

Security and the White House



INTRODUCTION

Today, the president of the United States, the first family, and the White House are protected and monitored by full-time security, but this has not always been the case. From the White House's earliest residents to today, security at the White House has changed dramatically. Although the first protective fence was built around the White House in 1801, the Secret Service did not provide full-time protection for the president until 1901. Living in the White House can create a difficult environment because the president's work and private life are publicly visible. Enhanced security measures ensure that the first family can feel safe in their home and in public. Explore the history of security at the White House.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

In 1801, President Thomas Jefferson initiated the earliest security measures at the White House when he ordered a fence to be built around the grounds—an area of about eight acres of land surrounding the residence. See a diagram of the fence layout in **Image 1** in the chart below. The fence established a security perimeter around the White House and provided a barrier of privacy around the gardens of the South Grounds. Later, guards were stationed both at the doors of the White House and outside the gates surrounding the residence. Some members of Congress initially opposed the presence of security guards at the White House out of fear that the president could potentially create a personal army. During the War of 1812, President Madison assigned a small militia unit to the White House grounds with a cannon, but this small force fled from British troops on August 24, 1814, when the British burned the White House, Capitol, and other government buildings. In the following years, however, security at the White House increased with additional fencing and iron gates. The militia was also replaced by security officers with the sole intent of protecting the president and the White House. A permanent White House security force was established in 1842 during the John Tyler administration. In 1853, President Franklin Pierce became the first president to have a full-time bodyguard. President Pierce set a precedent of maintaining a two-level security detail at the White

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House consisting of an outer perimeter to protect the building and an inner perimeter to directly guard the president.



Image 2. A guard standing outside the White House gates during the Civil War (circa 1864).

Security concerns at the White House escalated during the Civil War (1861-1865). During the first few weeks of the conflict, Confederate forces were located just across the Potomac River in Alexandria, Virginia, which left the White House open to attacks. Although President Abraham Lincoln recognized the vulnerable position of the White House, he wanted to reassure the American people and guarantee that citizens would still have access to the building—as was custom at the time. Although Union soldiers were stationed at the White House throughout the war, it remained open to the public. The Metropolitan

Police guarding the residence dressed in civilian clothes and concealed their firearms while uniformed officers protected the gates. The fencing controlled public access to the White House from the streets. View **Image 2**, above, to see a photograph of a guard standing outside the iron gates around the White House in 1864. **Image 3**, in the chart below, pictures the Cassius M. Clay Battalion of the Union Army on the South Lawn in 1861. The battalion was tasked with defending the White House during the Civil War.

The origins of the Secret Service also trace back to the Civil War. Established in 1865 as part of the Department of Treasury, seen in **Image 4** in the chart below, the Secret Service was not initially formed to provide protection for the president. At first, the Secret Service was responsible for tracking down counterfeit, or fake, currency. Two years later, the agency expanded its scope to include the investigation of individuals suspected of conducting fraud against the government. After receiving numerous threats, the Secret Service began providing informal, part-time protection to the president

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in 1894 during the Grover Cleveland administration. President William McKinley's assassination in 1901, however, prompted Congress to ask the Secret Service for full-time protection of the president. The following year, President Theodore Roosevelt became the first chief executive to receive this protection. President Roosevelt, however, was not always fond of the restrictions set by his guards and would often sneak away to go for a hike or a horseback ride. **Image 5**, above, is a photograph of Archie and Quentin



Image 5. President Theodore Roosevelt's youngest sons, Archie and Quentin, standing alongside uniformed guards near the White House (1902).

Roosevelt—President Roosevelt's youngest sons—standing alongside uniformed guards at the White House in 1902.

World War I (1914-1918) and World War II (1939-1945) further transformed security at the White House. After the United States entered World War I in 1917, Congress moved for the Secret Service to provide protection for every member of the first family—not just the president. This is a duty that continues today. In the same year, President Woodrow Wilson and his cabinet approved the establishment of the American Protective League (APL). The APL was a privately funded organization dedicated to investigating domestic threats to the country—such as potential spies and draft dodgers. In its first year, the APL had significant support and gained between 250,000 and 300,000 members in over 600 cities across the country. Facing criticism for its sometime extreme activities, the APL was short lived, however, and was dismantled after the war's end in 1919.

The United States entered World War II in December 1941, bringing even greater change to the White House. Concerned about the safety of the president and the first family, an air raid shelter was constructed under the East Wing and security agents set up new guard houses around the grounds.

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Image 6. A guard house located outside the West Wing of the White House (circa 1902-1934).

