

SOTU: GENERAL BACKGROUND

The State of the Union Address is an annual message presented by the President of the United States to a joint session of the United States Congress at the beginning of each calendar year in office. The message typically includes a budget message and an economic report of the nation, and also allows the President to propose a legislative agenda (for which the cooperation of Congress is needed) and national priorities.

The address fulfills rules in Article II, Section 3 of the U.S. Constitution, requiring the President to periodically “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.” During most of the country’s first century, the President primarily only submitted a written report to Congress. After 1913, Woodrow Wilson, the 28th U.S. President, began the regular practice of delivering the address to Congress in person as a way to rally support for the President’s agenda. With the advent of radio and television, the address is now broadcast live across the country on many networks.

A formal invitation is made by the Speaker of the House to the President several weeks before each State of the Union Address.

Significance. Although much of the pomp and ceremony behind the State of the Union address is governed by tradition rather than law, in modern times, the event is seen as one of the most important in the US political calendar. It is one of the few instances when all three branches of the US government are assembled under one roof: members of both houses of Congress constituting the legislature, the President’s Cabinet constituting the executive, and the Chief Justice and Associate Justices of the Supreme Court constituting the judiciary. In addition, the military is represented by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, while foreign governments are represented by the Dean of the Diplomatic Corps. The address has also been used as an opportunity to honor the achievements of some ordinary Americans, who are typically invited by the President to sit with the First Lady.

Invitations. Every member of Congress can bring one guest to the State of the Union address. The President may invite up to 24 guests with the First Lady in her box. The Speaker of the House may invite up to 24 guests in the Speaker’s box. Seating for Congress on the main floor is by a first-in, first-served basis with no reservations. The Cabinet, Supreme Court justices, members of the Diplomatic Corps, and the military leaders constituting the Joint Chiefs of Staff have reserved seating.

Protocol. By approximately 8:30 pm on the night of the address, the members of the House have gathered in their seats for the joint session. Then, the Deputy Sergeant at Arms addresses the Speaker and loudly announces the Vice President and members of the Senate, who enter and take the seats assigned for them.

The Speaker, and then the Vice President, specify the members of the House and Senate, respectively, who will escort the President into the House chamber.[19] The Deputy Sergeant at Arms addresses the Speaker again and loudly announces, in order, the Dean of the Diplomatic Corps, the Chief Justice of the United States and the Associate Justices, and the Cabinet, each of whom enters and takes their seats when called. The justices take the seats nearest to the Speaker’s rostrum and adjacent to the sections reserved for the Cabinet and the members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

The Sergeants at Arms of the House (left) and of the Senate (right) wait at the doorway to the House chamber before President Barack Obama enters to deliver the 2011 State of the Union Address.

Just after 9 pm, as the President reaches the door to the chamber, the House Sergeant at Arms stands just inside the doors, faces the Speaker, and waits until the President is ready to enter the chamber. When the President is ready, the Sergeant at Arms always announces the entrance, loudly stating the phrase: “Madam [or Mister] Speaker, the President of the United States!”

As applause and cheering begins, the President slowly walks toward the Speaker’s rostrum, followed by members of the Congressional escort committee. The President’s approach is slowed by pausing to shake hands, hug, kiss, and autograph copies of the speech for Members of Congress. After taking a place at the House Clerk’s desk, the President hands two manila envelopes, previously placed on the desk and containing copies of the speech, to the Speaker and Vice President.

After continuing applause from the attendees has diminished, the Speaker introduces the President to the Representatives and Senators, stating: “Members of Congress, I have the high privilege and distinct honor of presenting to you the President of the United States.” This leads to a further round of applause and, eventually, the beginning of the address by the President.

At close of the ceremony, attendees leave on their own accord. The Sergeants at Arms guides the President out of the Chamber. Some politicians stay to shake hands with and congratulate the President on the way out.

