



State of the Union Address Deeply Rooted in American History



Though it is draped in tradition, the modern State of the Union address provides a unique opportunity for presidents to lay out an entire policy agenda to Congress in one speech.

Lawrence Jackson/White House

When President Obama addresses other leaders of the U.S. federal government early in 2015 he will be fulfilling a constitutional obligation and following a long-standing tradition of American presidents.

The U.S. Constitution requires that the president report to Congress “from time to time” on the “State of the Union.” This constitutional requirement has evolved into the president’s annual State of the Union address, which now serves several purposes. The speech reports on the condition of the United States both domestically and internationally, recommends a legislative agenda for the coming year and gives the president the opportunity to personally convey his vision for the nation.

How successful the president will be in accomplishing his goals will depend in large part on how adroitly he can work with Congress and on how effectively he can bridge the partisan divide between Republicans

and Democrats, something of which this president is keenly aware. In the 114th Congress, Republicans control the House of Representatives and the Senate.

History of the Address

The tradition of the State of the Union address dates back to 1790 when George Washington, the first U.S. president, delivered his “Annual Message” to Congress in New York City, then the provisional capital of the United States. His successor, John Adams, followed suit.

But the nation’s third president, Thomas Jefferson, felt that such elaborate displays were not suitable for the new democratic republic. He delivered a written message rather than appearing in person. Jefferson’s influence was such that for more than a century thereafter presidents delivered written Annual Messages to Congress.

In the early decades of the republic, most of these messages were lists of bills the president wanted the Congress to enact — reflecting the tenor of the times and the practical problems involved in building the young American nation. The messages also dealt with the international situation and America's place in the world.

During the crisis that, more than any other, threatened the very existence of the American union — the Civil War — Abraham Lincoln wrote perhaps the most eloquent and memorable of all presidential messages sent to Congress.

“In giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free — honorable alike in what we give and what we preserve,” Lincoln wrote in 1862.

In 1913, Woodrow Wilson revived the practice of delivering the Annual Message in person. This was a timely decision because the United States was on the eve of a mass media revolution that soon would bring presidents into the homes of Americans, first through radio, then by television.

Keeping with tradition, Vice President Joe Biden — as president of the Senate — and Speaker of the House John Boehner were seated behind President Obama at his 2012 address. © AP Images



President George Washington delivered the first constitutionally required message to Congress before a joint session on January 8, 1790. © AP Images

With the election of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1932, Americans became accustomed to hearing their presidents on radio as well as to seeing and hearing them on newsreels in movie theaters.

In 1945, the Annual Message became formally known as the State of the Union address. It also became a television, as well as radio, staple as sales of television sets skyrocketed in the 1950s. In recognition of the power of television to deliver the president's words to a huge audience, President Lyndon Johnson in the 1960s shifted the time of the address from the traditional midday to evening, when more viewers could watch.

The tradition of the opposition response began in 1966 when two Republican congressmen, including future President Gerald Ford, delivered a televised Republican response to President Johnson's State of the Union address.