



INTRODUCTION

The President of the United States encounters many people, and not all those individuals have good intentions. Politics can create a hostile environment for the president’s work and private life. Above all, the first family needs to feel safe in their home, the White House. Over the centuries, security measures at the Executive Mansion have drastically increased. Learn about the history of White House security including the creation of the Secret Service and protective structures built around the mansion.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

In 1801, President Thomas Jefferson instructed that a fence be placed around the White House Grounds, which were about eight acres at the time. This barrier provided him with privacy for the South Grounds’ gardens and also helped establish a security perimeter (**Image 1**). In this early period, guards were placed around the gates and at the doors of the White House, but it was not until 1842 that a permanent security force was established during John Tyler’s administration. This small force was met with opposition from Congress. Some senators and representatives feared that the president would use these security guards to create his own personal army. Once it was understood that this concern was unfounded, the president’s security increased in 1853 when President Franklin Pierce became the first to have a full-time bodyguard. This action created the precedent for a two-level security detail – an outer perimeter protecting the house and an inner perimeter directly guarding the president.

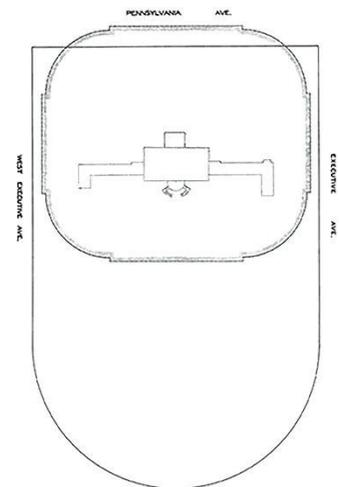


Image 1

Security concerns escalated during the Civil War. During the first weeks of the conflict, Confederate forces were just across the Potomac River in Alexandria, Virginia. President Abraham Lincoln understood the concerns but also did not want the White House to become an army camp that was



closed off to the American people. Working with Lincoln, some of the Metropolitan Police guarding the Residence dressed in civilian clothes and concealed their firearms while uniformed officers protected the gates (**Image 2**). In addition, Union soldiers were stationed at the mansion throughout the war, but it remained open to the public (**Image 3**).

Though not initially intended as protection for the president, the Secret Service also got its start around the time of the Civil War. Originally formed for the Department of Treasury in 1865, the Secret Service was tasked with tracking down counterfeit currency (**Image 4**). Two years later, its responsibilities grew to include investigating persons conducting fraud against the government.



Image 5

The Secret Service's role in guarding the president began under President Grover Cleveland in 1894, but this was informal and considered to be part-time protection. President William McKinley's assassination in 1901 prompted Congress to ask the Secret Service for full time protection of the president, and the following year Theodore Roosevelt became the first chief executive to receive this coverage (**Image 5**). However, Roosevelt did not always appreciate the restrictions set by his guards, sometimes sneaking away from the White House Grounds to go for a hike or a horseback ride. Presidents William H. Taft and Calvin Coolidge also often tried to escape their guards (**Image 6**). Presidents were learning the limits of being the leader of the United States.

The World Wars of the twentieth century would greatly change security at the White House. As the United States entered World War I in 1917, the decision was made to protect every member of the first family, not just the president, a duty that continues today. In the same year, President Woodrow Wilson also approved the establishment of the American Protective League. This group helped to investigate potential internal threats to the country. In less than a year, it is estimated that the League numbered between 250,000 to 300,000 members in over 600 cities across the country.

The League assisted the president in investigating potential spies and draft dodgers, but was dismantled after the war's end in 1919.

World War II would bring even greater change to the White House. The United States entered the war in December 1941. Worried about the safety of the president and his family, builders constructed an air raid shelter under the East Wing and security agents set up new sentry boxes around the grounds. Still, President Franklin D. Roosevelt did not give the guards free reign (**Image 7**). He dismissed their recommendations to paint the White House in camouflage and objected to having a perimeter of tanks around the mansion. The Secret Service did install bulletproof glass in the Oval Office and covered windows 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.

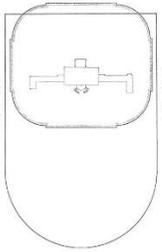


Image 7

White House security has continued to increase since World War II. In 1957, the threat of nuclear war prompted the government to purchase a helicopter for the president to quickly escape the mansion quickly (**Image 8**). In 1995, Pennsylvania Avenue on the north side of the White House was closed to all vehicular traffic as a response to the Oklahoma City bombing, and the fence around the grounds has continued to undergo improvements (**Images 9 & 10**). While the public can still tour the mansion, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 led to increased security screening and required visitors to request tickets in advance through a Member of Congress. For generations, first families have attempted to retain some semblance of a normal life after they moved into the White House, but to ensure their safety they have been forced to adapt and forego some of the everyday privileges of the average citizen (**Image 11**).

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%20Library/Main%20Index/Views/1112635.tif.info
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

SECURITY AND THE WHITE HOUSE



6	President and Mrs. Coolidge leaving First Congregation Church	1925	National Photo Company	Library of Congress		https://www.loc.gov/item/94509224/
7	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
8	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
9	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
10	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
11	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



SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

- Organize a class debate about the creation of a permanent security force in 1842 for President John Tyler. At the time, Senator John J. Crittenden of Kentucky said the guard “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.”
- Have students imagine they are the child of a president and followed by Secret Service daily. Have them keep a diary of every activity they do for an entire day and then write their response to being followed to all these activities. Then, create a class discussion on who would want to be a first kid.
- The Secret Service provides code names for first family members. These code names typically all begin with the same letter in the alphabet. For example, John F. Kennedy was “Lancer” and Jacqueline Kennedy was “Lace”. Other presidential code names include “Rawhide” for Ronald Reagan and “Renegade” for Barack Obama. Create a code name for yourself and for your family members or classmates.