

Mr. President, tweet the State of the Union: Forget about the useless pomp of a speech

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The week-long standoff over the State of the Union address began Jan. 16, when Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi called on President Trump to delay the SOTU or deliver it in writing. For a brief period, you had to wonder whether Trump would force the issue, gate-crashing the Capitol, with the Secret Service outgunning the House Sergeant-at-Arms.

Luckily, the dispute ended peaceably, after a rare climbdown by Trump. “I will do the Address when the Shutdown is over,” the President tweeted Wednesday evening.

Earlier that day, the Trump had griped: “It would be so very sad for our country, if the State of the Union were not delivered on time, on schedule, and very importantly, on location!” Actually it’s no great loss.

Trump describes the prime-time speech from the House chamber as a “constitutional duty.” But Article II, Section 3, doesn’t designate a particular place or time, nor even require the message to take the form of a speech. It just says that the President “shall from time to time give to the Congress Information of the State of the Union.” Certainly, nothing in the Constitution mandates what the modern SOTU has become: an imperious sermon befitting an imperial president, short on “Information,” long on pomp and circumstance and larded with exorbitant demands on the public purse.

As Pelosi pointed out in her Jan. 16 letter, a written message is the historical norm. Of the 221 SOTUs in American history, fewer than half have been delivered in person before Congress assembled.

True, the “security concerns” Pelosi cited were bogus. Our third President, Thomas Jefferson, offered far better reasons for switching to the written SOTU. In his 1801 letter to the Senate proposing the move, Jefferson described it as a time-saving measure for “the convenience of the legislature.” But his principal motivation was a small-‘r’ republican one: Jefferson thought the in-person address favored by Washington and Adams “too kingly for the new republic,” a monarchical “Speech from the Throne.”

From Jefferson’s first SOTU to William Howard Taft’s last, the Jeffersonian tradition reigned. It took a series of imperial Presidents, starting with the norm-busting Woodrow Wilson, to usher in

the modern State of the Union. Harry Truman gave us hell with the first televised address in 1947. In 1965, Lyndon Johnson moved the speech from mid-afternoon to prime-time.

Along the way, the President's annual message became unmoored from its constitutional purpose. "*Information of the State of the Union*" is the key phrase. The early days of the republic featured a part-time legislature and a full-time chief executive, so the original idea was that the President would be well-positioned "to lay before Congress all facts and information which may assist their deliberations," as Justice Joseph Story put it in 1833.

The modern SOTU extravaganza provides little information that Congress could use. Instead, with an average of 42 demands for action per speech since 1965, it's an excuse for the President to harangue the legislature, interrupted by applause and occasional jeers.

Even Presidents might be better off without it. In a 2013 analysis, Gallup found that "most Presidents have shown an average *decrease* in approval of one or more points" after delivering the State of the Union. Right now, Trump doesn't have a lot of points he can afford to lose.

You'd never confuse President Trump or Speaker Pelosi with Thomas Jefferson, but their unpleasant little spat has given us an opportunity to reboot the Jeffersonian tradition. Trump could even put his own "modern-day presidential" spin on the written message, delivering it via Twitter: "My fellow Americans (Thread): 1/126..."

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