

## The Speech That Turns Mere Presidents Into Talk Show Hosts

By Geoffrey Nunberg

Every year, by law and by custom, we meet here to consider the state of the union." The beginning of President Bush's State of the Union speech echoed the phrases that Ronald Reagan was fond of using in the exordiums to his annual addresses: "In keeping with time-honored tradition"; "a constitutional duty as old as our republic itself."

Other presidents haven't usually bothered to make those observations, which would hardly come as news to the assembled legislators to whom the speech is ostensibly addressed. But Mr. Reagan understood that the occasion was really contrived for other ears - and that its effectiveness as television would be all the greater if it seemed to be a tradition that wasn't fashioned with the tube in mind.

"By law and by custom" - well, yes and no. The Constitution says only that the president "shall from time to time give to the Congress Information of the State of the Union." And while Washington and Adams made annual addresses to Congress, the practice lapsed with Jefferson, who compared the address to a "speech from the throne," a symptom of the Federalists' dangerous desire "to draw over us . . . the forms of the British Government."

Jefferson's misgivings were still very much on people's minds when Woodrow Wilson resurrected the annual address in 1913 - Senator John Sharp Williams, a Mississippi Democrat, derided Wilson's speech as "a cheap and tawdry imitation of the pomposities and cavalcadings of monarchical countries."

Those criticisms weren't entirely stilled until after World War II, as Congress came to accept the speech as a presidential prerogative that should be received with respectful civility. By 1956 the political scientist Richard E. Neustadt could note "the almost total absence nowadays of vocal criticism or surprise at annual presentations of the president's program."

State of the Union addresses have been broadcast since Calvin Coolidge's 1923 speech was carried over the radio. Harry S. Truman's 1947 speech was the first to be telecast. Lyndon B. Johnson moved it to prime time in 1965.

But it was one thing to televise the speech and another to turn it into a television show. The credit for that transformation goes to Mr. Reagan, who signaled the new order in 1982 when he pointed to the gallery to honor Lenny Skutnik, the man who had dived into the icy Potomac to save a woman after a plane crash.

That was the precedent for the bathetic "Skutnik moments" that have punctuated the addresses ever since, as well as for seeding the gallery with military leaders, foreign dignitaries and ordinary citizens whose stories will dramatize his message in human terms.

More important, the 1982 speech demonstrated Mr. Reagan's realization that once the audience in the chamber was made a visible participant in the occasion, television viewers would settle into the familiar role they assume with every other kind of television talk, from "Oprah" to "Firing Line" to the local happy-talk news show - as the privileged onlookers for whom the exchange is really being transacted.

The effects on the language of the speeches have been dramatic. In 1956, Dwight D. Eisenhower described his program in dry and unemotional language directed at the legislators themselves.

"It is expected that more than \$12 billion will be expended in 1955 for the development of land, water and other resources; control of floods, and navigation and harbor improvements;

construction of roads, schools and municipal water supplies, and disposal of domestic and industrial wastes."

After Mr. Reagan, there would be no more sentences like that one. Now the president's object is to characterize his program in stirring terms that make a coded appeal to his own constituents, but that are vague enough to land with the television audience and command a deferential reception by the opposing party's members, who are obliged by the rules of the genre to respect the pretense of a direct address.

It makes for a strange exercise, like a political Simon Says, as the opposition tries to decide whether to respond politely to the superficially bland appeals of the address or more truculently to their coded messages.

"Instead of bureaucrats and trial lawyers and H.M.O.'s, we must put doctors and nurses and patients back in charge of American medicine."

Representatives Nancy Pelosi of California and Richard A. Gephardt of Missouri could greet that line with a disdainful look, recognizing the proposal to limit the legal responsibilities of health care providers. But other Democrats in less safe seats would as soon not have to explain those niceties to their constituents or risk looking sulky on television.

James Fallows, a speechwriter for President Jimmy Carter, observed once that the effectiveness of the State of the Union speech has less to do with what the president says than with the repeated applause in an impressive setting. That's why the speech always raises the president's standing in the polls. But the ceremony wouldn't be nearly so effective if it actually appeared to be a made-for-TV event. Hence the importance of those invocations of custom at the beginning of Mr. Bush's and Mr. Reagan's addresses, which suggest that the form and language of the speech are really dictated by the president's traditional role.

Like Jefferson, viewers today may see in this dangerous monarchical tendencies. But the British monarch's annual speech from the throne makes an explicit reference to the limits of the sovereign's power. It begins when the royal usher knocks on the door of the House of Commons, which is slammed in the official's face in a reminder that no sovereign is permitted to enter the Commons.

The present-day State of the Union speech wouldn't have any place for a ritual that seems so churlish (the term comes from the Old English word for peasant).

The president delivering his address is not like a monarch, whose dutifully respectful reception is conditioned on the hard-won limitation of her temporal powers. He's something much more commanding than that - the host of his own television special - and refractory subjects can display their disagreement only by sitting on their hands.

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