

Woodrow Wilson's Stroke: Should Disability Have Been Declared?

Fran O'Malley

INTRODUCTION

No fewer than six Presidents including Lincoln, Garfield, Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, Eisenhower and Lyndon Johnson have been so disabled for varying lengths of time that they could not carry on the duties of their office. By analyzing and deciding the most prolonged case of Presidential illness, that of Woodrow Wilson, students will arrive at an understanding of the complexities in attempting to declare the disability. The need for the 25th Amendment will also be realized. Students will be asked to dramatically re-enact the actual events surrounding President Woodrow Wilson's incapacitating stroke. Then, acting as a modern day Cabinet, students will be asked to decide the case of Wilson's disability in accordance with the provisions of the 25th Amendment, which was ratified in 1967.

This lesson is useful in teaching about Article II, the 25th Amendment, and the Wilson years 1919-1920. It is suggested that this lesson follow the unit on the defeat of the Treaty of Versailles when used in conjunction with a United States history course since Wilson's condition may help to explain the Treaty's defeat.

AUDIENCE

Senior high school/United State history or government classes

TIME TO COMPLETE

Two class periods

GOALS

As a result of this lesson, students will:

- understand the Twenty-fifth Amendment
- practice thinking and decision-making skills

MATERIALS

1. Props (optional). Be creative in designing your set. Students are valuable resources. A "bed," nightstand, water bottle and a concealed area accessible through a door are the only essentials. Your classroom door will serve the purpose nicely. It will be the entrance to President Wilson's bedroom and bathroom.
2. Handout 1 – Article II and Presidential Disability
3. Handout 2 – "Woodrow Wilson Suffers a Stroke" (Re-enactment)
4. Handout 3 – The 25th Amendment and Presidential Disability

PROCEDURES

1. Open the lesson by asking students if they think that there are any circumstances, other than "high crimes" or "misdemeanors," that would justify and necessitate relieving a President of his powers and duties. Lead students into a discussion about disability.
2. Distribute Handout 1. Ask students to read Article II, Section 1, Clause 6 and answer the comprehension questions. Go over each question with the class. The vagueness of this clause will result in much uncertainty. This confused state of mind will place the students in a quandary comparable to that in which Wilson, his advisers, and Congress found themselves in 1919.
3. Depending on the amount of time that you have to devote to this subject, the lesson can be presented in one of three ways. Ideally, students should be assigned before hand to the roles in the re-enactment. Give them enough time to prepare for the classroom re-enactment. For those pressed for time, roles can be assigned on the day of the class. Students, sitting at their desks, can simply read their parts aloud. As a last resort, distribute xeroxed copies of the re-enactment and have students read silently to themselves.

In the event that you do allow for a dramatic re-enactment, it is suggested that the teacher serve as narrator. Students who view the play are to be told that they will be asked to assume the role of Wilson's Cabinet in order to decide his disability. Once the re-enactment is completed, the actors will be asked to serve as members of Congress.

Later, they will be asked to resolve a disability conflict between the President, who does not accept his "disability," and his Cabinet, which has certified it.

4. Tell the students that they are about to view, hear or read about a retelling (Handout 2) of actual events which took place in 1919 and 1920 when President Wilson suffered a serious stroke and was recuperating from it. The entire script is based on the testimony of those whose roles they will be playing, as well as on the research of historians and medical experts. Tell the "Cabinet-students" that they will be asked to decide the President's ability following the re-enactment.
5. Re-enact the drama (or have students read it).
6. Immediately after the re-enactment, ask students if they are clear as to the procedures outlined in Article II for declaring disability. In all likelihood, they will not be. Distribute Handout 3 – "The 25th Amendment and Presidential Disability." Tell them that the Constitution was amended in 1967 in an attempt to clarify the procedures for declaring disability and related issues. Go over the discussion questions with the entire class and ask the "Cabinet-students" to decide President Wilson's disability using the procedures outlined in the 25th Amendment. Have the student who played the role of Vice-President Marshall lead the discussion so that the rest of the class hears their arguments.
7. Next, set up a scenario (if it has not developed already) in which the Vice-President and the Cabinet have certified the President's disability. Have the President attempt to reclaim his powers by notifying Congress that no disability exists. Assuming that the Cabinet has recertified the disability, inform the "student-Congress" that it is now up to them to resolve the conflict within the executive branch. Remind them that a 2/3 majority is needed.
8. Debrief students by raising the following questions for class discussion:
 - a. Which factor was most influential in your determination of Wilson's disability?
 - b. What reasons can be given to explain the fact that Wilson was not declared disabled?
 - c. Does the wording of the 25th Amendment leave unanswered any questions regarding Presidential disability?
 - d. What are the advantages and/or disadvantages of having the Vice-President and Cabinet certify disability?

