

Obama's First Address to Congress

Brighter Days Ahead

By [Austin Knappe](#)

The first question on everyone's mind last night was why President Obama's first speech to a joint session of Congress was not called a "State of the Union" Address (SOTU). This question also piqued my interest as I tuned into the proceedings on PBS. After a minute or two on Google, I came up with a simple, yet nuanced answer.



The U.S. Constitution says that 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." There is nothing in the text about the address being a yearly tradition. Thomas Jefferson broke the tradition set by George Washington and John Adams when he delivered his messages to the Congress in writing. The custom of giving a State of the Union speech was revived by Woodrow Wilson, but did not catch on permanently until Harry Truman's address in 1947.

Tradition dictates that the president's first SOTU takes place one year after serving in office. Thus President Obama's speech was officially designated a joint address to Congress. Presidents Carter, Reagan, and Clinton all followed this format and used their first speech to lay out a policy agenda for the remainder of their first term in office. This tradition has been broken on occasion as a symbolic gesture. In 1953 President Eisenhower gave a SOTU address after a month in office to show the American public that after twenty years of Democrats in the White House, a "new sheriff was in town." President Kennedy followed Eisenhower's cue and ten days after his inauguration addressed the nation during the State of the Union. Interestingly enough, Kennedy gave a second SOTU speech in May of that same year in the aftermath of the disastrous Bay of Pigs invasion.

While President Barack Obama did not begin his speech with "the state of the union is strong," he began with an equally symbolic statement when he announced, "Tonight I want every American to know this: We will rebuild, we will recover, and the United States of America will emerge stronger than before." The floor of Congress immediately erupted into applause and many Americans at home were assured that the president has clear convictions. A CBS News poll revealed that before the speech, 62% of Americans approved of the president's plans for the economy. After last night's address, 73% are confident in the administration's economic agenda, despite a lack of concrete details in the speech.

Contrary to some commentators' expectations, the president also struck chords that were pleasing to conservatives' ears. He announced that now was the time to usher in a new era of individual responsibility, from personal spending and investing habits, to educating our children. He spoke of a tax cut for families who make under \$250,000 a year as well. In an interview with Katie Curic, Senator John McCain said that President Obama "gave an effective speech that was a balance between the size and enormity of the challenges we face, but also an expression of hope and confidence that America will get through this." McCain was disappointed, however, that the president did not specifically address Social Security reform. Skeptics of the speech concur that Obama will not be able to cut taxes while also raising government spending programs to revive the economy.

The president sought to bring a bipartisan tone to his speech. He spoke of political responsibility, arguing that, "Everyone in this chamber, Democrats and Republicans, will have to sacrifice some worthy priorities for which there are no dollars...[a]nd that includes me." He also wanted to ensure the American public that spending would not benefit the financial and political institutions that got America into this economic mess in the first place. "We have lived through an era where too often, short-term gains were prized over long-term prosperity, where we failed to look beyond the next payment, the next quarter or the next election," he said. In light of the president's bipartisanship, he did take one stab at the Bush administration when he referred to the "deficit we inherited." After the quip, half of the House floor erupted in loud applause.

At the conclusion of the evening, Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal gave the Republican's response to the speech. Jindal, who many politicians consider to be the political wunderkind of the GOP, may be a serious contender for the presidency in 2012. In his speech, the Governor was supportive of the president's historic achievements, but also disappointed in the stimulus bill that was signed into law earlier that day. "The way to lead is not to raise taxes and put more money and power in hands of Washington politicians," Governor Jindal said. "Who among us would ask our children for a loan, so we could spend money we do not have, on things we do not need?" Jindal was specifically critical of the \$140 million in the bill reserved for "volcano monitoring."

When all is said and done, both the public and the Congress were generally accepting of President Obama's remarks. The Dow Jones, however, is responding in quite a different way. At the time of writing, the Dow is down 173 points and falling. Time will only tell how the "invisible hand" responds to the president's policies.