Armed guards patrolled the roof of the White House. The Secret Service installed bulletproof glass in the Oval Office and covered windows with heavy curtains to block out light so that enemy planes could not locate the house at night. Additionally, the two small streets that flanked the mansion, West and East Executive Avenues, were closed to the public. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, however, did not allow all proposed security measures to be

implemented. He rejected proposals to paint the White House in camouflage and to place a perimeter of tanks around the grounds. **Image 6**, above, features a photograph of a guard standing outside the West Wing of the White House, taken between 1902 and 1934. If you look closely, there is a small guard house outside the building.

White House security has continued to increase since World War II. Amidst the threat of the use of nuclear weapons during the Cold War, the government purchased a helicopter to provide the president with a quick escape route from the White House in case of emergency. **Image 7**, to the right, features a photograph of President Dwight D. Eisenhower next to the first presidential helicopter, the Bell UH-13J Sioux, on the South Lawn of the White House in 1957. Since then, the president has



Image 7. President Dwight D. Eisenhower standing next to the first presidential helicopter—a Bell UH-13J Sioux—on the South Lawn of the White House Grounds (1957).

increasingly used special helicopters to travel quickly to and from the White House – a modern convenience that can also provide a quick escape in the event of an emergency.

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In response to the Oklahoma City Federal Building bombing in 1995, Pennsylvania Avenue—located on the north side of the White House—was closed to all vehicle traffic. Over time, the fences enclosing the White House Grounds have continued to undergo improvements to increase security. Refer to **Image 8**, in the chart below, to see a photograph of the current entry gate on the northwest side of the White House. **Image 9**, also in the chart, pictures tourists taking photos in front of the north side of the White House as police officers look on in 2008. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, led to even more increased security at the White House. While the public can still tour the building, they must request tickets in advance through a member of Congress and undergo a background check prior to entry.

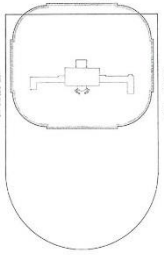




For generations, first families have attempted to retain some aspects of a normal life after moving into the White House. View **Image 10**, in the chart below, to see a photograph of Tricia Nixon signing autographs for the public at the annual Easter Egg Roll in 1971 surrounded by police and Secret Service. To remain safe, however, the president and the first family must adapt and surrender some of the everyday freedoms of the average citizen.

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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	Original Wooden Fence Line	1927	United States National Park Service	National Archives and Records Administration		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital-Library/Main%20Index/Plans/1112635.tif.info#c=%2Ffotoweb%2Farchives%2F5017-Digital-Library%2F%3Fq%3D1112635.tif%2520
2	Sentry on Duty at the White House Gates, Civil War Era	Ca. 1864	Montgomery Cunningham Meigs	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Views/2465.tif.info
3	Union Battalion on the South Lawn	1861	Unknown	National Archives and Records Administration		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Views/4970.tif.info
4	U.S. Department of the Treasury and Washington Monument	2014	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/President's%20Neighborhood/1111564.tif.info
5	Police Roll Call Inspection at the White House	1902	Frances Benjamin Johnston	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Theodore%20Roosevelt/1577.tif.info

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6	Police Box in the Rear of the Executive Offices	Unknown	National Photo Company	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Views/2945.jpg.info
7	Eisenhower Prepares to Board Helicopter	1957	Unknown	Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA, National Park Service		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Dwight%20D%20Eisenhower/4107.tif.info
8	North View of the White House	2008	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Views/1112626.tif.info
9	Northwest Entry Gate	2015	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Views/1112628.tif.info
10	Tricia Nixon Signing Autographs at the Easter Egg Roll	1971	Unknown	Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Richard%20Nixon/1672.tif.info

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Essay: "The American Protective League and White House Security During World War One" by Bethany Nagle for the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Essay: "Secret Service and the Presidents" by Joel D. Treese for the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)

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SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

For all learners:

- The Secret Service provides code names for first family members that typically all begin with the same letter in the alphabet. For example, John F. Kennedy's code name was "Lancer" and Jacqueline Kennedy's was "Lace." President Ronald Reagan was referred to as "Rawhide" and President Barack Obama, "Renegade." Create a code name for yourself and for your family members or classmates. Explain why you chose the codename for each person.

For older learners:

- In 1842, a permanent security force was established for President John Tyler. At the time, some members of Congress opposed the presence of security guards at the White House out of fear that the president could potentially create a personal army. Senator John J. Crittenden of Kentucky said the guards "might be metamorphosed into a political guard for the executive...it would not be entirely safe to organize such a corps. It was a little sort of stand guard, which might eventually become a formidable army." If you were a member of Congress in the 1840s, do you think you would have similar concerns? Why or why not? Discuss your thoughts with a classmate, family member, or friend.

For younger learners:

- Imagine that your parent or caretaker is the president, and you are followed by Secret Service every day. Write a diary entry of every activity that you do in a typical day and write how it feels to be accompanied by Secret Service all day. Would you want to be a first kid? Share your thoughts with a classmate, family member, or friend.