

**“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?

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