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Cancel the State of the Union

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Mid-January is the time to ask the annual question: Are we ready for a big, noisy, overhyped prime-time production that has outgrown its simple origins and usually leaves us feeling both gorged and disappointed? If not, you may want to skip the State of the Union address and prepare for something humbler, like the Super Bowl.

President Barack Obama has been doing his best to make a low-news event a no-news event, by traveling the country unveiling the sort of programs presidents normally use the speech to unveil: free community college, paid job leaves, universal broadband access and more. By the time he actually ascends the House dais on Tuesday evening, we will already know pretty much everything he's going to say.

Too bad he isn't canceling the whole exercise. It would not be unprecedented. Richard Nixon decided to stay home in 1973, and that decision was not listed in the articles of impeachment. Dwight Eisenhower, recovering from a heart attack, elected not to appear in 1956, and both he and the country survived.

Not showing up on Capitol Hill used to be the norm. The Constitution says the president "shall from time to time give to the Congress information of the state of the union," but it doesn't specify the means of communication.

George Washington and John Adams delivered the address in person, but Thomas Jefferson sent written messages instead. The change, according to the Congressional Research Service, "was intended to simplify a ceremony that he believed to be an aristocratic imitation of the British monarch's Speech from the Throne, and thus unsuitable to a republic."

His successors followed that commendable example of restraint for more than a century. It was the notably unrestrained Woodrow Wilson who had the grand idea of visiting the Capitol to dazzle Congress with his radiance.

But it took another champion of the imperial presidency, Franklin Roosevelt, to cement this as the consistent practice. Lyndon Johnson, no shrinking violet, moved the show to the evening to get a bigger TV audience.

Republicans are also happy to exploit the occasion to the hilt: Ronald Reagan began the tradition of inviting and paying tribute to ordinary citizens who have done admirable things. There have been so many of those guests that there's a book about them.

The public appetite for the whole spectacle, however, is less than before. Since Obama's first one, the TV audience has shrunk every year. The 2014 viewer count was 33.3 million, down from 52.4 million in 2009. Laying out his agenda in advance is not likely to boost this year's Nielsen rating.

There will always be those citizens who will tune in hoping to see Obama clutching a Koran or Joe Biden throwing a spitball at John Boehner. Or—who knows?—maybe some livid House member will interrupt the president to bellow, "You lie!"

But most people who watch most likely will do so out of a heavy sense of civic duty rather than any urgent interest or any expectation that they'll learn much.

Presidents, of course, love these occasions for letting them occupy the undisputed center of attention, basking in waves of applause. The occasion dramatizes the theme of the 2008 book [*The Cult of the Presidency*](#), by Cato Institute analyst Gene Healy: the chief executive as "the great leader of the Progressives' dreams, Herbert Croly's 'Thor wielding with power and effect a sledge hammer in the cause of national righteousness.'"

The State of the Union address has grown in step with presidential presumption. It's a conspicuous symptom of a dangerous malady: We expect too much of our presidents and limit them too little.

Whether this event is still worth their time, however, is doubtful. If there was ever a time that direct exposure to presidential eloquence could melt the hearts of hostile legislators, it has passed. Even the public seems to have acquired immunity.

The effort often backfires. "In a 2013 analysis of SOTU polling," Healy has noted, "Gallup found that 'most presidents have shown an average *decrease* in approval of one or more points between the last poll conducted before the State of the Union and the first one conducted afterward.'"

Obama might be surprised to learn that killing it off would have no downside. When Calvin Coolidge woke up from his daily White House nap, he would puckishly ask an aide: "Is the country still there?" It always was.