THE WHITE HOUSE AND WAR

THE WHITE HOUSE
HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

INTRODUCTION

The American colonies gained their independence by fighting a war against England. After the American Revolution, the newly formed United States began to establish itself as a nation by ratifying the Constitution, creating a capital in Washington, D.C., and building the President's House. As the home of the president, the White House has confronted war on various occasions in more than two hundred years of its existence. Learn about the physical scars created during the War of 1812, the victory gardens planted on the grounds during World Wars I and II, and other topics highlighting the history of the White House and war.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

The White House experienced various aspects of war throughout the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries, but war's most significant impact on the Executive Mansion occurred during the War of 1812. In August 1814, after the American defeat at the Battle of Bladensburg outside Washington, D.C., President James Madison and First Lady Dolley Madison made quick arrangements to leave the White House ahead of advancing British troops. With the assistance of her enslaved servants and hired help, Mrs. Madison saved the famous Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington before leaving. The British entered the White House that evening and set fire to the building (**Image 1**). Only the outer stone walls remained (**Image 2**). Despite considerations about moving the capital away to a more remote location inland, President Madison quickly assessed the damage and ensured that the White House was rebuilt on the same grounds. This decision showed the world that a young America would not be influenced by threats from other nations.

Image 1

During the Civil War, the Lincoln White House became the center of attention for both sides of a country at war with itself. Washington, D.C., and the White House were strategic targets of the Confederate forces, and until Union troops captured Alexandria, Virginia, enemy soldiers were just across the Potomac River. The President was able to keep in touch with his Union generals on the battlefields by using the telegraph office in the War Department building located next to the White House. Bodyguards protected President Abraham Lincoln, and Union soldiers frequented the White House Grounds (**Images 3 & 4**). Despite multiple threats to his safety, Lincoln continued to keep the White House doors open to those wishing to meet with the president. This simple act demonstrated to Americans that the government was confident about the survival of the United States.
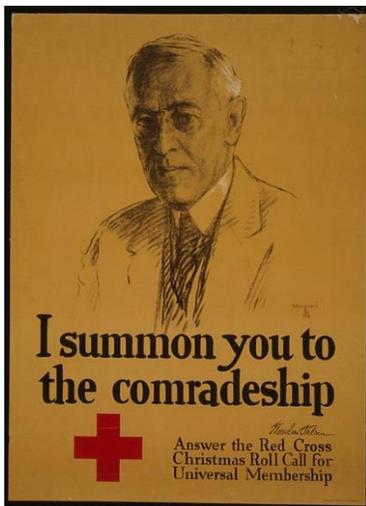
Image 8

Even when there was no fighting on American soil, the White House reflected a nation at war in numerous ways. In 1917, after President Woodrow Wilson asked Congress to enter World War I and declare war on Germany, he realized that his family must make sacrifices just like all Americans. A red, white and blue sticker was attached to a White House window, indicating that the Wilsons observed "meatless and wheatless" days to conserve food for U.S. troops and starving European allies. In addition, the White House planted "victory gardens" – small vegetable gardens meant to supplement food rations and support food production on the home front. The president also brought sheep to graze on the South Lawn of the White House, selling their wool to benefit the Red Cross (**Images 5-7**). The president and first lady led by example during World War I and made the White House a symbol for domestic war efforts (**Image 8**).

During World War II, victory gardens were again planted at Franklin Roosevelt's White House as wartime rationing returned. Roosevelt's beloved Scottish Terrier, Fala, even helped show Americans

how to ration. In a highly-publicized campaign, Fala donated his toys to promote scrap rubber collections for the war effort in 1942 (**Image 9**). During World War II, many foreign guests came to the White House, including British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, who visited to discuss war strategy with Roosevelt (**Image 10**).

Image 10

World War II also brought heightened security to the White House. Worried about the safety of the president and his family, the Secret Service installed bulletproof glass in the windows of the Oval Office. Sentries patrolled the roof with machine guns, and builders constructed a bomb shelter beneath the East Wing. The windows of the White house were covered with black paint or dark curtains to prevent light from escaping. These security precautions were taken in the event enemy planes might try to target and bomb the White House during the war.

The White House figures prominently in wartime decisions, as presidents have discussed and planned many actions in various White House rooms. For example, William McKinley kept a "War Room" on the Second Floor during the Spanish-American War in 1898 (**Image 11**). Franklin Roosevelt converted a room in the White House basement into a top-secret communications center called the Map Room. Recent presidents have relied on the West Wing's Situation Room to meet with military advisors. According to the Constitution, Congress retains the power to declare war, but the president serves as Commander-in-Chief of the Armed forces and leader of the nation. As the president's residence, the White House has not avoided war, but instead has adapted and changed to meet the demands of conflicts through the centuries.
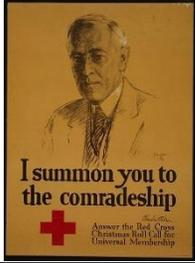
IMAGES

Click on web link to access online and for larger viewing

Source	Title	Date	Created By	Courtesy Of	Thumbnail	Web Link
1	Burning of the White House by British Soldiers in 1814	2004	Tom Freeman	White House Historical Association		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Views/5720.tif.info
2	Burnt Shell of the White House	1814	William Strickland	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Views/394.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	Flag Raising at the White House	1861	Alfred R. Waud	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Events/1112764.tif.info
5	President Wilson's Sheep	Ca. 1918-1920	National Photo Company	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Woodrow%20Wilson/1075.tif.info
6	Feeding President Wilson's Sheep	Ca. 1918-1920	Office of the Secretary of Agriculture	National Archives and Records Administration		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Woodrow%20Wilson/4936.tif.info

7	Wool from President Wilson's Sheep	Ca. 1918-1920	Unknown	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Woodrow%20Wilson/1201.tif.info
8	President Wilson and His Red Cross Recruitment Poster	1918	United States Printing and Lithograph Co.	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Woodrow%20Wilson/1112888.tif.info
9	Fala Donates Toys to the War Effort	1942	Unknown	Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Franklin%20D%20Roosevelt/8819.tif.info
10	Roosevelt and Churchill Meet with Chiefs of Staff	1943	Unknown	Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum/ NARA		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Presidents/Franklin%20D%20Roosevelt/10.tif.info
11	War Room, William McKinley Administration	1898	Frances Benjamin Johnston	Library of Congress		https://library.whitehousehistory.org/fotoweb/archives/5017-Digital%20Library/Main%20Index/Rooms/1683.tif.info

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Video: Picturing Life at the White House During the Civil War, featuring Evan Phifer, Research Historian at the White House Historical Association. Click here.

SUGGESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

- Reflect on why the White House was rebuilt in the same place after the British burned the residence in 1814. What are the advantages and disadvantages of this location? Keep in mind that the United States was a young country. How might other countries at the time have viewed keeping or moving the location?

- Compare and contrast the impact of each war on the White House based on information gained from the contextual essay. Enhance the discussion by using students' knowledge of United States history.

- From Washington, D.C., President Abraham Lincoln maintained contact with Union generals on the battlefield through the use of the telegraph. Research and try Morse Code, the code used for the telegraph where letters are represented by long and short sound signals.

- Debate whether the White House is a safe place to live during wartime. Why or why not? Have students use historical evidence where they can.
  - During this activity, remember the Secret Service, the president's protection team. The contextual essay mentions Secret Service during World War II. Learn more about this history by reading the short article, "Secret Service and the Presidents," on the White House Historical Association's website. Click here.