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Cartoon from the 1918-19 Spanish-Flu era, originally published in the *New York World* and more recently included in an article published in *Navy Medicine* (May-June 1986 issue). Image online, courtesy Library of Congress.

Harry Truman, the future president, was serving with U.S. forces in France when he heard that his fiancé, Bess Wallace, had the “flu.” Expressing joy that she was on the mend, Truman voiced what was on the minds of people everywhere. He hoped that the “flu” will “be an unheard of ailment from this time forward.”

That wish would not come true. The following are just a few examples of flu-devastated America:

- Red Cross workers, providing food to a Charlotte, North Carolina family “all down with the flu,” wore face masks to protect themselves from the virus. When they arrived at the home, the workers learned the mother had just died.
- In October of 1918, when the disease was at its worst, some newspapers observed that more whites than blacks were struck down. That experience did not seem universal, however. Howard University, in Washington, D.C. was shut down for a period of time in October, 1918.
- The flu epidemic also hit the Inuit (Eskimos) of Alaska where it killed about 60% of the population. Dr. Henry Greist was the only physician for a thousand miles. He wrote an account of the devastating effects of flu on the local population.
- When an Armistice was suddenly announced, on 11 November 1918, people thought the worst of the flu epidemic, like the war, was finally over. Monstrous crowds (such as those in Philadelphia and Chicago) gathered to celebrate. Some individuals (like those in the forefront of a gathering at Chicago’s Art Institute) wore surgical masks to ward off the virus. The disease spread anyway.
- Ten days later, on November 21st, San Francisco city officials sounded the flu “all-clear” siren. (By then, 2,122 San Franciscans had died from influenza and its complications.) Despite that all-clear signal, five thousand more San Francisco cases were reported in December.

Another catastrophe, in 1919, was kept from the American people. President Woodrow Wilson (who had survived a bout of flu himself) suffered a massive, partially paralyzing stroke. He never completely recovered. Later, when the truth came out, people said that Edith Wilson had served as America’s first female president.

At the time, no one knew what caused Spanish Influenza. There appeared to be no cure. Since then, scientists have looked for answers. An Inuit Eskimo woman, buried in Alaska’s permafrost, and two American soldiers, whose flu-infected tissue samples were preserved in paraffin for 80 years, may have given recent researchers a breakthrough.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/MORE-BAD-NEWS-Spanish-Flu-Pandemic>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/MORE-BAD-NEWS-Spanish-Flu-Pandemic>

Questions 2 Ponder

Does Humor Help Us to Deal with Disasters?

During the Spanish-Flu Epidemic, some newspapers published cartoons which referenced the deadly illness. The point was to help people find at least some humor amid all the death and dying.

Do you think providing some comic relief—when the news is otherwise always bad or frightening—is a good thing? Why, or why not?

Do you think cartoons, in such circumstances, disrespect the people who are ill or who have died? Why, or why not?

Why Was a U.S. President's Health Crisis Kept Quiet?

After already recovering from a bout of the flu, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson suffered a massive stroke on the 2nd of October, 1919. He was partially paralyzed as a result of the stroke.

His second wife of just a few years - Edith Bolling Wilson - refused to allow any member of the President's cabinet, or the press, to see him for many months after his stroke.

Until January, of 1920, the President had almost no contact with anyone outside his most-intimate circle of family and doctors. He did not meet with his cabinet until April of 1920.

Why, do you think, was President Wilson's health crisis kept from the American people?

Although World War I was over, by the time of Wilson's stroke, why would his cabinet members not have insisted on seeing the President before April of 1920?

If something happened to an American President today, do you think anyone could keep that information from the American people? Explain your answer.

Who Was America's First Claimed De-facto Female President?

While her husband recovered from a massive, partially paralyzing stroke - which he suffered on October 2, 1919 - Edith Bolling Wilson made key political decisions on her husband's behalf.

Despite his debilitated status, Wilson did not resign (at his wife's insistence). Edith - who preferred to be called "Mrs. Woodrow Wilson" - worried that losing office would kill him.

In seeking to protect her husband, Edith assumed a major political role. She decided what papers the President would review, what issues he would ponder and what people he would see.

Later, after people learned what had really happened, historians referred to Edith Wilson as America's first claimed de-facto female president.

A similar situation could not occur today since, in 1967, the American people ratified the 25th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. It states what will happen if an American President becomes disabled.

What do you think motivated Edith Wilson to take the actions she took in 1919 and 1920?

Why, do you think, members of the President's cabinet did not insist on meeting with him after so many months?

Do you think people were getting suspicious about Wilson not appearing in public for so long?

Do you think a similar situation could happen (or would be tolerated) in the 21st century?

Media Stream



Harry Truman

Image online, courtesy the U.S. National Park Service.

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Bess Wallace

Image online, courtesy the Harry S. Truman Library.

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Bess at Home

Image online, courtesy the Harry S. Truman Library.

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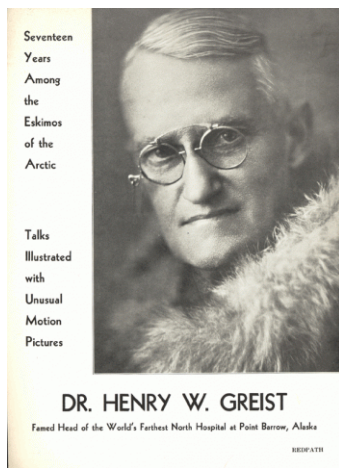


Spanish Flu - Wearing Face Masks to Avoid the Virus

Image online, courtesy the U.S. National Archives.

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Dr. Henry W. Greist

Image online, courtesy the University of Iowa Library, Redpath Chautauqua Collection.

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Philadelphia - Celebrating People Exposed to Spanish Flu

Image online, courtesy the U.S. National Archives.

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Spanish Flu - Chicagoans Exposed to Spanish Flu

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Gathering in Chicago - People Exposed to Spanish Flu

Image online, courtesy the U.S. National Archives.

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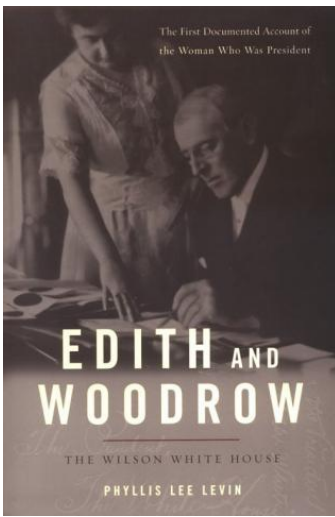
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Woodrow Wilson

Image online, courtesy the U.S. National Archives.

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[Edith and Woodrow - by Phyllis Lee Levin](#)

Image online, courtesy [amazon.com](#) website.

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