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Why the State of the Union still matters

The annual address can sometimes resemble an extended television commercial. But it's an important marker by which to judge the president.

By JOSHUA SPIVAK

Tonight, all the networks will be running what amounts to two long commercials: The State of the Union and the Republican response. The current version of the president's address couldn't be further from its original purpose of having the country's chief executive report to Congress once a year. Over the past century, it has become an exercise in political theater, especially with the advent of television. Which raises the question: Is there any reason to continue giving this annual tradition so much attention?

The idea for a State of the Union comes from a vague provision in the Constitution mandating that the president give information to Congress "from time to time," and propose such "measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient." What this information should be, and how often the president should impart it, was unclear. As with many of our presidential traditions, George Washington set the precedent. He gave an annual reporting and did it in person, as did John Adams.

But then there was a sharp break. Thomas Jefferson, who was no fan of public speaking, thought the idea of addressing Congress sounded too regal, like the British monarch's "Speech From the Throne." Instead, Jefferson just sent a letter to Congress. Jefferson's practice was maintained for more than a century, until one of the first truly modern presidents, Woodrow Wilson, saw the publicity value of doing it in person.

Wilson was looking to distinguish himself from his rival, Theodore Roosevelt, one of the most fabled practitioners of maximizing the PR potential of the office. Wilson's plan to directly address Congress was originally looked down upon by members of Congress and the press, but the speech worked out so well that Wilson supposedly said, "I think I put one over on Teddy."

Since then, the vast majority of the State of the Union addresses have been in-person exercises. Developments in modern media further made the State of the Union into a spectacle. Calvin Coolidge first used radio for the State of the Union in 1923, and Harry Truman became the first to have it broadcast on TV in 1947.

But the real breakthrough for the State of the Union came under Lyndon Johnson. In 1965, Johnson moved the State of the Union from a daytime affair to a primetime event. The Republican Party didn't take that sitting down. In 1966, the GOP demanded, and received, the right to respond, a tradition for the opposition party that has continued to this day. And now,

thanks to the internet, ambitious politicians who don't necessarily fit into the mainstream of their party have taken to giving an additional opposition party response. Under the banner of the Tea Party, Rep. Michele Bachmann (Minn.) and Herman Cain both gave rebuttals to the State of the Union, and Sen. Rand Paul (Ky.) will give one this year.

While the State of the Union has occasionally been newsworthy, the speech itself is frequently boring and almost instantly forgotten. Presidents try to play up the event by inviting public heroes to attend (an innovation pioneered by Ronald Reagan), and generally bask in applause on a free hour or so of pre-empted network time. But the most memorable moments in recent years have not been what the president says; instead, they've been disruptions like a mouthed objection by Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito. Mostly, the affair has become a set of dueling press conferences masquerading as substantive news.

But does this mean Jefferson was right? Should the State of the Union be a more sedate affair, just a written letter outlining the basics? Should it be more like an annual report, such as the 19th-century versions that included real details of revenue and expenditures? The reality is that such reports are issued all the time. Modern-day presidents have hundreds of federal employees churning out reams of data on gross domestic product, population figures, and deficit projections. The "time to time" report mentioned in the Constitution is now an all-the-time affair.

Despite this, the State of the Union remains a good idea. Not the part where the president affirms that the State of the Union is "strong." Nor is there a great need for the president to actually address Congress. Rather, at this point, delivering the State of the Union is really satisfying the second part of the Constitutional mandate — that the president "recommend to their Consideration such measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient." The State of the Union has indeed become the one omnibus policy statement to the nation. It is a speech that forces the president to put down markers of success. Sometimes what he doesn't say is equally revealing about his agenda — for example, two weeks after the shooting of former Rep. Gabby Giffords (D-Ariz.) in 2011, gun control issues were ignored.

It is here that the State of the Union transcends the basic political ad. No matter how much sugar is coated onto that address, it is by its very nature substantive, much more so than any political speech or ad we heard over the last grueling election year. It forces the president (and the opposition party in its rejoinder) to lay down policy prescriptions, ones that he and his supporters could be held to account for in future races. The State of the Union address is not going to be that exciting. But at least it forces a president to give us a look into what should be his policy goals for the next year.

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