

INTRODUCTION

The United States emerged as a newly independent country after defeating Great Britain in the American Revolutionary War. The United States then began to establish itself as a nation by ratifying the Constitution, founding a capital city in Washington, D.C., and building the White House. Over the course of its 220-year history, the White House has served as the backdrop for presidential leadership and decision-making during several wars. Explore the ways in which the War of 1812, the Civil War, World War I, and World War II transformed how the White House operates as a home, office, and stage.

CONTEXTUAL ESSAY

The War of 1812 (1812-1815)

While the United States has confronted war on several occasions, the War of 1812 had the most significant impact on the White House building itself. On August 24, 1814, British troops entered the White House and set fire to the building following the American defeat at the Battle of Bladensburg, just miles outside of Washington, D.C. **Image 1**, to the right, features a modern painting of the White House in flames with British troops marching outside. Minutes prior, President James



Image 1. Modern painting of the White House on fire during the War of 1812. On August 24, 1814, the British set fire to the White House (Tom Freeman, 2004).

Madison and First Lady Dolley Madison quickly made arrangements to evacuate the White House as British forces advanced towards the residence. At the request of Mrs. Madison, enslaved valet Paul Jennings, steward John Sioussat, and gardener Thomas Magraw (or McGrath) removed Gilbert Stuart's celebrated portrait of George Washington from the wall before leaving. The aftermath of the fire was devastating—only the outer stone walls of the White House remained intact. Refer to **Image**

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2, in the chart below, to see an engraving of the burned White House in 1814. As debates surrounding the idea of moving the capital city and the White House to a safer location inland arose, President Madison immediately assessed the damage and made plans for the building's reconstruction on the same grounds. This decision sent a defiant message to the world—the young United States would not be threatened by other nations.

The Civil War (1861-1865)

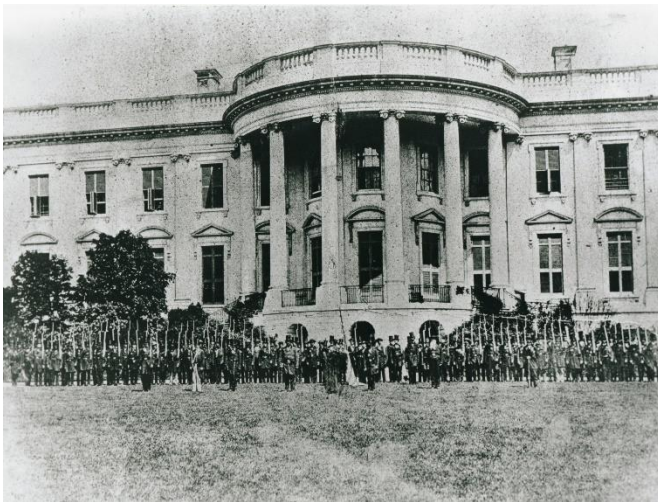


Image 3. The Cassius M. Clay Battalion of the Union Army standing on the South Lawn of the White House. The Cassius M. Clay Battalion was in charge of defending the White House from potential threats during the Civil War (1861).

Less than fifty years later, the United States was at war again. But this time, it was at war with itself. During the Civil War, Washington, D.C. and the Lincoln White House were focal points for both Union and Confederate forces. While the capital city served as the Union headquarters, it was also a strategic target for the Confederacy. Bodyguards protected President Abraham Lincoln and Union soldiers defended the White House as Confederate troops were close by, with the Confederate capital located in Richmond, Virginia. View **Image 3**, to the left, to see a

photograph of Union troops guarding the White House in 1861. President Abraham Lincoln often visited the telegraph office in the War Department building, located across the street from the White House, to remain in contact with Union generals on the battlefields. Despite multiple threats to his safety, President Lincoln kept the White House doors open to those wishing to meet with him. This simple act reassured Americans and demonstrated that President Lincoln was confident in his efforts to preserve the United States. **Image 4**, in the chart below, is a drawing of a flag raising ceremony on the South Lawn of the White House in the early days of the Civil War.

