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The State of the Union Address

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The State of the Union Address

Introduction

Communication is one of the most important instruments in politics. Frequent and effective communication is a necessary benchmark for a well-functioning government. The State of the Union Address is among the most important dialogues between the executive and legislative branches. It has evolved into an opportunity for a president to tout their accomplishments and set an agenda for the upcoming year. The ability to broadcast the State of the Union Address via television, radio, and other communication forums allows it to function as more than just the president's address to Congress, giving the president a medium to communicate with the public.

Question 1: What has been the purpose of the State of the Union address throughout American history?

The State of the Union address serves as a means for the president to provide an annual update to Congress. Article II, Section 3 of the US Constitution states, "[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." Today, this update occurs at the beginning of the year, usually late January or early February, and focuses on the nation's overall well-being. Addresses tend to highlight critical ongoing issues and offer insight into policies that will receive priority under the presiding administration.

George Washington delivered the first of "the President's Annual Message to Congress" in person in 1790. John Adams followed suit, delivering his addresses in person, but the tradition would change with Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson and all other presidents from 1801-1913 provided their Annual Message as a written letter sent directly to Congress. Woodrow Wilson would re-establish the in-person address in 1913.

The invention of the radio and later television revolutionized communication and broadened the scope of what the Annual Message meant to American politics. Since 1947, the President's Annual Message to Congress has been referred to as "the State of the Union Address," extending the message to the general public. Other innovations of the State of the Union address have introduced the common practices of an opposition response, establishing a designated survivor, and housing special guests. The opposition response allows members of the president's opposing party to provide a response or critique of matters addressed in the president's speech. It also provides an opportunity to showcase an up-and-coming member of the party. The designated survivor is an individual from the president's cabinet held in a secure location to maintain a line of presidential succession in an emergency during the address.

Question 2: What are some of the most memorable State of the Union addresses, and which presidents delivered them?

While all State of the Union addresses are intended to bring attention to important issues America faces at a given time, some have stood out throughout history. The first of these was given in 1862 by Abraham Lincoln. This address was given weeks after Lincoln issued his Emancipation Proclamation and was met with considerable resistance. He discussed the Northern war effort and the Emancipation Proclamation in a more moderate light. Due to his eloquence and impeccable writing, Lincoln's State of the Union address set the bar for all future addresses. A memorable part of this address states, "Fellow-citizens, we cannot escape history. We of this Congress and this administration will be remembered in spite of ourselves. No personal significance, or insignificance, can spare one or another of us...We shall nobly save, or meanly lose, the last best hope of earth."

Franklin D. Roosevelt is another president who gave a State of the Union address that is still remembered today. Similar to Lincoln, FDR gave his address during a time of war, in 1941, and it put the country's wartime goals into words. He focused his speech around the idea of four main freedoms. These included the freedom of speech, the freedom of worship, the freedom from want, and the freedom from fear. FDR hoped to achieve these freedoms not just for America but for the world. In his address, he exclaims, "We are fighting today for security, for progress, and for peace, not only for ourselves but for all men, not only for one generation but for all generations. We are fighting to cleanse the world of ancient evils, ancient ills."

One final State of the Union address that is notable was given by George W. Bush in 2002. Just months after the historic attacks on the United States on September 11th, 2001, Bush indicated that the country was at war and in the midst of a recession. He went on to indicate that the United States would show resolve in fighting what he called "an axis of evil," composed of North Korea, Iran, and Iraq. He argued these countries were a threat to world peace, sponsoring terrorism and showed a willingness to use weapons of mass destruction. The War on Terror would become a defining feature of the Bush presidency and would go on for two decades.

Question 3: What do we expect from President Biden's upcoming State of the Union?

On February 7, 2023, President Biden will deliver his State of the Union address. Although we cannot be certain of what he will say, we can expect he will emphasize his accomplishments and chart out what he seeks to do in the remainder of his term. It is important to acknowledge that President Biden will be addressing a very different Congress than he did last time now that midterm elections have changed the political composition of Congress, with Republicans now controlling the House of Representatives.

It is expected that President Biden will speak on things like inflation, the debt ceiling, gun violence, the Russian-Ukraine conflict, and infrastructure. President Biden will address the economy, especially inflation. Inflation is still an issue that is impacting American families. President Biden will most likely acknowledge high inflation, but will also seek to take credit for its

decrease in the past year. Likewise, he will point to some strong economic indicators as well. We expect Biden will argue that the debt ceiling must be increased so as to not have the US default on its loans. This has been a point of contention with congressional Republicans.

In the aftermath of multiple school shootings, many expect that Biden will address the issue of gun control in America. In the past, President Biden has pushed Congress to pass an assault weapons ban, so the State of the Union address will be an opportunity for Biden to revisit this topic. Now that the Russian-Ukraine conflict has been occurring for over a year, it is expected that President Biden will once again express support for Ukraine. He will want to raise awareness about the situation and gain bi-partisan support. While speaking on bi-partisan movements, President Biden is also expected to update the American people on the infrastructure legislation that was passed in 2021.

It will be curious to see whether President Biden addresses election denialism, which would also be an attack on former President and potential competitor, Donald Trump. The occasion might also serve as a moment for Biden to categorically indicate that he will be running for a second term.

Conclusion

The State of the Union Address provides a forum for fruitful communication between the president, Congress, and the American public. Presidents past and present have crafted iconic phrases and delivered powerful messages from this platform. This address can generate a continued conversation of essential issues and serve as a beacon for what we value collectively at a given time.