EVALUATION

As the lesson progresses, you will be able to determine the students' level of understanding as each discussion question is addressed. A quiz, based on the discussion questions, may be developed as a final evaluation tool. Ask students to apply their legislation to other cases of Presidential disability.

TIPS FROM THE TEACHER

You may want to encourage more creativity within the classroom: first, by allowing students to view the play prior to introducing them to the Constitution's provisions on disability; second, by having them draft their own amendment which is designed to handle cases of Presidential disability. As a follow-up activity, have the students compare their own legislation to the 25th Amendment.

In dealing with younger or less talented students, you may want to create a scenario which is analogous to a case of Presidential disability, i.e., a teacher is so ill that it is necessary to hire a substitute as a temporary replacement. Many of the discussion questions raised in this lesson apply.

Information on other cases of Presidential disability and on the evolution of the 25th Amendment can be found in the two books by John D. Feerick which are cited in the bibliography.

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HANDOUT 1

“ARTICLE II AND PRESIDENTIAL DISABILITY”

Article II, Section 1, Clause 6:

Death, Removal, or Inability of President to Serve

“In case of the Removal of the President from office, or of his death, resignation, or inability to discharge the powers and duties of the said office, the same shall devolve on the Vice-President, and the Congress may by law provide for the case of removal, death, resignation, or inability, both of the President and Vice President, declaring what officer shall then act as President, and such officer shall act accordingly, until the disability be removed, or a President shall be elected.”

Discussion Questions: Students should be instructed to answer the following questions based on their understanding of Article II.

1. Who assumes the duties or office of the President in the event of disability?
2. Who has the authority to certify the President’s disability or inability?
3. What procedure must be followed in declaring Presidential disability or inability?
4. Did the founding Fathers choose to use two separate words (“disability” and “inability”) to refer to two different conditions?
5. May the President’s powers be removed only in the case of mental impairment or in cases of physical disability as well?
6. Does the officer upon whom Presidential powers and duties “devolve” become the President of the United States, or is he a temporary “Acting President” only?
7. For what length of time does the officer upon whom presidential powers and duties devolve, serve in his role as President?
8. May a “disabled” or “inable” President be declared “able” again? If so, by what means?
9. Does the President himself have any role in deciding his own disability?
10. Must a disability exist for a certain length of time before a President’s powers and duties can be removed, or is the duration of a disability not a consideration?

HANDOUT 2

“WOODROW WILSON SUFFERS A STROKE” (RE-ENACTMENT)

The Characters: (in order of appearance)

Rear Admiral Cary T. Grayson – President Wilson’s personal physician and trusted friend.

Woodrow Wilson – President of the United States from 1913 until 1921.

Edith Bolling Wilson – the President’s caring and protective (second) wife.

David F. Houston – Wilson’s Secretary of Agriculture.

Thomas R. Marshall – Wilson’s Vice-President. He showed signs of anxiety when the seriousness of Wilson’s condition and the topic of succession were discussed.

Robert Lansing – Wilson’s Secretary of State who raised the issue of disability on more than one occasion and, partly as a consequence, was dismissed by Wilson early in 1920.

Joseph P. Tumulty – The President’s personal secretary and trusted friend. Tumulty was part of the “bedroom circle” (which included Mrs. Wilson and Dr. Grayson) that guarded the President after his stroke.

Senator Albert Fall – Republican Senator from New Mexico. Fall was a political foe and critic of the President.

Dr. Francis X. Dercum – Neurologist who served as a medical consultant for the Wilsons.

The Script

Narrator: On September 25, 1919, while on a national speaking tour in which he was attempting to rally support for the Treaty of Versailles and U.S. participation in the League of Nations, President Woodrow Wilson fell ill in Wichita and was forced to cancel the rest of his trip. His close friend and personal physician, Cary T. Grayson, initially informed executive aides that “The President has suffered a complete nervous breakdown.” Later, he released the following statement:

Dr. Grayson: (addresses the class) “President Wilson’s condition is due to overwork. The trouble dates back to an attack of influenza last spring in Paris from which he has never entirely recovered. The President’s activities on this trip have overtaxed his strength and he is suffering from nervous exhaustion. It will be necessary for his recovery that he has rest and quiet for a considerable time.”

