

Jack Cunningham

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Digital History Print Project

State of the Union Speeches: Digital History Examination of SOTU

Introduction

American presidents have an enormous of power and responsibility entrusted in them by the Constitution and the nation. They were elected by the people of the nation. They trust that that individual would make the right choices, uphold the voter's values and ideas, and steer the nation away from danger and into prosperity. A president must decide what to prioritize and where the focus of the administration should be. For the vast majority of the American public, tuning into C-SPAN regularly or reading and reviewing the Congressional voting agenda is not something that is on the top of the to-do list. The president needs to lay out their agenda to the public in a format that is more easily digestible than C-SPAN but more informative than a ren second sound bit from a debate or campaign speech. The American public deserved to be informed, however, they are picky and lazy about how they like to be informed. That has changed over the past few centuries in the United States. What has not changed however, is the obligation of the president to give a speech on the state of the American Union.

This speech is televised live on the major news networks and online over hundreds of platforms. As a society, we have deemed it an important occasion. The entire U.S. government, aside from one member, is present in the U.S. Capital Building to hear the president speak. Despite the SOTU not having any legal or binding resolutions, it draws a massive audience who listen and afterwards critique every aspect of the address. This speech can tell us so much about

the state of mind the nation is in, what the priorities of the current administration are, and how those two are connected, if at all. The SOTU address is overlooked and under utilized by researchers looking to connect the history of the country with the American Presidents who led/made that history. How did administrations year to year? How did crisis shape the nation? Were Republican and Democratic presidents really that different? Were all Democratic administrations aligned in their ideals? How about Republican administrations? These questions and questions like it can be answered by analyzing the SOTU speeches. Presidents are already in office. They no longer need to pander to the voting public on policies or ideas. In the SOTU, they can actually lay out what they would like to do for the country.

Every president with exception of President Harrison who died one month into office and James Garfield who was assassinated, every president has given a State of the Union address in our nation's history. Even the current administration, which seems to pride itself on breaking tradition and past protocol, has given an address. And because every president has given one, it is a very informative and unique primary source to study for the history of the American Presidency. Not many other primary sources can be linked between Washington to Trump. It is very unique in that regard for researchers and historians. These speeches have been digitized, collected, and put into online archives and databases to be saved for future generations. The internet has advanced the rate of research and expanded access to materials otherwise limited to some. These 21st century tools can be used to enhance the kinds of research being done currently in the field. To examine these addresses, I will be using an online source <http://stateoftheunion.onetwothree.net/> that has compiled all of the SOTU speeches and made them text searchable. This resource paired with a text analysis tool, Voyant Tools, will allow me to see the most used key phrases, words, and how many times those appear in the speech. It will

also allow me to analyze the length and reading level each president used in their address. This wealth of knowledge can then be used to look at how different administrations used that podium to address the public and how they elected to do so.

Brief History of the State of the Union

The State of the Union Speech is the easiest way for the current administration to lay out its plans, priorities, and wishes for the upcoming year. This is the time where the president and his advisors get to set the tone they wish to see and dictate the terms they wish to accomplish that. This annual address to both Congress and subsequently the American people is enshrined in the U.S Constitution. This gives the authority to the president that they “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.”¹ The wording of this section is vague and ambiguous to and specific details. Those holes in detail are to be filled in by the president. This leeway has allowed for presidents to take a myriad of approaches in what they elect to address in the speech, how to give it, and the length of the speech.

The State of the Union has not always been delivered in person in front of a joint session of Congress. It obviously has not always been broadcasted to the American public either. The Constitution does not lay out any parameters for how the State of the Union should be delivered. Again, the vagueness of the wording gives the president options. President George Washington would be the president to set the tone in some regards when he gave his first State of the Union address in New York City from Federal Hall on Wall Street. He gave his address to a gathering

¹ U.S. Constitution, Article II, Section 3, Clause 1.

of Senators, Representatives, gentry, and average citizens who were in the area.² Washington also set the precedent of what this annual address should be called since the Constitution did not give it a name. He named it State of the Union Message. Since then, each president has referred to it as such, and that name has been the colloquial term used by the public as well.

