

How Nixon changed the State of the Union

By Philip Bump, Washington Post

The Constitution, in one of its less explicit sections, mandates that the president shall “from time to time” give Congress his assessment of the state of the union, and offer ideas for what to do about it. Nearly every president has taken this literally, giving either an address (as is now customary and was first done by George Washington) or a written letter (most of the 19th century) to the House and Senate. (The only two who didn’t offer state of the union were dead before they had the chance to do so.)

Franklin Roosevelt figured out that this was a pretty good way of talking to the American people, too, and so he introduced the modern, delivered State of the Union address. Looking at the dates of the past addresses, you’ll notice that for decades presidents gave their thoughts right at the top of the year. President Obama’s 2016 address – which won’t necessarily be his last – will be on Jan. 12. That’s a relatively late date by the standards of Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson.

But by modern standards, it’s unheard of. Beginning with Richard Nixon, State of the Union addresses moved to late in January.

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