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Keeping a president's illness secret

By Orange County Register, adapted by Newsela staff on 06.11.14

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Franklin D. Roosevelt, Fala and Ruthie Bie at Hill Top Cottage in Hyde Park, N.Y. Photo: Margaret Suckley - Franklin

Delano Roosevelt Library/Wikimedia Commons

Woodrow Wilson was president of the United States during World War I. After the war, he needed to convince the American public to accept the Treaty of Versailles. This was the agreement that ended the war.

He started a tour of the country by train, giving speeches along the way. But three weeks into the tour, he collapsed after becoming exhausted. A week later, he had a stroke. The stroke left him unable to walk. He was in *very bad shape*.

Wilson was afraid that he was too sick to run the country. He wrote to his doctor and friend: “If I am only half-efficient I should turn the office over to the vice president. The country cannot afford to wait for me.”

But his wife and doctor convinced him to keep his condition a secret. For more than a year and a half, Wilson’s wife and advisers ran the country. The public wasn’t told about this.

This is an extraordinary example of a president keeping an illness secret from the public. But it is not the only one. Here are other examples of presidential illnesses that were kept secret from the public.

**Abraham Lincoln**

Even as a young man, Lincoln was usually sad, or melancholic. Today we believe he was depressed for most of his life. Lincoln often cried in public and read sad poetry. Despite his depression, Lincoln was able to lead the country through one of its most difficult times: the Civil War.

**Grover Cleveland**

In 1893, the U.S. was going through a financial crisis. Cleveland noticed a sore on the roof of his mouth that may have been cancer. Cleveland had it removed while sailing on his yacht. The boat’s crew had to swear to keep the operation a secret.

**Franklin D. Roosevelt**

FDR was president for 12 years, from 1933 to 1945. He led the United States during the Great Depression and World War II. But the public during that time didn’t know that he was paralyzed from the waist down due to polio.

**John F. Kennedy**

Kennedy had many health problems, including serious back pain and Addison’s disease, which caused physical weakness and yellow skin. JFK took as many as 12 pills at a time to deal with his illnesses.

**Ronald Reagan**

After a speech at the Hilton Hotel in Washington, D.C., Reagan was shot by John Hinckley. He was wounded in the chest and arm. At 70 years old, the wounds were especially serious for the president. *But the White House didn’t want to show weakness*. Reagan left the hospital after only 13 days even though it took him about seven months to recover fully. Later in his presidency, Reagan sometimes had trouble remembering names and other details. He was in his late 70s. In 1994, Reagan announced that he was suffering from Alzheimer’s disease. The disease causes severe memory loss.