How the State of the Union address has been given over the years has varied. There is no requirement the president give the speech in person or that the address be read aloud at all. Just that an address can be given by the president. The first two presidents, Washington and Adams, elected to give the speech in person for each of their annual addresses. However, in 1801, President Jefferson elected to have his address written out and delivered to Congress by a clerk.³ This shocked Congress and even his own party. However, despite this massive break in tradition from Washington and Adams, Jefferson's method of delivering the SOTU by written message to Congress would stand for over a century until President Wilson stunned the nation by addressing Congress in person in his 1913 State of the Union address.⁴ Since his break from tradition, presidents have gone back and forth on how to deliver their address. The advent of new technologies such as radio and television have forced most presidents to give their SOTU speeches in person before Congress. In 2002, President Bush's address was available to be seen and heard on the internet. Since then, all presidents and their STOU addresses have been available to be seen live by the nation and the world via the internet.

First State of the Union Addresses

² Edward Boykin, ed., *The State of the Union* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1963), 1.

³ *Ibid*, 2.

⁴ *Ibid*, 2.

Since the State of the Union parameters are so vague and presidents are able to essentially say what ever they wish in their annual message to the nation, the SOTU speeches have varied wildly between Washington and Trump. The address is the best way for the president to clearly lay out his message to a wider audience without worrying about being interrupted, pandering to voters, or lobbying Congress. This is the prime opportunity for a president to present the fullest extent of his ideas and values to the nation and Congress. The first SOTU is arguably the most important. It sets the stage for the rest of the term and possibly the second term. This address is not the thankfulness of an Inauguration speech or the rowdiness of a campaign speech. It is a delicately crafted state speech outlining objectives, policies, and plans forward.

President Washington served two terms as president and delivered eight State of the Union addresses. Since he was the one to set the tone for the rest of the men to follow him His very first address was 1,080 words long.⁵ This was the speech he gave in person to the class diverse crowd in Federal Hall in New York City. His message urged the nation to prepare itself for the journey ahead and unite behind the Constitution and its principles. However, the biggest take away from his message was preparation for war to preserve peace. His messages were short but packed full of dense messages and wise words for the future of the country he helped create. He used the words “public” and “country” the most times in his speech.⁶ His message of forward progress as a nation and building a national identity resonated with the audience and the nation as a whole.

⁵ Voyant Tools Corpus, Washington’s First Address,1790, <https://voyant-tools.org/?corpus=98900b67cca942db6a6c856d2e04e653>.

⁶ Ibid.

In the first State of the Union address to be written out and delivered by clerk to be read to Congress, Jefferson's address was over three times the length of Washington's first address at 3,217 words.⁷ Jefferson took office ten years after Washington. The country was prospering and growing rapidly. Jefferson's address focused on that prosperity and the results of the census which alluded to more good news. The population was growing and moving west. Jefferson's ideal vision of America. A nation of farmers stretching from coast to coast. In his first address, one of his most commonly used words was "peace."⁸ He used this word nine separate time to solidify the prosperity and growth the United States witnessed leading to his election. He vowed to continue that growth. However, Jefferson did forecast repealing the extreme naturalization laws put into place under the Adams Administration. An early example of policy desires laid out by an administration.

