this Nation. His demonstrations have been designed to call attention to injustice, designed to provoke change, designed

to stir reform.” On August 6, 1965, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 into law surrounded by civil rights activists in the East Room of the White House. The Act protected African American voting rights.

Vietnam War Protests



Image 10. Vietnam War protesters outside the White House in 1966.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Americans gathered in front of the White House and in Lafayette Park to oppose U.S. military involvement in Vietnam. Students, peace activists, and concerned citizens marched, picketed, and staged sit-ins. Some demonstrators used other tactics including hunger strikes and theatrical presentations to raise awareness for their cause.

Image 10, to the left, pictures Vietnam war protesters outside the White House in 1966. Refer to **Image 11**, in the chart, to see a photograph of Vietnam war protesters in 1968. Demonstrators are carrying signs that read “No more...Stop the war” and “End the Draft.” Susan Ford Bales, President Gerald R. Ford’s youngest child, later described hearing some of these protests: “I think the hard part was the demonstrations that go on outside of the White House. My bedroom was on the north side, so I could hear the demonstrators...Having grown up in politics you begin—I think from birth—to realize that there's always going to be somebody on the other side.” **Image 12**, in the chart, features a photograph of the view of Lafayette Park from inside the White House during the Clinton administration.

LGBTQ+ Protests

LGBTQ+ protests also took place in Lafayette Square and in front of the White House from the late 1900s to present day. On April 17, 1965, Frank Kameny led the first gay rights picket outside the White House in response to the “Lavender Scare,” a period during the Cold War when thousands of

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gay U.S. government employees were wrongly terminated as homosexuality was linked to communism and criminal activity. Although early pickets did not receive much media attention, the 1969 Stonewall Uprising in New York City reignited the movement. On October 14, 1979, 25,000 protesters advocating for LGBTQ+ rights marched across Lafayette Square and in front of the White House during the first National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights.

Inadequate responses to the HIV/AIDS crisis and discriminatory policies, such as President Bill Clinton’s “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” (DADT) policy—a law that prevented openly lesbian, gay, and bisexual Americans from serving in the U.S. military—sparked protests throughout the 1980s and 1990s. On October 11, 1987, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) led a protest at the White House as part of the second March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights. The 1993 March on Washington for Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Equal Rights and Liberation attracted an estimated one million demonstrators and is recognized as one of the



Image 13. The White House lit in rainbow colors following the *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision (2015).

largest protests in U.S. history. LGBTQ+ demonstrations continue today, and recent events include the 2009 National Equality March and the 2017 National Pride March. After years of activism, President Barack Obama repealed DADT in 2011. In 2015, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of same-sex marriage in the landmark *Obergefell v. Hodges* case. Following the decision, the White House was lit in rainbow colors—as seen in **Image 13** above—and a crowd gathered to celebrate.

Conclusion

The National Park Service (NPS) regulates all First Amendment activities in Lafayette Park and preserves the space to make it available for all citizens’ enjoyment. Organizers are required to obtain a

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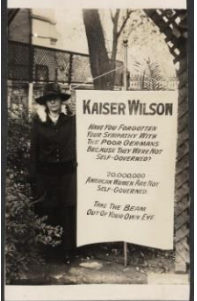
permit from NPS for any demonstration that is expected to involve more than 25 people. NPS does not discriminate against causes and works to ensure equality among demonstrators by providing an environment in which any voice can be heard. See an aerial photograph of Lafayette Park from 2016 in **Image 14** in the chart.

The White House and Lafayette Park have and continue to serve as stages for demonstrations focused on causes that are not discussed in-depth in this essay including Native American rights, gun control, and more. In 2020, thousands of Americans gathered in front of the White House—and across the country—to protest police brutality after the murder of George Floyd. From the first suffragist pickets to current protests, Americans make their voices heard in front of one of the nation’s greatest symbols of freedom and democracy—the White House.









