

RSC Policy Brief: A Closer Look at Joint Sessions of Congress

September 2009

Since Congress first convened in 1789, there have been a total of 245 Joint Sessions of Congress.¹ 165 were procedural or conducted by Congress—66 of these were for the purpose of counting electoral votes, 17 were for memorials or other events not conducted by the president (though the president may have attended), 8 were for inaugurations (some inaugurations are listed as joint sessions and some are not), and two occurred when LBJ and Ford assumed office. 88 were for the President’s Annual Message/State of the Union Address (the State of the Union Address was formally known as the Annual Message until 1934).² The remaining 64 sessions were other speeches given by the various presidents. (Table 1 provides a summary of this information.)

Breaking down these numbers, 5 of the 64 sessions were ceremonial addresses such as the “Bicentennial of George Washington’s Birth” given by Hoover or the “Sesquicentennial of the 1st Congress” delivered by FDR. 16 were speeches directly related to war, such as Bush Sr.’s speech on the “Invasion of Kuwait,” and 18 were messages about foreign policy or national security (some of these included foreign dignitaries such as Carter’s announcement of the Middle East Peace Agreements with Anwar El Sadat the President of Egypt, and Menachem Begin the Prime Minister of Israel).³ Of the remaining 25 presidential addresses, 18 were on economic issues (many given in times of economic crisis), while 7 dealt with “other” areas of presidential policy: either highlighting specific issues, such as LBJ’s address on voting rights and FDR’s “Veto Message,” or providing sweeping overviews similar to a State of the Union address, such as Harding’s “Federal Problem Message.” (Tables 2 and 3 examine these figures more closely.)

¹ U.S. House of Representatives, Office of the Clerk, “House History: Joint Meetings, Joint Sessions, and Inaugurations,” http://clerk.house.gov/art_history/house_history/Joint_Meetings/jointAll.html (accessed September 4, 2009).

² U.S. House of Representatives, Office of the Clerk, “House History: State of the Union Address,” http://clerk.house.gov/art_history/house_history/stateunion.html (accessed September 4, 2009).

³ Note that Article II, Section 2 of the Constitution delegates certain military and foreign policy making authority to the President, making speeches given to Congress on matters of war or international relations certainly seem appropriate.

Historical Background

Article II, Section 3 of the Constitution states that 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.” George Washington and John Adams both orally delivered “Annual Messages” to Congress. Thomas Jefferson, however, felt this method was overbearing and began providing his annual recommendations to Congress in writing.⁴ This tradition was standard until Woodrow Wilson again began giving his addresses to Congress in person, and the practice has continued to this day. Before Wilson, John Adams was the only president to give a speech to Congress that was not an annual address (on May 16, 1797 Adams spoke on current “Relations with France”). In addition to his annual messages, however, Wilson started giving extra speeches to Congress on various matters of policy (17 in all) which was an unprecedented practice. He spoke about everything from the Panama Canal tolls to a program for the world’s peace. Presidents after Wilson continued this custom, though none made so many addresses. Most presidents since Wilson have given 1 to 4 speeches to Joint Sessions of Congress besides their State of the Union Address, though Truman and FDR (both dealing with World War II) are notable exceptions.

Summary

In general, the giving of presidential addresses to Joint Sessions of Congress (other than the State of the Union) has been a practice started only in the last hundred years, and the majority of these speeches have been related to matters of war, foreign policy, or economic problems. The only other President to hold a Joint Session of Congress to speak about healthcare reform was Bill Clinton in 1993. Although a few have used the practice more extensively, most presidents have averaged less than one additional speech a year. It is interesting to note that Obama is giving his second (non-state of the union) speech before a Joint Session of Congress, and he has been president for only 8 months.

Table 1: A Breakdown of Joint Sessions of Congress:

| Counting Electoral Votes | Memorials/Events not conducted by President | Inaugurations | Assumption of Office | Annual Address/State of the Union | Other Presidential Addresses | Total |
|--------------------------|---|---------------|----------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------------|-------|
| 66 | 17 | 8 | 2 | 88 | 64 | 245 |
| 26.9% | 6.9% | 3.2% | 0.8% | 35.9% | 26.1% | 100% |

Source: U.S. House of Representatives, Office of the Clerk, “House History: Joint Meetings, Joint Sessions, and Inaugurations,” http://clerk.house.gov/art_history/house_history/Joint_Meetings/jointAll.html.

⁴ Gerhard Peters, “State of the Union Messages,” The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/sou.php> (accessed September 4, 2009).