President Taylor would give his only State of the Union speech in December 1849. This would prove to be his only chance to address a troubled and divided nation. President Taylor died after contracting cholera morbus after consuming cherries and iced milk. Even though President Taylor only was able to give one State of the Union address, his speech was over 7,500 words long and packed with fiery rhetoric on topics both foreign and domestic.⁹ During the time Taylor was giving his speech, Congress was debating what would become the Compromise of 1850. Putting off the Civil War for another ten years. Taylor adamantly pushed for the passing of this compromise bill in his address despite him owning slaves himself. Taylor, ever the fighter, ended his speech with a promise to ward off threats to the Union and "stand by it [the Union] and

⁷ Voyant Tools Corpus, Jefferson's First Address, 1801, <https://voyant-tools.org/?corpus=cfd652f6dd49621524f8a1259f3707c1>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Voyant Tools Corpus, Taylor's First Address, 1849, <https://voyant-tools.org/?corpus=7c89fc58bf1e79a0d1a2dd14cbb4affc>

maintain its integrity to the full extent of the obligations and powers conferred upon me by the Constitution.”¹⁰ Although he would not be able to fulfil that promise, Taylor harped on unity, strength of the Union, and the importance of the admission of the newly conquered Mexican territory. He used the word “united” and “government” a combined total of 63 times in his address.¹¹ Taylor is a president often forgotten because of his short time in office. However, his administration presided over a tremendous changing point in American history. The decade leading up to the Civil War was a rigorous course to navigate and Taylor’s Administration led the way for others to follow. His State of the Union address was symbolic of his intentions and desires for the nation. Exactly what that speech was intended for.

Arguably President Lincoln’s first State of the Union speech was given under the most difficult of times. He gave his address on December 3, 1861 with the American Civil War just eight months old. Lincoln could not say he could preserve the Union; he had to save the Union. His address was nearly 7,000 words long and carefully thought out in each sentence. His message was both a rally cry to defeat the Confederate States of America and focused on traditional “domestic” policies. He asked Congress to fund more roads, canals, and railways. His most frequently used word in his speech is “Congress”, used twenty-nine times. The word Union by comparison was only used twenty times. Even in unrepresented times, Lincoln was making sure Congress knew he was going to go through the proper channels and let them legislate.

¹⁰ Zachary Taylor’s First State of the Union, in *State of the Union*, ed. By Edward Boyton (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1963), 170.

¹¹ Voyant Tools Corpus, Taylor’s First Address, 1849, <https://voyant-tools.org/?corpus=7c89fc58bf1e79a0d1a2dd14cbb4affc>

The longest first State of the Union address was written by President Truman. He did not deliver his 27,000-word address in person orally.¹² He had his written and delivered to Congress on January 21, 1946. His address was more of a moral roadmap for America reshaping the globe after the utter devastation of the Second World War. Truman set his agenda in establishing America's role in the United Nations. Truman saw the United Nations as "a great voice to speak constantly and responsibly in terms of world collaboration and world wellbeing."¹³ Truman also touted American economic power and wealth in his speech. He used "dollar" and "war" over 200 times each in his massive speech. The world would be reshaped in America's image according to Truman's vision. His State of the Union speech is a great example of how the SOTU is used to proclaim a vision for the country as the president sees it. Truman was able to put down into words how everlasting global peace was to be achieved and how America would be at the height of world power to put the world back together after the horrors of the Second World War. Quite an optimistic speech after such utter global devastation.

These State of the Union addresses are prime examples of presidents who took advantage of their first-time addressing Congress and the nation. Each speech was filled with legislative ambition, forward visions of America and the world, and the president's own goals while in office. While each address varied in length and style, they each left no question of what the goals of that administration were and what they saw as the future while they were at the helm. That is what a first SOTU speech should convey. It is a message of progress and hope for the future. A president's first true opportunity to display the values and desires of an administration away from

¹² Voyant Tools Corpus, Truman's First Address, 1946, <https://voyant-tools.org/?corpus=4b6128ab75b8a2c986b6326e00c5c6be>

¹³ Harry Truman's First State of the Union, in *State of the Union*, ed. By Edward Boyton (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1963), 448.

the scrutiny of the voters. A president's job is to lead the nation through the bad times and the good. The State of the Union is one of the ways to do that. Lincoln and Truman had to heal a broken nation and a shattered globe. Their messages of peace and unity reassured a troubled people. They took advantage of this momentous first address to accomplish that. Both Jefferson and Taylor used their time to harp on the past success of the country while also making sure to push for legislation they deemed beneficial to the forward progress of the country they were elected to lead. A president has a minimum of four SOTU addresses. However, they only get one chance to impress on the first time at the podium.