Narrator: The President arrived back in Washington on Sunday, September 28. Suffering from constant and throbbing headaches, he could not read, work or sleep. The First Lady, Edith Bolling Wilson, rose often during the course of each night to check on the President. At about 8:00 a.m. on October 2nd, Mrs. Wilson found the President sitting on the side of the bed trying to reach for a water bottle.

*Scene (The President sitting on the bed...one hand holding his head, the other reaching for a water bottle. Mrs. Wilson gets the bottle for her husband.)

President Wilson: “I have no feeling in my left hand. Will you rub it? But first, help me to the bathroom.”

*Scene (Mrs. Wilson helps the President into the bathroom.)

Mrs. Wilson: “I’m going to call Dr. Grayson. Will you be all right for a few minutes?”

President Wilson: (feebly responds) “Yes”

*Scene (Mrs. Wilson leaves the room. The President falls unconscious to the floor, making a loud noise. Mrs. Wilson rushes back into the room.)

Mrs. Wilson: “Oh, my God!”

*Scene (Mrs. Wilson grabs a blanket, covers the President, and places a pillow under his head. She then closes the door to the bedroom. Dr. Grayson arrives, finds the door locked, knocks and is admitted. The President is cut on his nose and temple. Together, Mrs. Wilson and Dr. Grayson help the President into bed. Dr. Grayson walks away from the bed, turns to the class and says...)

Dr. Grayson: “My God, the President is paralyzed!”

Narrator: In the days that followed, the President remained bed-ridden as his condition got worse. Absolute rest was ordered. Mrs. Wilson, Dr. Grayson and the President's personal secretary, Joseph Tumulty, shielded the President from any work and agitation. Visitors were not permitted (not even the Vice-President or Cabinet members). The seriousness of the President's condition was revealed to few people. On Sunday, October 5, Tumulty spoke in confidence to Josephus Daniels, the Secretary of the Navy, and David Houston, the Secretary of Agriculture. Both were shaken by the news that Wilson had suffered a serious stroke and that his left side was paralyzed. Secretary Houston met with Vice-President Thomas R. Marshall that afternoon for lunch.

*Scene (Houston and Marshall eating lunch)

Marshall: "Tell me, David, how bad is it?"

Secretary Houston: "I know very little except that the President is a very sick man. I cannot reveal much."

Vice-President Marshall: (appearing very nervous) "If anyone should know what's going on it should be me. Dr. Grayson has no right keeping me in the dark. I have not been well informed of the affairs of this administration and it would be a great tragedy for this nation if I were to assume the President's duties without warning."

Houston: "There is nothing more I can say."

Marshall: "I do not like the situation in which I find myself. I'll tell you one thing...I'm not going to be the one to usurp the President's authority. I'll not expose myself to the wrath of a woman, especially if she is the wife of the President of the United States."

Narrator: Concerns about the health of the President and his ability to function as President led to the calling of a Cabinet meeting by Secretary of State Robert Lansing. Prior to the meeting, which was held on Monday, October 6, Secretary Lansing met with Joseph Tumulty and Dr. Grayson, both of whom had been keeping a close eye on the President. The sensitive issue of disability was raised.

*Scene (Lansing talking to Tumulty and Grayson, who get more and more defensive)

Secretary Lansing: "In view of the President's condition, I think it necessary to consider placing the duties of the President in the hands of Vice-President Marshall. I brought a copy of the Constitution and would like your thoughts on the matter." (Lansing reads from the Constitution)

"In case of the Removal of the President from office,...or inability to discharge the powers and duties of the said office, the same shall devolve on the VicePresi..."

Tumulty interrupts: "Mr. Lansing, the White House is well aware of the Constitution. I have read it and do not find myself in need of any tutoring at your hands on the provision you have just read. Tell me something, however. Who has the authority to determine whether or not the President is disabled?"

Lansing: (pauses and in an uncertain fashion responds) "That decision would have to be made by you or Dr. Grayson, I suppose."