Table 2: Presidential Addresses to Congress Excluding the State of the Union

| Ceremonial | War | Foreign Policy | Economic | Other | Total |
|------------|-------|----------------|----------|-------|-------|
| 5 | 16 | 18 | 18 | 7 | 64 |
| 7.8% | 25.0% | 28.1% | 28.1% | 10.9% | 100% |

Source: U.S. House of Representatives, Office of the Clerk, "House History: Joint Meetings, Joint Sessions, and Inaugurations," http://clerk.house.gov/art_history/house_history/Joint_Meetings/jointAll.html.

Color Coded Chronological List of All Presidential Speeches to Congress Excluding State of the Union Addresses:

Key: Ceremonial War Foreign Policy Economic Other

| Year: | Topic: | President: |
|--------------|---|----------------------------|
| 1797 | Relations with France | Adams |
| 1913 | Tariff message | Wilson |
| 1913 | Currency and bank reform message | Wilson |
| 1913 | Mexican affairs message | Wilson |
| 1914 | Trusts message | Wilson |
| 1914 | Panama Canal tolls | Wilson |
| 1914 | Mexico message | Wilson |
| 1914 | War tax message | Wilson |
| 1916 | Railroad message (labor management dispute) | Wilson |
| 1917 | Severing diplomatic relations with Germany | Wilson |
| 1917 | Arming of merchant ships | Wilson |
| 1917 | War with Germany | Wilson |
| 1918 | Federal operation of transportation systems | Wilson |
| 1918 | Program for world's peace | Wilson |
| 1918 | Peace message | Wilson |
| 1918 | War finance message | Wilson |
| 1918 | Terms of armistice signed by Germany | Wilson |
| 1919 | Cost of living message | Wilson |
| 1921 | Federal problem message | Harding |
| 1922 | Maintenance of the merchant marine | Harding |
| 1922 | Coal and railroad message | Harding |
| 1922 | Promotion of the American merchant marine | Harding |
| 1923 | British debt due to the United States | Harding |
| 1927 | George Washington birthday message | Coolidge |
| 1932 | Bicentennial of George Washington's birth | Hoover |
| 1934 | 100th anniversary of the death of Lafayette | FDR w/Ambassador of France |
| 1935 | Veto message | FDR |
| 1939 | Sesquicentennial of the 1st Congress | FDR |
| 1939 | Neutrality address | FDR |

| | | |
|------|---|-----------------------------|
| 1940 | National defense message | FDR |
| 1941 | War with Japan | FDR |
| 1945 | Yalta Conference | FDR |
| 1945 | Prosecution of the War | Truman |
| 1945 | Bestowal of Congressional Medal of Honor on Tech. Sgt. Jake William Lindsey | Truman and Marshall |
| 1945 | Universal military training message | Truman |
| 1946 | Railroad strike message | Truman |
| 1947 | Greek-Turkish aid policy | Truman |
| 1947 | Aid to Europe message | Truman |
| 1948 | National security and conditions in Europe | Truman |
| 1948 | 50th anniversary, liberation of Cuba | Truman w/Ambassador of Cuba |
| 1948 | Inflation, housing, and civil rights | Truman |
| 1952 | Steel industry dispute | Truman |
| 1957 | Middle East message | Eisenhower |
| 1961 | Urgent national needs: foreign aid, defense, civil defense, and outer space | JFK |
| 1965 | Voting rights | LBJ |
| 1971 | Economic policy | Nixon |
| 1972 | European trip report | Nixon |
| 1974 | Economy | Ford |
| 1975 | State of the World message | Ford |
| 1977 | Energy | Carter |
| 1978 | Middle East Peace Agreements | Carter |
| 1979 | Salt II agreements | Carter |
| 1981 | Economic recovery | Reagan |
| 1981 | Economic recovery--inflation | Reagan |
| 1983 | Central America | Reagan |
| 1985 | Geneva Summit | Reagan |
| 1989 | Building a Better America | Bush, Sr. |
| 1990 | Invasion of Kuwait by Iraq | Bush, Sr. |
| 1991 | Conclusion of Persian Gulf War | Bush, Sr. |
| 1993 | Economic Address | Clinton |
| 1993 | Health care reform | Clinton |
| 2001 | Budget Message | Bush, Jr. |
| 2001 | War on Terrorism | Bush, Jr. |
| 2009 | Economic recovery | Obama |

Source: U.S. House of Representatives, Office of the Clerk, "House History: Joint Meetings, Joint Sessions, and Inaugurations," http://clerk.house.gov/art_history/house_history/Joint_Meetings/jointAll.html.

RSC Staff Contact: Jessica Wagner, jessica.wagner@mail.house.gov, (202) 226-9717