State of the Union Addresses and Messages: research notes by Gerhard Peters

jump to menu



Needs Your Support Make a Gift

Consider a tax-deductible donation &



Document Archive • Public Papers of the Presidents • State of the Union Addresses & Messages Inaugural Addresses • Farewell Addresses

 Weekly Addresses Fireside Chats • News Conferences • Executive Orders Proclamations Signing Statements Press Briefings Statements of Administration Policy • Economic Report of the President Debates Convention Speeches

• Party Platforms • 2016 Election Documents • 2012 Election Documents • 2008 Election Documents 2004 Election Documents 1996 Election Documents • 1968 Election Documents • 1960 Election Documents • 2017 Transition 2009 Transition • 2001 Transition • White House Media Pool Reports **Data Archive** Data Index **Media Archive**

Election Index Florida 2000 Links Presidential Libraries

Audio/Video Index

Elections

• Length of State of the Union Messages and State of the Union Messages to the Congress are mandated by Article II, Section 3 of the United States Constitution: "He 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;"

George Washington established the precedent that clarifies the phrase "from time to time." Since 1790, with occasional exceptions, State of the Union messages have been delivered once annually.

A misconception found even in some academic literature is that

• Length of State of the Union Addresses in Minutes (from 1966) List of Acknowledged Guests Sitting in House Gallery List of Opposition Responses Cabinet Members Not in Attendance (from 1984)

Addresses in Words

exceptions, this has been true in the modern era (ca. 1933-present, see Neustadt or Greenstein). However, beginning with Jefferson's 1st State of the Union (1801) and lasting until Taft's final message (1912), the State of the Union was a written (and often lengthy) report sent to Congress to coincide with a new Session of Congress..

the State of the Union is an *orally* delivered message presented to a joint session of Congress. With a few

Federalists Washington and Adams had personally addressed the Congress, but Jefferson was concerned that the practice of appearing before the representatives of the people was too similar to the British monarch's practice of addressing each new Parliament with a list of policy mandates, rather than "recommendations."

Jefferson's practice changed in 1913 with Woodrow Wilson. Wilson believed the presidency was more than an impersonal institution and active and visible presidential leadership was needed by both the people and the Congress. As an expression of this philosophy, Wilson

delivered oral messages to Congress, citing the authority of the Constitution. For health reasons, Wilson did not address Congress in 1919 and 1920. Warren Harding's two messages (1921 and 1922) and Calvin Coolidge's first (1923) were also oral messages. Subsequently, Coolidge's remaining State of the Unions (1924-28) and all four of Hoover's

(1929-32) were written. Franklin D. Roosevelt consolidated the modern practice of delivering an oral State of the Union beginning with his first in 1934. However, there continued to be exceptions. In some cases there was only a written message and no spoken address. These include Truman (1946 and 1953), Eisenhower (1961), and Carter (1981). In some years there were both written messages and oral addresses. Nixon in 1972 presented both an oral address and a written message. In 1973 and 1974, Nixon submitted multiple documents entitled "State of the Union." In addition,

Carter also spoke and wrote in 1978, 1979, and 1980. Roosevelt's last (1945) and Eisenhower's 4th (1956) were technically written messages

although they also addressed the American people via radio summarizing their reports (rather than speaking to a Joint Session of Congress).

Scholarly research needs to recognize the variability in these practices. The five most recent presidents (Reagan, Bush, Clinton, G.W. Bush, and Obama) addressed a joint session of Congress shortly after their inaugurations but these messages are technically not considered to be "State of the Union" addresses. Reagan's 1981 address is called, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the Program for Economic Recovery." Bush's 1989 and Clinton's 1993 messages are called "Administration Goals" speeches.

G.W. Bush's 2001 speech was actually his "Budget Message," and President Obama delivered a similar non-State of the Union address to a joint session of Congress on February 24, 2009. For research purposes, it is probably harmless to categorize these as State of the Union messages. The impact of such a speech on public, media, and congressional perceptions of presidential leadership and power should be the same as if the address was an official State of the Union. These speeches are included in the table below with an asterisk.

An additional fact is that the State of the Union is delivered near the beginning of each session of Congress. Before 1934 this meant the State of the Union was delivered usually in December. Since 1934, the State of the Union has been delivered near the beginning each year, with some presidents delivering a final message at the end of their last term (Truman, Eisenhower, Johnson, Ford, and Carter). The table below reflects each message's placement in the President's term.

President George W. Bush delivered his last State of the Union Address on January 28, 2008. Bush had the right to deliver either a written or oral State of the Union in the days immediately before leaving office in 2009. However, like Presidents Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and Clinton, he chose not to do so. Presidents Truman, Eisenhower, Johnson, Ford, and Carter chose to do so.