Ushering in a New Century

Only three presidents have had the rare opportunity to be in office as the century mark turned over. President Adams saw the young new United States out of the 18th century and into the 19th century. Little did Adams know, the one hundred years to come would break the country down, but by the end of the century, the United States would be an emerging industrial world power. President McKinley would lead the United States into the 20th century: The American Century. This century would prove how destructive humanity could be. A global depression, pandemic, two world wars, and the rise of authoritarian regimes around the world. However, for the United States, the 20th century proved to be a time of wealth, prosperity, and growth- for some Americans. The last president to date that has ushered in a new century was President Clinton in 1999. The 21st century is still unfolding. However, right at the turn of it, the United States stood alone as the global superpower. The Cold War had been won and Communism had been toppled in the Soviet Union. These three presidents had an opportunity like no other U.S. president has. Their SOTU addresses looked toward the future and positivity as the world said goodbye to one century and hello to the next one.

President John Adams had big shoes to fill in place of George Washington. The father of the nation stepped down after two terms and eight State of the Union addresses. He set the standard for presidential terms (until FDR and the Twenty-Second Amendment to follow). Adams gave his first STOU address in 1797. However, he was lucky enough to give the last State of the Union for the 18th century and the first one of the 19th century. This unique opportunity to reflect on the progress of the nation under the leadership of President Washington and looking ahead to the challenges and opportunities of the new century was the perfect opportunity for Adams. Despite this opportunity, Adams elected to talk about treaties and commerce, citing each nine and seven times respectively.¹⁴ Adams was focused on the short-term problems facing the nation rather than looking far into the future. The United States was trying to build up a trade fleet during this time and Adams was concerned with European Powers interfering in that. The Adams administration was also dealing with the French fleet raiding the United States merchant marine vessels in the years prior to this address. It makes sense that Adams was focused on that aspect rather than the new century.

President William McKinley was the next president to be in office to witness the century tick over. Unlike Adams, President McKinley, in the first State of the Union in the 20th century, spent the first few paragraphs to sum up the previous century of America's progress as a nation. McKinley touted that

“the Republic was never so strong, because never so strongly entrenched in the hearts of the people as now.

The Constitution, with few amendments, exists as it left the hands of its authors. The additions which have been made to it proclaim larger freedom and more extended citizenship. Popular government has demonstrated in its one

¹⁴ Voyant Tools Corpus, Adam's Third Address, 1799, <https://voyant-tools.org/?corpus=814c5644c3c485ca90ca60ca85359b87>

hundred and twenty-four years of trial here its stability and security, and its efficiency as the best instrument of national development and the best safeguard to human rights.”¹⁵

McKinley touted American exceptionalism in the new century. The United States had just won the Spanish American War against a wavering, yet still major, European power in 1898. In 1900, its newly acquired possessions in the Pacific and Caribbean Oceans were worth noting for McKinley. American liberty and freedom would be welcomed to those islands with open arms. Starting his speech with the strength of the American Republic and her ideas was a good idea to sell American colonial expansion. The President also touted the rapid expansion across the board in the nation over the past century: “When the Sixth Congress assembled in November 1800, the population of the United States was 5,308,483. It is now 76,304,799. Then we had sixteen States. Now we have forty-five. Then our territory consisted of 909,050 square miles. It is now 3,846,595 square miles.”¹⁶ And although his speech was not centered on the past century, President McKinley did use that as his base for the rest of his address. His focus on foreign policy was remarkable with the use of the word “islands” fifty-three times.¹⁷ McKinley was an expansionist president. He oversaw the beginnings of the American colonial expansion at the start of the 20th century. His speech reflected the feeling of the country during this expansion to keep up with the European overseas empires.

