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State of the Union message

Where does the tradition of the president giving State of the Union speeches come from? On February 2, 2005, President George W. Bush will give the 216th State of the Union message before a joint session of Congress. It is the 30th *wartime* State of the Union message.^[1]

Where does this long tradition come from? The early modern precedent, well known to America's founders, was the British monarch delivering the Speech from the Throne to open each new session of Parliament. More importantly, the chief executive's report to Congress is required by the Constitution. The president "shall from time to time give to the Congress Information of the State of the Union, and recommend to their Consideration such Measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient...." This passage from Article II, Section 3, is not particularly specific. But it is the sole legal basis for what has become the annual State of the Union message that the president delivers to a joint session of Congress after it convenes each January.



William Safire, himself a drafter of State of the Union messages in the Nixon administration, observes that these mandatory annual reports to the president "have inclined to be lengthy statements of legislative intent; they are a method by which a president takes the initiative in shaping a legislative program for his administration. An exception was FDR's 1941 message, which became known as the 'Four Freedoms Speech.'"^[2]

WASHINGTON-ADAMS

In earlier times, this act of giving information to Congress was not called the "State of the Union message," but the "Annual Message." Indeed, George Washington called his first report to Congress the Annual Message. Aware of the precedent he was setting, he thought it important to deliver the report personally in the form of a speech. So on the morning of January 8, 1790, he stepped into a fancy yellow carriage drawn by six regal horses through the streets of New York. (As one of my favorite historians, John Willson, likes to point out, the first president was a car guy.) Leaving his residence on Cherry Street, he rode to Federal Hall where a joint session of Congress had assembled.

George Washington delivered his First Annual Message to both houses of Congress on January 8, 1790; that speech was the shortest annual message in U.S. history -- less than 1,100 words and needing barely 10 minutes to deliver. As the White House website notes, "The president's focus ... was on the very concept of union itself. Washington and his administration were concerned with the challenges of establishing a nation and maintaining a union. The experiment of American democracy was in its infancy. Aware of the need to prove the success of the 'union of states,' Washington included a significant detail in his speech. Instead of datelining his message with the name of the nation's capital, New York, Washington emphasized unity by writing 'United States' on the speech's dateline."^[3]

Another enduring idea from the address was this: "Among the many interesting objects which will engage your attention, that of providing for the common defense will merit particular regard. To be prepared for war is one of the most effectual means of preserving peace."

Washington's subsequent annual messages were delivered each autumn.

As in so much else concerning the American presidency, Washington started the precedent. The "from time to time" became an annual fall event. Indeed, Washington delivered eight annual messages in all; his successor John Adams delivered four annual messages in all, also in the autumn months.

JEFFERSON-TAFT

Most people assume that all annual messages were speeches. In fact, the majority were not. Beginning with Thomas Jefferson in 1801, the annual message was not delivered as a speech but was submitted to Congress in writing. That's because our third president (1) was a superb writer, (2) disliked public speaking, and (3) rationalized the change on the grounds that a presidential speech before Congress was unbecomingly similar to the British monarch's annual Speech from the Throne; such monarchical trappings were unseemly in a republic. Jefferson's habit of submitting a written message to Congress rather than delivering a speech to a joint session became an unbroken tradition in its own right, lasting from 1801 through the end of William Taft's administration in 1912. Several presidents after Taft, especially those favoring a strict construction of the Constitution (Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover, for example), preferred written annual messages.

The timing became routinized as well. From James Monroe's presidency forward, the messages were submitted in December, almost without exception during the first week of the month. Any oral reading of them was performed by clerks in Congress.

WILSON-BUSH

Not until Woodrow Wilson became president in 1913 was the earlier tradition of giving an annual *speech* to Congress revived. Although it was somewhat controversial, Wilson revived the oratorical State of the Union message because he was a superb rhetorician who liked to strut his stuff; also, by that point the president did not have to worry about being compared to the British monarch. Wilson, following long-established precedent, delivered his annual addresses during the first week of December.

Which brings up a point about the change in timing, since States of the Union are nowadays delivered in January or February. Recall that for many decades only George Washington had delivered a State of the Union message in January; and that, his first. Remarkably, the second time the message would be delivered in the month of January would not occur until 144 years later, when Franklin D. Roosevelt delivered the annual address in 1934. The reason for the change is that passage of the Twentieth Amendment moved the inauguration date from March to January, so FDR thought a January message would be more timely. Almost every year he was in office he gave the speech during the first week of the new year. FDR is also the president who began referring to the speech as the "State of the Union message,"^[4] words that were lifted straight from the Constitution and stuck in popular discourse.

SOME MEMORABLE STATE OF THE UNION MESSAGES

While a number of annual messages read like laundry lists since they are given over to the president's legislative agenda, several have endured in Americans' collective memory because of their eloquence and the power of their ideas.

In 1823, James Monroe used his Seventh Annual Message to spell out his foreign policy, the Monroe Doctrine, warning European powers to cease entertaining designs to colonize the Western hemisphere.