Tumulty: "Well, as long as the President is in his sickbed, I'll not be a party to ousting such a kind, loyal and wonderful friend. (Tumulty turns to Dr. Grayson and asks) Doctor...what are you thoughts?"

Grayson: "I will not be a party to the President's removal."

Tumulty: "And rest assured that we will stand together if anyone outside of the White House tries to certify the President's disability."

Narrator: Secretary Lansing brought up the issue of disability again at the Cabinet meeting the next day.

*Scene (Lansing meeting with Secretary Houston and the rest of the Cabinet. Lansing should face the class as if they are the Cabinet)

Secretary Lansing: "If Wilson is unable to attend to the affairs of government, Vice-President Marshall should act as President."

Secretary Houston: "We really need to know more about the President's condition. Send for doctor Grayson."

*Scene (Lansing goes to get Dr. Grayson and returns with him)

Secretary Houston: "Dr. Grayson, what can you tell us?"

Dr. Grayson: "The President's condition is touch and go. He should be bothered as little as possible. Any excitement may kill him. At this very moment he is already quite irritated by the fact that his Cabinet is meeting without his authority."

Narrator: After hearing about the President's irritated state, the subject of disability was quickly dropped. Nine days after his stroke it was announced that the President would not be allowed to leave his bed for an extended period of time. Thereafter, the President's "bedroom circle" (Grayson, Tumulty and Mrs. Wilson) closed ranks to protect the President from what they judged to be detrimental to his recovery. Admittedly, Mrs. Wilson decided which matters would be brought before the President for his consideration after consulting with the doctors.

*Scene (Tumulty delivering letters to Mrs. Wilson)

Tumulty: "Mrs. Wilson, I have been asked to deliver these letters to the President."

Mrs. Wilson: (looks over the envelopes...discusses a few with Dr. Grayson...sets some aside, and while walking towards the President's bedroom says) "Let me see how he is today."

*Scene (Mrs. Wilson leaves the classroom and returns a moment later)

Mrs. Wilson: (while handing over envelopes to Tumulty) "Here, Joseph. Please deliver these responses from the President."

Narrator: Over 30 years later, unopened letters to the President were found and read for the first time. The confusion and frustration which resulted from the protective wall which had been built around the President led to angry accusations about the decision making process at the White House. A particularly scathing remark was made by Senator Albert Fall, a Republican critic of the President.

*Scene (Senator Fall angrily addresses the class)

Senator Fall: "We have no President. We have a petticoat government! Wilson is not acting. Mrs. Wilson is President. We have a President in petticoats!"

Narrator: The role played by Mrs. Wilson has been debated for years. In her personal memoir, written after the President's death, Mrs. Wilson recalled a conversation she had with Dr. Francis Dercum, a consulting neurologist.

*Scene (Mrs. Wilson conversing with Dr. Dercum)

Mrs. Wilson: "My husband's recovery cannot be hoped for unless he is released from every disturbing problem during these days in which nature repairs the damage which has been done. How can I protect him from these problems when the country looks to the President as leader?"

Dr. Dercum: "Madam, it is a grave situation but I think you can handle it. Have everything come to you; weight the importance of each matter, and see if it is possible to solve them without the guidance of your husband. Every time you excite him, you are turning a knife in an open wound."

Mrs. Wilson: "Then had he better not resign, let the Vice-President succeed to the Presidency and he himself get that complete rest that is so vital to his life?"

Dr. Dercum: "No, not if you are up to the task. For Mr. Wilson to resign would have a bad effect on the country and a serious effect on our patient. If he resigned with the Treaty not yet ratified, his greatest incentive to recovery is gone."

Mrs. Wilson: "Well, then doctor, I shall begin my stewardship. But, I will never make a single decision regarding the conduct of public affairs. I shall only decide what is important and what is not, and when to present matters to my husband, and when to withhold them."

