

Civics is all around us. There is a lot to know about the government and how "We the People" interact with the government and each other. Let's help each other expand our civic literacy.

Among the duties of the President of the United States is to explain to Congress and the American people the State of the Union:

**"He shall from time to time give to Congress information of the State of the Union and recommend to their Consideration such measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient."**

---Article II, Section 3

In this constitutionally required report, the president generally has two expected tasks. First, the president will describe the good things that are happening in the nation, and identify areas of concern. Second, the president will propose new policies, new legislation, and new goals that the president believes will keep the nation strong while also acknowledging those who supported the president's agenda.

One of the more common misconceptions about the mandatory State of the Union report (also known as 'the President's Annual Message to Congress', though the Constitution only requires it be given 'from time to time') is that it needs to be delivered as a speech to Congress. That is not the case! The Constitution, remember, only requires the president "give to Congress information". It doesn't say how.

President **Washington** actually did deliver his first State of the Union as a speech to a joint session of Congress, and **John Adams** continued that example. However, **Thomas Jefferson** thought a president giving a speech to Congress was too much like something the king of England would do, so he ended the practice. As a result, it was not until President **Woodrow Wilson**, in 1913, that presidents started giving their message as a speech again. And it's important to note that the president must **actually be invited** to give a speech before a joint session of Congress; presidents cannot just walk in and deliver it. If Congress refuses to extend the invitation, the president can deliver the speech somewhere else or even just send a letter, like so many other presidents have done. So when would presidents actually deliver this address to Congress?

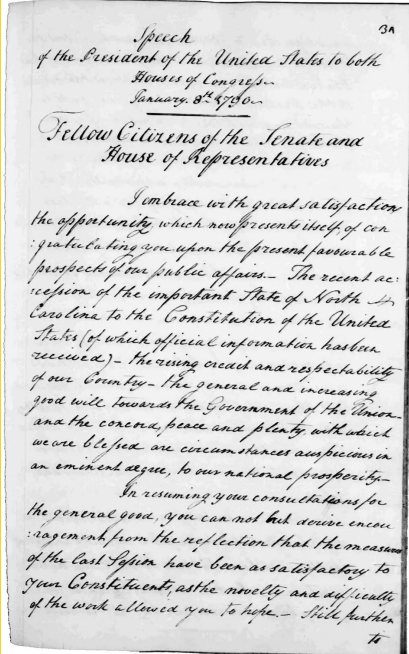
The Constitution does not actually say when presidents are required to give their

State of the Union message, and over the life of the nation, it has **varied significantly**. Up until 1934 or so, the president delivered it at the end of the calendar year, but since then it has occurred in January or February. It is interesting to note that over the **past few decades**, newly elected presidents do not deliver a 'State of the Union' address as their first speech to Congress; after all, the condition of the nation over the previous year occurred under the watch of the former president (It is possible that the new president **might point out** in the address if the previous office holder left things in rough shape.). As a result, the last six presidents (starting with Ronald Reagan in 1981) have not delivered a formal 'State of the Union' address in their first year. Rather, they have delivered an 'Address before the Joint Session of Congress' that will **highlight a need or priority** over the coming year.

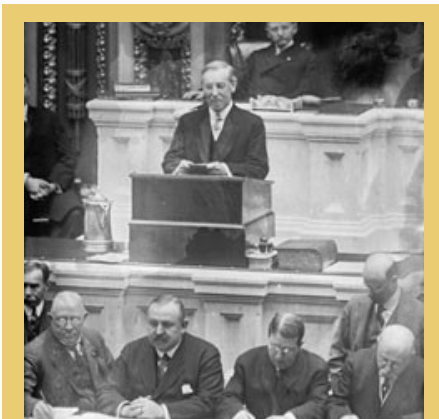
**To Think and To Do:** Reflect on your experiences over the past year, both good and bad. If you had to deliver a 'State of the Union' to your class, what would you emphasize, and what goals or priorities would you provide in your address? How does this reflect a president's traditional State of the Union message to Congress?

**Learn MORE** about the State of the Union Address.

- [Frequently Asked Questions](#), from Congressional Research Service
- [Annual Message on the State of the Union](#), from the American Presidency Project
- [President Washington's First State of the Union Address](#), from Mount Vernon



Washington's notes for his first address to Congress.



President Wilson delivers the first presidential speech before a joint session of Congress since John Adams.



**Lou Frey Institute**