In 1862, Abraham Lincoln used his Second Annual Message to say that the time had come to emancipate the slaves.

In 1941, Franklin D. Roosevelt used his Ninth State of the Union message to proclaim the famous "Four Freedoms."

In 2002, just four months after the deadliest single attack against the U.S. on these shores, George W. Bush used his State of the Union message to declare that an Axis of Evil threatened the nation; the Axis consisted of Iraq, Iran, and North Korea.

SOME FIRSTS

1st Annual Message: George Washington's on January 8, 1790, in New York City, which then served as the provisional capital of the U.S.
1st Annual Message not delivered as a speech: Thomas Jefferson's, in the new capital of Washington, DC, on December 8, 1801.

1st Annual Message broadcast over the radio: Calvin Coolidge's on December 6, 1923.

1st popular use of the term "State of the Union" to refer to the message: with Franklin Roosevelt's message of 1935.

1st State of the Union message broadcast on television: Harry S. Truman's during the day on January 6, 1947.

1st State of the Union message broadcast live during primetime: Lyndon B. Johnson's on the evening of January 4, 1965.

1st State of the Union message streamed live on the world wide web: George W. Bush's in 2002.

1st broadcast rebuttal to the State of the Union message: in 1966, Republicans countered President Lyndon Johnson's speech. Ever since, it has been the tradition of the party out of the White House to give a response on radio and/or television.

1st State of the Union message delivered in February: Dwight D. Eisenhower on February 2, 1953, appeared before Congress to flesh out the vision he had outlined in his inaugural address two weeks earlier. It was a wartime address delivered during the closing months of the Korean War. The State of the Union message has been given in February only five times since (by Nixon in 1973, Reagan in 1985 and 1986, and Clinton in 1993 and 1997). George W. Bush's message on February 2, 2005, will be the seventh such February message.

OTHER NOTABLE FACTS

Virtually every modern president has used the words "state of the Union" in his message, trailed by some such adjective as "good," "better," or "strong." Since you hail from Independence, Missouri, let's turn to Harry S. Truman. In his 1949 State of the Union message, Truman declared, "I am happy to report to this 81st Congress that the *state of the Union is good* [emphasis added]. Our Nation is better able than ever before to meet the needs of the American people, and to give them their fair chance in the pursuit of happiness. This great Republic is foremost among the nations of the world in the search for peace."

But as William Safire points out, the tendency toward optimism has not been universal. The first president to say outright that "the state of the Union is *not* good," was Gerald R. Ford on January 15, 1975. He explained, "Millions of Americans are out of work. Recession and inflation are eroding the money of millions more. Prices are too high, and sales are too slow."

Two presidents did not give an Annual Message -- and they both had a good excuse: William Henry Harrison died one month after his inauguration in 1841, and James A. Garfield died 200 days into his administration in 1881 -- the shortest and second shortest administrations in U.S. history.

After 1789, there was only one calendar year -- 1933 -- in which no Annual Message was given; Hoover had given his last written Annual Message to Congress in December of 1932, and FDR would deliver his first State of the Union message in January of 1934; only 13 months separated the two messages.

In three calendar years there have been two State of the Union messages given to Congress. (1) In 1790, Washington gave his First Annual Message in January, and his second in December. (2) In 1953, outgoing President Harry S. Truman and incoming President Dwight D. Eisenhower gave dueling State of the Union messages within a month of each other. (3) In 1961, outgoing President Dwight D. Eisenhower and incoming President John F. Kennedy gave dueling State of the Union messages within three weeks of each other.

In 1986, President Ronald Reagan postponed his State of the Union message because of the Space Shuttle *Challenger* disaster.

On January 19, 1999, President Bill Clinton delivered his Seventh State of the Union message in an unusually tense atmosphere. Exactly one month earlier -- on December 19th -- he had been impeached by the House of Representatives. Then on January 7th the Senate had opened the trial and the president found himself in the midst of heated political and constitutional debate. The Senate did not vote to dismiss the articles of impeachment against the president until February 12, 1999.

On February 2nd, when President George W. Bush enters the House of Representatives to deliver his 2005 State of the Union Message, he will be applauded by members of both parties. Even Democrats will applaud because they are acknowledging the office, not (necessarily) the person who occupies it. Indeed, following long-established tradition, the president will not be introduced by name.

(Question from Ron L. of Independence, MO)

[1] Wartime here includes the five declared wars the U.S. has waged -- War of 1812, Mexican War, Spanish-American War, World War I, World War II -- and seven additional significant conflicts -- Quasi-War against France, Tripolitan War against the Barbary Pirates, Civil War, Korean War, Vietnam War, Desert Storm, and the Iraq War.

[2] William Safire, *Safire's New Political Dictionary* (New York: Random House, 1993), s.v. "State of the Union," p. 755.

[3] Visit the White House website: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/stateoftheunion/history.html>.

[4] Word maven William Safire prefers the word "message" to "speech," "address," or "report" when referring to the State of the Union message. [Safire, *Political Dictionary*, s.v. "State of the Union," p. 755.]