Narrator: Thus emerged the rumors of a "Petticoat Presidency." Altogether, 180 days elapsed between Wilson's initial collapse and his attendance at his first Cabinet meeting on April 14, 1920. He did not get out of bed until the end of October (1919), and did not begin walking until after Christmas. During this period, only a handful of outsiders were permitted in to see the President. The first visitors, the King and Queen of Belgium, were received on October 31. Others included the Democratic minority leader, Senator Gilbert Hitchcock (a week later), the Prince of Wales (November 13), and Senators Hitchcock and Fall (December 15) who had actually been sent as the eyes of Congress. Vice-President Marshall saw Wilson for the first time in 1921 at the inauguration of the newly-elected President, Warren G. Harding. Those who did visit the President invariably attested to the clearness of the President's comments. It is not certain, however, whether Mr. Wilson was, at all times, so clear of mind. The President's partial recovery was very slow and gradual. As time passed, he became more active in the affairs of government. He did, however, miss 21 Cabinet meetings called by Secretary of State Lansing. Wilson also terminated his relationships with Lansing and with the wartime adviser, Colonel Edward House. Additionally, twenty-eight bills became law by default of any action on the part of the President. When the President finally did sign four bills into law on October 22, 1919, with the assistance of the First Lady, his signature was so

illegible that a handwriting expert was hired to confirm its authenticity. On November 19, with the President still confined to his bedroom, the Treaty of Versailles was defeated in the United States Senate. Wilson has ordered Democratic Senators to reject any revisions in the Treaty even if such revisions were necessary for ratification. Worldwide pressure, some of which filtered through to the President, did not change the President's position. Although introduced in amended and original form again, the Treaty of Versailles was defeated, as were hopes for U.S. participation in the League of Nations. Some researchers have concluded that the stroke caused the President's thinking patterns to change, making it more unlikely for him to compromise. The President apparently denied some of the effects of his stroke, a condition common in stroke victims called agnosognosia, as well. It may be significant, however, to remember that the President himself did raise the issue of disability at one point. In Dr. Grayson's own memoirs, he recalled Wilson's comments which were brought up during the Treaty debates in the Senate.

*Scene (Wilson, in bed, speaking slowly to Grayson)

President Wilson: "I am seriously thinking about my duty to the country on account of my physical condition. My personal pride must not be allowed to stand in the way of my duty to my country. If I am only half-efficient I should turn the office over to the Vice-President. If it is going to take too much time for me to recover my health and strength, the country cannot afford to wait."

Narrator: Undeniably, President Wilson suffered a very serious stroke. The physical effects, including paralysis of the left side and impaired vision and speech, were real. The effects on the President's mental functioning are still being debated. One question remains to be considered: should Woodrow Wilson have been declared disabled, thereby permitting the duties of the office of the President to devolve upon Vice-President Marshall?

END

HANDOUT 3

“THE TWENTY-FIFTH AMENDMENT”

Section 3: President Declares Own Disability

“Whenever the President transmits to the President pro tempore of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives his written declaration that he is unable to discharge the powers and duties of his office, and until he transmits to them a written declaration to the contrary, such powers and duties shall be discharged by the Vice-President as Acting President.”

Discussion Questions

1. What role does the President play in deciding his own disability?
2. Under what circumstances might a President choose to declare himself disabled?
3. Does the office of the President devolve upon the Vice-President, or is he considered an acting President only?

Section 4: Vice-President and Cabinet Declare Disability

“Whenever the Vice-President and a majority of either the principal officers of the executive departments or of such other body as Congress may by law provide, transmit to the President pro tempore of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives their written declaration that the President is unable to discharge the powers and duties of his office, the Vice-President shall immediately assume the powers and duties of the office as Acting President.” Thereafter, when the President transmits to the President pro tempore of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives his written declaration that no inability exists, he shall resume the powers and duties of his office unless the Vice-President and a majority of either the principal officers of the executive department or of such other body as Congress may by law provide, transmit within four days to the President pro tempore of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives their written declaration that the President is unable to discharge the powers and duties of his office. Thereupon Congress shall decide the issue, assembling within forty-eight hours for that purpose if not in session. If the Congress, within twenty-one days after the receipt of the latter written declaration, or, if Congress is not in session, within twenty-one days after Congress is required to assemble, determines by two-thirds vote of both Houses that the President is unable to discharge the powers and duties of his office, the Vice-President shall continue to discharge the same as Acting President; otherwise the President shall resume the powers and duties of his office.”

Discussion Questions

4. Who is empowered to certify the President’s disability in the event that he does not declare it himself?
5. Is it possible for the President to reclaim his powers once he has been declared disabled by the Vice-President and Cabinet?
6. Can a President who has been declared disabled be prevented from reclaiming his powers? If so, by whom?
7. If a conflict develops between the Vice-President and Cabinet, who declare disability, and the President, who asserts no disability, how is the disability conflict resolved?
8. What majority is required for Congress to certify Presidential disability?