Bill Clinton is the final president to be in the White House during the centennial turnover. With the Cold War freshly over, the United States stood alone as the global hegemon. No other nation could compete with the economic and military power of the United States at the turn of

¹⁵ William McKinley’s Fourth State of the Union, in *State of the Union*, ed. By Edward Boyton (New York: Funk & Wagnalls Company, 1963), 338.

¹⁶ Ibid, 338.

¹⁷ Voyant Tools Corpus, McKinley’s Fourth Address, 1900, <https://voyant-tools.org/?corpus=4e8d20f0c52da964a58fab5e2bd56bf0>

the 21st century. President Clinton used that to enhance his rhetoric in his State of the Union address. Of the two presidents who were in his place centuries ago, President Clinton dwelled on this unique opportunity he had the most in his 1999 and 2000 SOTU addresses. In 1999, Clinton's most used word was "century." He used it thirty-six times in his 7,500-word address.¹⁸ His focus was turning the attention of the nation forward to the 21st century. His administration was "determined to give our people the tools they need to make the most of their own lives in the 21st century, a 21st century government for 21st century America."¹⁹ His administration, or so he would brand it in this address, was the 21st century presidency. His administration would guide the nation into the Information Age with dignity and American determination. The same determination that had guided his predecessors. Clinton was aware of the historic moment of his address that would be the "last State of the Union Address for the 20th century, [and] no one anywhere in the world can doubt the enduring resolve and boundless capacity of the American people."²⁰ The speech Clinton was presenting to the American people and Congress was one of forward American progress and prosperity in the coming new century.

Both President McKinley and President Clinton took advantage of their unique place in history with their State of the Union Speeches. They both saw the future of America as a prosperous one filled with American success and leadership. Both men had led the nation through the end of a conflict, one military conquest and one an ideological battle between superpowers. With America being successful in both areas of conflict, McKinley and Clinton had room to boast about the future century. Adams had more pressing matters to address in his

¹⁸ Voyant Tools Corpus, Clinton's Seventh Address, 1999, <https://voyant-tools.org/?corpus=9de29d61c1a5d222b61a4548bba04156>

¹⁹ President Bill Clinton's Seventh State of the Union, 1999
<http://stateoftheunion.onetwothree.net/texts/19990119.html>

²⁰ Ibid.

State of the Union. With France harassing U.S. trade and commerce, the president was forced to make that the focus of his speech. It is interesting to note the three speeches given at the same historic setting a century apart, but each is so different in its own regard.

Age and the State of the Union

The office of the President, the highest office in the land and would become the most powerful person in the world, has been surrounded by the question of age. How old is too young? How old is too old? We are still grappling with the question of age today, especially during election season. The Constitution places an age minimum on the president at thirty-five years old. This age requirement of the president shows that the Founding Fathers were predicting the rigor of the job and needed a mature adult to hold that office. Now, there have been movements and pushes to change that age and determine exactly at what age a person would be mature enough and have enough experience to be president. However, on the flip side, how old is too old? There is no age cap on the president. There have been arguments on this side of the age spectrum as well. At what point is a person's mind and body too old to keep up with the pressures of running the nation? The age debate rolls around each election season. However, does age impact what president's talk about in their State of the Union addresses?

President Theodore Roosevelt was the youngest president to assume the office of the president when he was forty-two years old after the assassination of President McKinley. In his first State of the Union, President Roosevelt spent much of his address talking about the death of his predecessor and the assassination of the two other Presidents Lincoln and Garfield. The assassination

“was not aimed at tyranny or wealth. It was aimed at one of the strongest champions the wageworker has ever had; at one of the most faithful representatives of the system of public rights and representative government

who has ever risen to public office. President McKinley filled that political office for which the entire people vote, and no President not even Lincoln himself--was ever more earnestly anxious to represent the well-thought-out wishes of the people.”²¹