President	years of term	Delivered as a Speech Political Time (see essay above)					Delivered as a Written Message Political Time (see essay above)				
Donald I Twomp	2017 proc	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	end 4th	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	end 4th
Donald J. Trump Barack Obama	2017-pres. 2013-2017	2017* 2013	2018 2014	2015	2016						
Багаск Ораша	2013-2017	2013	2014	2015	2010						
George W. Bush	2005-2013	2005	2010	2011	2012						
George W. Bush	2003-2009	2003	2000	2007	2008						
William J. Clinton	1997-2001	1997	1998	1999	2000						
William & Clinton	1993-1997		1994	1995	1996						
George Bush	1989-1993	1989*	1990	1991	1992						
Ronald Reagan	1985-1989	1985	1986	1987	1988						
· ·	1981-1985	1981*	1982	1983	1984						
Jimmy Carter	1977-1981		1978	1979	1980			1978	1979	1980	1981
Gerald R. Ford	1974-1977			1975	1976	1977					
Richard M. Nixon	1973-1974		1974				1973†	1974			
	1969-1973		1970	1971	1972					1972	
Lyndon B. Johnson	1965-1969	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969					
	1964-1965	1061	1060	1060	1964						
John F. Kennedy	1961-1963	1961	1962	1963	1000						1061
Dwight D. Eisenhower	1957-1961	1957 1953	1958 1954	1959 1955	1960 1956‡					1956‡	1961
Harry S Truman	1953-1957 1949-1953	1933	1950	1955	1950+					1930+	1953
Harry S Truman	1945-1933	1343	1930	1931	1932			1946			1933
Franklin D. Roosevelt	1945	1945‡		1347	1340		1945‡	1340			
Trankin D. Roosever	1941-1945	1941	1942	1943	1944		1313.				
	1937-1941	1937	1938	1939	1940						
	1933-1937		1934	1935	1936						
Herbert Hoover	1929-1933						1929	1930	1931	1932	
Calvin Coolidge	1925-1929						1925	1926	1927	1928	
	1923-1925			1923						1924	
Warren G. Harding	1921-1923	1921	1922								
Woodrow Wilson	1917-1921	1917	1918	4045					1919	1920	
YA7°11°	1913-1917	1913	1914	1915	1916		1000	1010	1011	1012	
William Howard Taft Theodore Roosevelt	1909-1913						1909	1910	1911	1912	
Theodore Rooseveit	1905-1909 1901-1905						1905 1901	1906 1902	1907 1903	1908 1904	
William McKinley	1897-1901						1897	1898	1899	1904	
Grover Cleveland	1893-1897						1893	1894	1895	1896	
Benjamin Harrison	1889-1893						1889	1890	1891	1892	
Grover Cleveland	1885-1889						1885	1886	1887	1888	
Chester A. Arthur	1881-1885						1881	1882	1883	1884	
James A. Garfield	1881					no me	ssages				
Rutherford B. Hayes	1877-1881						1877	1878	1879	1880	
Ulysses S. Grant	1873-1877						1873	1874	1875	1876	
	1869-1873						1869	1870	1871	1872	
Andrew Johnson	1865-1869						1865	1866	1867	1868	
Abraham Lincoln	1861-1865						1861	1862	1863	1864	
James Buchanan	1857-1861						1857	1858	1859	1860	
Franklin Pierce	1853-1857						1853	1854	1855	1856	
Millard Fillmore	1850-1853						1040	1850	1851	1852	
Zachary Taylor	1849-1850						1849	1046	1047	1040	
James K. Polk John Tyler	1845-1849 1841-1845						1845 1841	1846 1842	1847 1843	1848 1844	
William Henry Harrison	1841					no mo	ssages	1042	1043	1044	
Martin Van Buren	1837-1841					no me	1837	1838	1839	1840	
Andrew Jackson	1833-1837						1833	1834	1835	1836	
indiew ouchson	1829-1833						1829	1830	1831	1832	
John Quincy Adams	1825-1829						1825	1826	1827	1828	
James Monroe	1821-1825						1821	1822	1823	1824	
	1817-1821						1817	1818	1819	1820	
James Madison	1813-1817						1813	1814	1815	1816	
	1809-1813						1809	1810	1811	1812	
Thomas Jefferson	1805-1809						1805	1806	1807	1808	
Talan Allem	1801-1805	1707	4700	1700	1000		1801	1802	1803	1804	
John Adams	1797-1801	1797	1798	1799	1800						
George Washington	1793-1797 1789-1793	1793 1790	1794 1790	1795 1791	1796 1792						
	1/03-1/33	1/30	1/30	1/31	1/32						

* Technically not a "State of the Union" Address. See explanation in essay above this table

‡ In 1956 President Eisenhower sent a written message to Congress, and also addressed the Nation via radio with a summary of his message. He did not deliver a speech before a joint session of Congress.

‡ In 1945 President Roosevelt sent a written message to Congress, and also addressed the Nation via radio with a summary of his message. He did not deliver a speech before a joint session of Congress.

† In 1973 President Nixon delivered a series of six written State of the Union messages to Congress. One message was an overview, followed by five additional messages each of which focused on a specific public policy theme. The president also delivered a radio address to the nation before each policy-specific message was sent to Congress. Links to each individual

message and radio address are below: February 2, 1973 State of the Union Message to the Congress: Overview and Goals

February 15, 1973 State of the Union Message to the Congress on Natural Resources and the Environment February 22, 1973 State of the Union Message to the Congress on the Economy

March 1, 1973 State of the Union Message to the Congress on Human Resources March 8, 1973 State of the Union Message to the Congress on Community Development

February 21, 1973 Radio Address About the State of the Union Message on the Economy

March 14, 1973 State of the Union Message to the Congress on Law Enforcement and Drug Abuse Prevention February 14, 1973 Radio Address About the State of the Union Message on Natural Resources and the Environment

February 24, 1973 Radio Address About the State of the Union Message on Human Resources

March 4, 1973 Radio Address About the State of the Union Message on Community Development March 10, 1973 Radio Address About the State of the Union Message on Law Enforcement and Drug Abuse Prevention

Contact