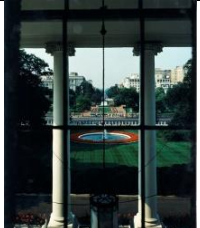
IMAGES

Click on web link to access online and for larger viewing



Source	Title	Date	Created By	Courtesy Of	Thumbnail	Web Link
1	North View and Lafayette Park in Early Spring	2014	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/President's%20Neighborhood/111476.tif.info
2	Woman Suffrage Pickets At White House	1917	Harris & Ewing, Washington, D.C.	Library of Congress		https://www.loc.gov/item/hec208005262/
3	Suffragist Alison Turnbull Hopkins Holds Banner at Northwest Corner of White House Grounds	1917	Unknown	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/1629.tif.info
4	Party Watchfires Burn Outside White House, Jan. 1919.	1919	Harris & Ewing, Washington, D.C.	Library of Congress		https://www.loc.gov/resource/mnwp.276030/
5	Virginia Arnold Holding Kaiser Wilson Banner	1917	Harris & Ewing, Washington, D.C.	Library of Congress		https://www.loc.gov/item/mnwp000220/

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6	Group Appealing to the President for the Release of Political Prisoners	1922	Herbert E. French	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/1490.tif.info
7	African American Demonstrators Outside the White House	1965	Warren K. Leffler	Library of Congress		https://www.loc.gov/resource/ds.05267/
8	Demonstrators in front of White House	1965	Thomas J. O'Halloran	Library of Congress		https://www.loc.gov/item/2016646660/
9	Sit-In Demonstrators at the White House	1965	Cecil Stoughton	LBJ Library photo by Cecil Stoughton		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital-Library/Main%20Index/Events/130970.tif.info
10	Vietnam Protestors at the North Fence, 1966	1966	James P. Blair	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/4901.tif.info
11	Anti-Vietnam War Protest and Demonstration in Front of the White House	1968	Warren K. Leffler and Thomas J. O'Halloran	Library of Congress		https://www.loc.gov/item/2010646065/
12	North View to Lafayette Park from White House	Ca. 1996	Erik Kvalsvik	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Views/1414.tif.info



13	White House Lit in Rainbow Colors for Pride	2015	Patrick Rodenbush	National Archives and Records Administration		https://catalog.archives.gov/id/236748334
14	Aerial View of Lafayette Square	2016	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/President's%20Neighborhood/1111785.tif.info

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Articles

- “Civil Rights Protests and the White House” by Lina Mann for the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- “From the Suffragists to the ERA: Women’s Rights Protests and Lafayette Park” by Colleen Shogan for the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- “LGBTQ+ Protests in Lafayette Square” by Sarah Fling for the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)

Collection

- “Protest at the People’s House” by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)

Podcast

- “The White House 1600 Sessions: Women’s Suffrage and the White House” by the White House Historical Association. [Listen here.](#)

Audio/Video

- “The Bonus Army: How a Protest Led to the GI Bill” by Radio Diaries for NPR. [Click here.](#)



- “Woman's Suffrage, the National Woman's Party, and the White House” by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

For all learners:

- Explore WHHA’s “Protest at the People’s House” gallery to see photographs from protests throughout history. [Click here.](#)
- In 2021, three wayside exhibit markers about enslaved labor and the construction of the White House, the preservation of Lafayette Square, and the history of demonstrations at Lafayette Square were installed in Lafayette Park by the White House Historical Association and the National Park Service. Listen to an audio recording of the demonstration-focused wayside [here.](#) Listen to a discussion with the narrators of the wayside markers [here.](#)

For older learners:

- The First Amendment of the United States Constitution states: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for redress of grievances."
 - What freedoms are protected in the First Amendment? Why has Lafayette Park become an important place for people to express their First Amendment rights? Write down your thoughts making connections between protests and the White House.
- If a demonstration in Lafayette Park will include more than 25 people, the National Park Service requires a permit. Imagine you are organizing a demonstration in Lafayette Park and need a permit. Research a social or political issue that you feel passionate about and write a

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persuasive statement answering the following questions: Why is the demonstration important? Why should it take place? Who may be impacted?

- [Click here](#) for more specifics on permits from the National Park Service.
- Examine President Lyndon Johnson’s diary entry for March 11, 1965. [Click here](#) and use the option to browse by date. Identify President Johnson’s response to the White House sit-in and create a timeline of what happened at the White House that day.

For younger learners:

- From the Contextual Essay, Susan Ford Bale’s quote demonstrates that protests in Lafayette Park can be heard inside the White House. She added that one of her dad’s favorite sayings was: “You need to learn how to disagree without being disagreeable.” What are some ways that people can disagree without being disagreeable, and why is this important?