Roosevelt took this opportunity to calm a shocked and angry nation after this hateful act. Although he was the youngest president, his grace and powerful speech steered a nation out of mourning and into continued progress and growth. In this first address, the president’s most used word was “great” which he used sixty times.²² He was forward thinking while also memorializing a fallen president. The use of the word great is often in reference to McKinley. However, Roosevelt also talks about the death of Queen Victoria who he also calls great and talks about her longest reign in English at that point in history. He even walked in the funeral precession behind her casket alongside European monarchs. Roosevelt had his own vision for the nation. The United States was an emerging power beginning to rival the industrial might of Europe and build up its naval presence around the globe. In his eight State of the Union addresses, President Roosevelt talked about “government” and “law” most often. A total of over eight hundred references combined.²³ He would become the “trust busting” president and his references to law and government certainly reflect that legacy. He was a president filled with optimism and future glory for the United States. He did not dwell on the past to find greatness. He was forward thinking and progressive in both his policies at home and for his visions of the nation. He saw that America was becoming a global superpower alongside England and the major European continental powers. His age and youth contributed to this progressive outlook

²¹ President Theodore Roosevelt’s First State of the Union, 1901, <http://stateoftheunion.onetwothree.net/texts/19011203.html>

²² Voyant Tools Corpus, Roosevelt’s First Address, 1901, <https://voyant-tools.org/?corpus=99395bb01f63a513bb79589352d5b27c>

²³ Voyant Tools, President Theodore Roosevelt’s State of the Union, 1901-1908, <https://voyant-tools.org/?corpus=85dc8ad45f16d6841712d2b72c51f66b>

for the nation. He brought his energy and passion into every speech and policy he enacted. His love of nature and the fight for its preservation was another example of President Roosevelt's commitment for progress and American longevity and prosperity.

Unlike Theodore Roosevelt's youth and optimism when he assumed the office, President Donald Trump was the oldest president when he took office; he was seventy years old at the start of his presidency. He just beat out President Ronald Regan by less than a year. President Trump beaks the mold of a traditional American President for sure. The country has changed in many ways since he took office. His State of the Union addresses are under the same scrutiny as any other president no matter how much Trump has changed the political landscape and climate of this county. Unlike President Theodore Roosevelt and his forward-thinking presidency, Trump has lamented on the "good old days" of Americas past. His slogan "Make America Great Again" is strong evidence of his focus on America's past. Trump's focus on bringing American manufacturing jobs back to the United States is directly referencing the early to mid-20th century when America was the unrivaled manufacturing king. His State of Union addresses also reflect his obsession with America's former glory. Unsurprisingly, overt the course of his four speeches to Congress, Trump's most used word is "America" or a variation there of such as "American" "Americans." In total, he has used those phrases nearly three hundred time combined over his addresses.²⁴ His obsession of how things were when he was growing up at the height of American power compared to the rest of the world has pigeonholed the president to only talking about that. Trump does not talk in terms of progress or forward thinking. His base and his political allies reminisce about the past. That can be detrimental to the nation going forward. The

²⁴ Voyant Tools, President Trump's State of the Union, 2017-2020, <https://voyant-tools.org/?corpus=8774f2106a0c6ff56ed3358dd5806299>

nostalgia of post-World War Two America is not where the mind of a seventy-year-old president should be when leading the nation. Progress is looking forward, not back.

Conclusion

The State of the Union can give researchers tons of information about the president and his administration. This speech is given by every president annually. A perfect primary resource to study the presidency. In today's digital world, breaking down those speeches has never been easier. Voyant Tools has allowed me to text analyze and compare all of these State of the Union addresses in a matter of minutes rather than hours or days. It gives quick information on total word count, most often used words or phrases, where those words are located in the speech, and average words per sentence. Voyant Tools can also be used to compare and contrast those speeches as well. Which president's address was longest by total word count is something that can easily be researched with the help of Voyant Tools. These three areas I have decided to look at were possible because of the information provided to me by this digital resource. The presidency and the State of the Union go hand in hand. More research and analysis should be aimed at this address to further dissect and study each administration more in depth. With the help of new digital tools at our disposal, that research is more possible than ever before.

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