

INTRODUCTION

For more than 100 years, people have exercised their First Amendment rights to speak out using the White House as both their stage and audience. Many of these protests have influenced legislation and encouraged government action. Demonstrations at the White House have taken the form of nighttime vigils, marches, picketing, and other peaceful activities.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

The United States Constitution provides for “the right of the people to peaceably assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.” Lafayette Park, located on the north side of the White House, has become an important place for public exercises of the First Amendment, which protects Americans’ freedom of speech (**Image 1**). Advocates of a wide variety of causes have long understood the relevance of the location and used it in their attempts to effect change. Sometimes their campaigns changed the views of fellow citizens including government decision makers.

In 1916, the National Woman’s Party moved their headquarters to Lafayette Square. Suffragists, wanting to confront President Woodrow Wilson about women’s voting rights, gave speeches, marched with banners demanding the right to vote, and stood with picket signs in front of the White House gates (**Images 2-4**). Supportive onlookers cheered; others hissed and accused the protestors of “bad manners and mad banners.” Hundreds of women were arrested, charged with inciting unlawful assembly and obstructing the sidewalk. In August 1917, an unruly crowd, upset by a banner labeling the president “Kaiser Wilson,” threw eggs and tomatoes at the Congressional Union for Woman Suffrage headquarters, and a bullet was fired through a second-floor window (**Image 5**). While delivering a speech in the park in 1918, one woman declared, “I stand at the foot of the monument to the great



Image 3

PROTEST AT THE WHITE HOUSE



Lafayette who fought for American freedom. We fight today for the freedom of American women.” The protests continued until suffragists received the support of the president and Congress, and the 19th Amendment, which granted women the right to vote, was ratified in 1920.



Image 7

Protests about a variety of domestic and international issues continued in front of the White House over the next few decades (Image 6). During the 1960s, Lafayette Park played a pivotal role in the Civil Rights Movement as supporters protested racial discrimination. The 14th and 19th Amendments guaranteed all African Americans the right to vote, but throughout the country many were denied the

opportunity to exercise this right. In 1965, demonstrators gathered to object police violence against peaceful protesters in Selma, Alabama, who were marching to demand equal voting rights for African Americans. Supporters positioned themselves in front of the White House and demanded that President Lyndon Johnson send federal troops to protect the marchers in Alabama (Images 7 & 8).

On March 11, 1965, a group of twelve protesters staged a sit-in inside the Ground Floor of the White House and announced that they would not leave until they could talk to the President about the events in Selma (Image 9). Johnson’s White House diary shows that the sit-in was a frequent topic of conversation for the President that day, although he did not meet with them personally. Other activists used Lafayette Park to stage additional sit-ins, vigils, marches, and prayer meetings that, along with the backlash from the violence during the march, prompted Johnson to send federal troops to Alabama.

PROTEST AT THE WHITE HOUSE



As President Johnson introduced his proposed voting rights act to Congress on March 15, 1965, he praised the protestors from across the nation, thousands of whom were not far from his doorstep at the time: “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.” In August 1965, the act was signed into law in the East Room, protecting African American voting rights.

In the 1960s and 1970s, people who were opposed to American involvement in the Vietnam War gathered at Lafayette Park to express their disapproval. In addition to pickets, sit-ins, and marches, some people used fasts and theatrical presentations to raise awareness for their cause (**Images 10 & 11**). Susan Ford, the youngest child of President Gerald R. Ford, 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. I was a senior in high school, freshman in college. Having grown up in politics you begin—I think from birth—to realize that there's always gonna be somebody on the other side” (**Image 12**).



Image 10

The hundreds of annual protests in Lafayette Park are regulated by the National Park Service, the agency that monitors First Amendment activities in the park while aiming to preserve this historic area and make it available for citizens’ enjoyment (**Image 13**). Organizers must obtain a permit from the National Park Service for any demonstration that involves more than 25 people. Extending from the suffragists to current protests, the park plays its role without discrimination. The National Park Service does not judge the theme or content of the protest, ensuring equality among demonstrators and providing an environment where any voice can be heard.



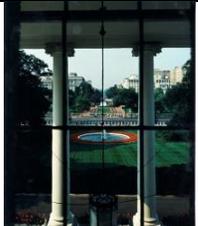
IMAGES

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/1111476.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	Suffragette 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://www.whitehousehistory.org/photos/sit-in-demonstrators-at-the-white-house
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

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13	Aerial View of Lafayette Square	2016	Bruce White	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/President%20Neighborhood/1111785.tif.info
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ADDITIONAL SOURCES

- Video: Woman's Suffrage, the National Woman's Party, and the White House, featuring Dr. Edward Lengel, Chief Historian at the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Article: “Picketing the White House: The Suffragist Movement during the Great War” by Dr. Matthew Costello on the White House Historical Association website. [Click here.](#)
- Radio: “The Bonus Army: How a Protest Led to the GI Bill” by Radio Diaries. [Click here.](#)



SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

- Consider the First Amendment of the United States Constitution: "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."
 - Ask students to identify the freedoms that are protected in the First Amendment and make connections to protests at the White House.
 - Why has Lafayette Park become an important place for people to express First Amendment rights?
- From the Contextual Essay, Susan Ford's quote demonstrates that protests in Lafayette Park can be heard inside the White House, and 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?
- Examine President Lyndon Johnson's diary entry for March 11, 1965. [Click here](#) and use the option to browse by date. Ask students to identify President Johnson's response to the White House sit-in and create a timeline of what happened at the White House that day.
- The National Park Service requires a permit for the use of Lafayette Park if the demonstration will include more than 25 people. Have students research an issue they feel strongly about and complete a permit application detailing the issue. Answer the questions: why the demonstration is important, what it will entail, why it should take place, and who would be impacted.
 - More specifics from the National Park Service. [Click here](#).