Traditional Content. In the State of the Union address, the President traditionally outlines the administration’s accomplishments over the previous

year, as well as the agenda for the coming year, often in upbeat and optimistic terms. Since the 1982 address, it has also become common for the President to honor special guests sitting in the gallery, such as American citizens or visiting heads of state. During that 1982 address, President Ronald Reagan acknowledged Lenny Skutnik for his act of heroism following the crash of Air Florida Flight 90. Since then, the term “Lenny Skutniks” has been used to refer to individuals invited to sit in the gallery, and then cited by the President, during the State of the Union.

State of the Union speeches usually last a little over an hour, partly because of the large amounts of applause that occur from the audience throughout. The applause is often political in tone, with many portions of the speech being applauded only by members of the President’s own party. As non-political officeholders, members of the Supreme Court or the Joint Chiefs of Staff rarely applaud in order to retain the appearance of political impartiality. In recent years, the presiding officers of the House and the Senate, the Speaker and the Vice President, respectively, have departed from the neutrality expected of presiding officers of deliberative bodies, as they, too, stand and applaud in response to the remarks of the President with which they agree.

— State of the Union, *Infogalactic*

https://infogalactic.com/info/State_of_the_Union

2019 BACKGROUND

The 2019 SOTU address was scheduled for Tuesday, January 29 in the chamber of the US House of Representatives. It would be President Trump’s second such address and the third speech to a joint session of the US Congress. However, on the morning of January 16th, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi requested the address to be postponed to an unspecified date due to the existing partial government shutdown, the original invitation being made on January 3rd. She cited security concerns regarding unpaid Secret Service members as a consequence of the ongoing shutdown; the Secretary of Homeland Security Kirstjen Nielsen responded to the letter saying DHM was “fully prepared” for the Address.

— 2019 State of the Union Address, *Infogalactic*
https://infogalactic.com/info/2019_State_of_the_Union_Address

Power Struggle. The midterm elections had left the Senate in Republican hands but the Democrats in control of the House. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi had regained the gavel and had opposed President Trump’s proposed border security. Trump responded by calling a non-essential government shutdown affecting about

one-quarter of all federal government employees. But by this time the shutdown was over. This struggle for power sets the context for this SOTU Address.

RESEARCH DIRECTOR’S PERSONAL NOTES

Unfortunately, we ran out of time to gather our reactions to this first viewing of the SOTU Address. For the record, I post some of my own notes.

- ◆ Politics: fighting with a naked blade.
- ◆ Does protocol reveal or conceal? Did it once reveal, by design, but now conceals the true state of affairs.
- ◆ Not only a staged event, but one in which every member present is aware of being *on* stage observed by an audience that not only spans the States but the world as well. Everything is scripted for public consumption.
- ◆ Garrett Harden: three filters to reality—mere verbal expertise, a matter of scale, and the ecological lesson that everything is interconnected. Any proposal needs to meet all three, but it seems only the first need apply
- ◆ What is the significance of all these Democratic women wearing white, making a visual block that really stands out, one that includes the House Speaker. What message to they hope to convey? What did their “collective” response to a series of policy statements have to tell us about their program? In celebration of women?
- ◆ Generalities or specifics? What is the ratio? Are the specifics so specific that they post their own norms, their own criteria for achievement? If so, is he setting a public bar for his presidency? What about the other major players, do they do the same?
- ◆ Orientation: middle class values? Or the values of an “aristocratic” elite? Speaking in a den of iniquity?
- ◆ Has the power of congress shifted from the making of laws to administrative oversight? The judicial to advocacy?
- ◆ Are President’s Trumps program only perceived as radical because of the “fundamental transformation” of the Obama era?
- ◆ It’s the Orientation → Evaluation → Diagnosis sequence, with no way to control meaning outside of the naked use of force. He who acquires the reigns of power can control, but such control is always illusory.
- ◆ Spite and resentment at play, not to mention outright hate lying under a civilized veneer?
- ◆ Is President Trump’s call for cooperation among different parties even possible if their foundational stances are in fact dialectically opposed to each other?