

AlbertMohler.com

The State of the Union Address: The Battle is Joined

The annual State of the Union address has become a fixture of American political life—an exercise in public democracy. President George W. Bush delivered his third State of the Union address last night, signaling a transition in his presidency and answering many of the criticisms leveled at him by the field of Democratic presidential candidates.

Wednesday, January 21, 2004

The annual State of the Union address has become a fixture of American political life—an exercise in public democracy. President George W. Bush delivered his third State of the Union address last night, signaling a transition in his presidency and answering many of the criticisms leveled at him by the field of Democratic presidential candidates.

As always, the event was a spectacle of American democracy. Senators and representatives from the two parties sat side-by-side as cabinet members and Supreme Court justices took their own places. The President was announced by the Speaker of the House and the chamber's doorkeeper, and then entered the giant room, decked with the symbols of democratic government.

The U.S. Constitution requires 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.” The Constitution does not require that the president deliver the address in person, nor does it stipulate an annual report.

President George Washington set the pattern of an annual address delivered to Congress in person. Washington's first State of the Union address was delivered to Congress as it met in New York City on January 21, 1790. The nation's first chief executive congratulated its first Congress “on the favorable prospects of our public affairs.” Like the current president, Washington made national security a vital part of his address. “To be prepared for war is one of the most effectual means of preserving peace,” Washington declared. “A free people ought not only to be armed but disciplined; to which end a uniform and well digested plan is requisite: And their safety and interest require that they should promote such manufactories, as tend to render them independent on others, for essential, particularly for military supplies.”

The modern State of the Union address is generally prepared by a team of speech writers working with the president. Washington had a speech writer too—in his case the very gifted James Madison, himself a later president. In those early years, Congress made a formal response to the president, delivered in person by congressional officers. The president would then respond with another formal proposal, and so it would go. But, as presidential historian Richard Norton Smith points out, during the Washington administration, James Madison wrote all of them—both sides of the communication—thus finding himself at the center of America's early government.

President Thomas Jefferson thought that the State of the Union speech—then called the “Annual Address”—was too reminiscent of royal speeches made from the British throne. He sent Congress an annual report in writing. That practice was not reversed until President Woodrow Wilson began making the trek down Pennsylvania Avenue to deliver his address in person. Even in fairly recent times, the speech was not a major media event. As recently as President Lyndon B. Johnson, the State of the Union address was delivered during the business day.

Some presidents use the address for the announcement of major policy initiatives. President Johnson used such a speech to launch his “war on poverty.” President Franklin D. Roosevelt outlined his famous “Four Freedoms” in his 1941 State of the Union address. President Ronald Reagan used the State of the Union speech as a teaching opportunity—one time bringing thousands of pages of paper into the chamber to indicate the complexity of the tax code. President Bill Clinton made his State of the Union addresses a catalogue of new program initiatives—sometimes surprising even his

senior staff with such announcements. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, President Bush spoke to the nation of an “axis of evil” that threatened world peace and national security.

Last night, President Bush began his State of the Union address with attention to the War on Terror. “We have not come all this way—through tragedy, and trial, and war—only to falter and leave our work unfinished,” the President said. He spoke of American troops deployed around the world, and stated that, “By bringing hope to the oppressed and delivering justice to the violent, they are making America more secure.”

He reminded the nation’s political leadership that the “once all-powerful ruler of Iraq was found in a hole, and now sits in a prison cell.” But he also acknowledged the very real challenges America faces in rebuilding Iraq. “The work of building a new Iraq is hard, and it is right. And America has always been willing to do what it takes for what is right.”

President Bush also pointed to the decision of Libya’s leader Muammar Qadhafi to relinquish his nation’s nuclear weapons program as evidence that his doctrine of preemptive military action is working. “Colonel Qadhafi correctly judged that his country would be better off, and far more secure, without weapons of mass murder.” As he explained, “For diplomacy to be effective, words must be credible—and no one can now doubt the word of America.”

In terms of policy, the President called for a reauthorization of the PATRIOT Act, allowing for expanded information gathering and police powers in the aftermath of September 11. In other sections of the address he stressed the need for the continuation of his tax cut legislation, his educational programs, and his faith-based initiatives.

A shift in the direction of his address was signaled by more dramatic language. “We are living in a time of great change—in our world, our economy, and in science and medicine. Yet some things endure—courage and compassion, reverence and integrity, respect for differences of faith and race.” The President went on to identify moral values “instilled in us by fundamental institutions, such as families, and schools, and religious congregations.” He set the direction for the remainder of his address by stating: “These institutions—the unseen pillars of civilization—must remain strong in America, and we will defend them.”

In issues of national defense and the War on Terror, the President delivered swift and unwavering answers to his critics—especially the Democratic presidential candidates. After weathering months of campaign attacks from the Democrats, he used the State of the Union address to defend his administration and its policies—no quarter given to the criticisms. On the moral issues, however, the President threw a gauntlet down before the Democratic hopefuls and gave them fair warning of the issues he will hit hard on the campaign trail.

Most significantly, President Bush pointed to the central institution of marriage. “A strong America must also value the institution of marriage. I believe we should respect individuals as we take a principled stand for one of the most fundamental, enduring institutions of our civilization.” The President reminded Congress of the Defense of Marriage Act signed into law by President Bill Clinton in 1996, defining marriage as the union of a man and a woman and preventing one state from redefining marriage for another state. Nevertheless, “Activist judges, however, have begun redefining marriage by court order, without regard for the will of the people and their elected representatives.”

“On an issue of such great consequence, the people’s voice must be heard. If judges insist on forcing their arbitrary will upon the people, the only alternative left to the people would be the constitutional process. Our nation must defend the sanctity of marriage.”

Those were bold words—bolder even than marriage advocates had expected. Though he did not call for immediate action on a constitutional amendment like the proposed “Federal Marriage Amendment,” the President warned that such an amendment would be “the only alternative left to the people.”

The Democratic response, delivered jointly by the House minority leader, Rep. Nancy Pelosi and Sen. Tom Daschle, the Senate minority leader, hit the President on the war in Iraq, economic issues, and education. But the Democrats stayed far away from the President’s concern for marriage and other “fundamental institutions” of society.

The contenders for the Democratic presidential nomination—to a man—are on the record in support of civil unions and are openly committed to the normalization of homosexuality. The values gap will separate the two parties in this presidential election more than any other issue—even economics and the war in Iraq.

President Bush demonstrated real courage in taking such a clear stand for marriage in his State of the Union address. The Democratic response did not even acknowledge the issue. The 2004 presidential race will largely determine the future of marriage in America—at least in the short term. That should be sufficient to remind voters that they will face a real choice this election year. President Bush’s State of the Union address—and the Democratic response—made that clear enough.

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.