

# STATE OF THE UNION ADDRESS

## Origins and authorization of the State of the Union Address

The formal basis for the State of the Union Address is from the U.S. Constitution:

- The President “shall from time to time give to the Congress Information on the State of the Union, and recommend to their Consideration such measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient.” Article II, Section 3, Clause 1.

The constitutionally-mandated presidential address has gone through a few name changes:

- It was formally known as the Annual Message from 1790 to 1934.
- It began to be informally called the State of the Union Address from 1942 to 1946.
- Since 1947 it has generally been known as the State of the Union Address.

Earlier Annual Messages of the President included agency budget requests and general reports on the health of the economy. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century Congress required more specialized reports on these two aspects separate from the Annual Message.

- Budget Message, required by the National Budget and Accounting Act of 1921 (42 Stat. 20) to be delivered to Congress no more than two weeks after Congress convenes in January.
- Economic Report, required by the Employment Act of 1946 (60 Stat. 23), with a flexible delivery date.

Over time, as the message content changed, the focus of the State of the Union also changed:

- In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the annual message was both a lengthy administrative report on the various departments of the executive and a budget and economic message.
- After 1913, when Woodrow Wilson revived the practice of presenting the message to Congress in person, it became a platform for the president to rally support for his agenda.
- Technological changes—radio, television, and the internet—further developed the State of the Union into a forum for the president to speak directly to the American people.

## Where and when the State of the Union Address takes place

In modern practice, the State of the Union Message is delivered in the House Chamber. Prior to the move to the Capitol the Senate Chamber was often where the Annual Message was delivered by the president.

A House concurrent resolution sets aside the day and time for a joint session “for receiving such communication as the President of the United States shall be pleased to make to them” and is passed by both the House and Senate.

The ratification of the 20<sup>th</sup> Amendment on January 23, 1933 changed the opening of Congress from early March to early January, affecting the delivery of the Annual Message.

- Until 1934, the Message was delivered every December.
- Since 1934, the Message and Address is delivered every January or February.

### **Attendance at the State of the Union**

The following officials occupy floor seating in the House Chamber during the Address:

- Members and former Members of the House of Representative.
- Members and former Members of the Senate.
- The President's Cabinet, save one secretary, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff.
- The Chief Justice of the United States and the Justices of the Supreme Court.
- Diplomatic Corps.

Seating in the gallery is by tickets only, coordinated by the Sergeant-at-Arms of the House.

Since President Ronald Reagan's State of the Union Addresses, some personal guests of the president in the gallery have been publicly recognized in the course of the Address.

### **Presidential delivery of the Annual Messages and State of the Union Addresses:**

- President George Washington combined the Inaugural Address with his Annual Message on April 30, 1789. He read the Address to a joint session of Congress in the Senate Chamber, Federal Hall, New York City. Washington delivered his first regular Annual Message to a joint session of Congress in New York City on January 8, 1790.
- President Thomas Jefferson began the practice of sending separate written Annual Messages to the House and Senate with his first one on December 8, 1801.
- President Woodrow Wilson revived the practice of delivering the Annual Message in person to a joint session of Congress on December 2, 1913, after delivering three special messages to Congress in person earlier in the year (tariff on April 8, currency and bank reform on June 23, and Mexican affairs on August 27).
- Presidents have occasionally sent a written Annual Message or State of the Union Address rather than deliver it in person. These include Presidents Woodrow Wilson (1919-1921), Calvin Coolidge (1924-1929), Herbert Hoover (1929-1933), Franklin Roosevelt (twice), Harry Truman (1946, 1953), Dwight Eisenhower (1956, 1961), Richard Nixon (1973), Jimmy Carter (1981), and Ronald Reagan (1989).
- President Ronald Reagan's State of the Union Address for 1986 was rescheduled because of the *Challenger* disaster that took place earlier in the day.

Several recent Presidents have chosen not to send or deliver a formal State of the Union Address during their first year in office, preferring to deliver more special messages to Congress on various policies and topics:

- President Ronald Reagan on economic recovery, 1981.
- President George H.W. Bush on "Building a Better America," 1989.

- President William J. Clinton on the economy, 1993.
- President George W. Bush on the economy, 2001.

In a few cases, during a transition between administrations, there have been two State of the Union messages in a single year. In these cases, usually one message is in writing while the other is personally delivered by the President before a joint session of Congress:

- Presidents Harry Truman (written message) and Dwight Eisenhower (address before Congress), 1953.
- Presidents Dwight Eisenhower (written message) and John Kennedy (address before Congress), 1961.

### **Technology and the delivery of the Annual Messages and State of the Union**

#### **Addresses:**

- First radio broadcast of Message: President Calvin Coolidge, 1923.
- First television broadcast of Message: President Harry Truman, 1947.
- First evening delivery of Message: President Lyndon Johnson, 1965.
- First live web cast on internet: President George W. Bush, 2002.
- First high definition television broadcast of Message, President George W. Bush, 2004.

#### **Historical highlights of the Annual Messages and State of the Union Addresses:**

- The longest: President Harry Truman, 1946, more than 25,000 words.
- The shortest: President George Washington, 1790, 833 words.
- Average length: 19<sup>th</sup> century was about 10,000 words; late-20th century, about 5000 words.
- Most Messages/Addresses given: President Franklin Roosevelt, 12 (10 were personal appearances before Congress).
- Fewest Messages/Address given: President Zachary Taylor, 1; President William Henry Harrison, 0; President James A. Garfield, 0.

#### **Response by the opposition party to the State of the Union Address:**

- Practice began in 1966 when the television networks provided the Republican party with a half-hour slot. Senator Everett Dirksen (Republican, Illinois) and Representative Gerald R. Ford (Republican, Michigan) delivered the first opposition response.
- By 1976 the television networks were providing a slot for the opposition party almost immediately after the Address.

## Bibliography

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