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World War I (1914-1918)

In 1917, President Woodrow Wilson asked Congress to enter World War I and declare war on Germany. The war had been ongoing in Europe and the Middle East since 1914. Although fighting did not take place on American soil during World War I, the White House reflected a nation at war in various ways as President Wilson and his family encouraged Americans to make sacrifices for the war effort. A red, white, and blue sticker plastered on a White House window indicated that the Wilsons observed “meatless and wheatless” days to conserve food



Image 7. White House staff collecting sheep wool to auction. During World War I, the proceeds made from selling wool were donated to the Red Cross (circa 1918-1920).

for U.S. troops and European allies. To further supplement food rationing, the White House planted “victory gardens”—small vegetable gardens to support food production on the home front. Rather than using groundskeepers to cut the grass, President Wilson brought sheep to graze on the South Lawn of the White House. The White House auctioned wool from the sheep and donated the profits to the Red Cross. Refer to **Image 5**, in the chart below, to see a photograph of the sheep grazing on the South Lawn of the White House. View **Image 6**, also in the chart, to see a man and a child feeding baby sheep on the South Lawn. **Image 7**, above, features a photograph of White House staff collecting wool to be auctioned off for the benefit of the Red Cross. **Image 8**, also in the chart, is a 1918 Red Cross membership recruiting poster featuring a portrait of President Woodrow Wilson. During World War I, President Wilson and First Lady Edith Wilson led the nation by example and used the White House as a stage to boost domestic war efforts.

World War II (1939-1945)



Image 10. President Franklin D. Roosevelt (front right) and British Prime Minister Winston Churchill (front left) seated in the Rose Garden at the White House surrounded by military Chiefs of Staff from the U.S. and the U.K. during World War II (May 24, 1943).

Once the United States entered World War II in 1941, the White House again served as a national symbol of unity as wartime rationing returned. President Franklin D. Roosevelt planted victory gardens at the White House and his beloved Scottish Terrier, Fala, demonstrated the importance of rationing to the American public. In a highly publicized campaign, Fala donated his dog toys to promote scrap rubber collections for the war effort in 1942. **Image 9**, in the chart below, pictures Fala with his toys.

President Roosevelt also welcomed foreign guests to the White House to discuss war strategy. As seen in **Image 10** to the left, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill met with President Roosevelt at the White House in 1943. Concerns regarding the safety of the president and the first family also brought heightened security to the White House. In the event that enemy forces might target the White House, the Secret Service installed bulletproof glass over the windows of the Oval Office. Guards patrolled the roof with submachine guns, builders constructed a bomb shelter below the East Wing, and windows were covered with black paint or dark curtains to prevent light from escaping.

Conclusion

While the United States Constitution grants Congress the power to declare war, the president is the Commander-in-Chief, and the White House continues to serve as home, office, and stage during wartime. As the president's residence, safety precautions protect the first family as the White House adapts and changes to meet the demands of conflict. As an office, presidents and their staff discuss tactics and make plans in the White House. President William McKinley created a designated "War

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Room” on the Second Floor of the residence during the 1898 Spanish-American War. See a photograph of the War Room in **Image 11** in the chart. President Franklin Roosevelt converted a room in the White House basement into a top-secret communications center known as the “Map Room.” Recent presidents use the West Wing’s Situation Room to discuss classified information and meet with military advisors. Arguably even more so during times of tension and uncertainty, Americans turn to the president and the White House for reassurance and guidance.

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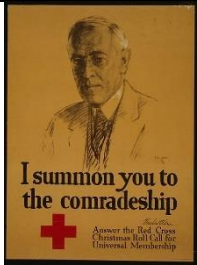



IMAGES

Click on web link to access online and for larger viewing

Source	Title	Date	Created By	Courtesy Of	Thumbnail	Web Link
1	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

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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

- Classroom Resource Packet: "Security and the White House" by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Collection: "America Under Fire" by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)

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- Gallery: “Civil War Veterans at the White House” by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Video: “Picturing Life at the White House During the Civil War” by the White House Historical Association. [Click here.](#)
- Video: “The Burning of the White House” by the White House Historical Association in partnership with UNTOLD. [Watch here.](#)

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

For all learners:

- President Abraham Lincoln used the telegraph to maintain contact with Union generals on the battlefield. Research and try Morse Code—the code used for the telegraph in which letters are represented by long and short sound signals.
- Learn more about the history of the Secret Service by reading a short article, “Secret Service and the Presidents,” on the White House Historical Association’s website. [Click here.](#)

For older learners:

- Why was the White House rebuilt in the same place after the British burned the building during the War of 1812? What are the advantages and disadvantages of its location in Washington, D.C.? Write a persuasive essay arguing for or against the relocation of the capital city and the White House.
 - Keep in mind that the United States was a young country. How might the international community have viewed keeping or moving the location of the capital?
- Using information from the contextual essay and your own knowledge of United States’ history, compare and contrast the impact of each war on the White House. Share your thoughts with a classmate, family member, or friend.

For younger learners:

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- Do you think the White House is a safe place to live during wartime? Why or why not?

Discuss with a classmate, family member or friend.