

"The State of the . . . "

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UUMH

Article II Section 3 of the Constitution of the United States:

"He 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 has provided from its inception a mandate that the executive leader of the country in essence, "check in" with the legislature. This Tuesday evening, those wishing to tune in will witness the State of the Union speech given by the President of the United States. A response will be given from the point of view of the opposing party. This year it will be given by the new Senator from Virginia, Jim Webb. Throughout the history of this country, there have been addresses given, either written or in person, that have produced varying results in their wakes.

The White House web site gives us some historical anecdotes:

"On a cold January morning, the President rode in a carriage drawn by six horses from his residence on Cherry Street in New York to Federal Hall for a joint meeting of the two bodies of Congress, the House of Representatives and the Senate. When George Washington personally delivered the first annual message to Congress on January 8, 1790, he was aware of his constitutional duty to deliver his message and of the precedent he was setting for future presidents . . .

Since Washington's first speech to Congress, U.S. Presidents have "from time to time" given Congress an assessment of the condition of the union. Presidents have used the opportunity to present their goals and agenda through broad ideas or specific details. The annual message or "State of the Union" message's length, frequency, and method of delivery have varied from President to President and era to era.

For example, Thomas Jefferson thought Washington's oral presentation was too kingly for the new republic. Likewise, Congress's practice of giving a courteous reply in person at the President's residence was too formal. Jefferson detailed his priorities in his first annual message in 1801 and sent copies of the written message to each house of Congress. The President's annual message, as it was then called, was not spoken by the President for the next 112 years. The message was often printed in full or as excerpts in newspapers for the American public to read.

The first President to revive Washington's spoken precedent was Woodrow Wilson in 1913. Although controversial at the time, Wilson delivered his first annual message in person to both houses of Congress and outlined his legislative priorities."¹

Since then, the addresses have been given in person to a joint session of Congress. In 1923, Calvin Coolidge was the first to give the address on the radio. Harry Truman's was the first to be seen on television in 1947. Now I want you to know that I have not been a student of State of the Union addresses until reading up for today's sermon. For this, I read through a number of the speeches as they

¹ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/stateoftheunion/history.html>

are all available on line conveniently listed and presented on one web site.² There seems to be a convention in the first paragraph or two to profusely thank the Almighty for the gift of this great nation. It goes back to George Washington and many have followed that lead. But I have to admit after reading about a dozen or so of these speeches, these are not the things of which dreams are made. It was like reading the annual reports to the church written by either the President or Chair of the governing body or from the minister. They are mostly, as one would expect, an accounting of the events of the year past and where things stand moving forward. Just as in reading church annual reports though, it gives us a touchstone of the history of this country. For example, here are the opening paragraphs of Abraham Lincoln's address given Dec. 1, 1862:

"Fellow-Citizens of the Senate and House of Representatives:

Since your last annual assembling another year of health and bountiful harvests has passed, and while it has not pleased the Almighty to bless us with a return of peace, we can but press on, guided by the best light He gives us, trusting that in His own good time and wise way all will yet be well.

The correspondence touching foreign affairs which has taken place during the last year is herewith submitted, in virtual compliance with a request to that effect made by the House of Representatives near the close of the last session of Congress. . . .

The civil war, which has so radically changed for the moment the occupations and habits of the American people, has necessarily disturbed the social condition and affected very deeply the prosperity of the nations with which we have carried on a commerce that has been steadily increasing throughout a period of half a century. It has at the same time excited political ambitions and apprehensions which have produced a profound agitation throughout the civilized world. In this unusual agitation we have forbore from taking part in any controversy between foreign states and between parties or factions in such states. We have attempted no propagandism and acknowledged no revolution. . . . The treaty with Great Britain for the suppression of the slave trade has been put into operation with a good prospect of complete success. It is an occasion of special pleasure to acknowledge that the execution of it on the part of Her Majesty's Government has been marked with a jealous respect for the authority of the United States and the rights of their moral and loyal citizens." ³

Most of the addresses were not the things of which history is made, but there are some very outstanding exceptions. In 1823, President James Monroe used his State of the Union speech to proclaim what became known as the Monroe Doctrine which warned the European nations from any further colonizing in the Americas and stated that the United States would only venture into European affairs if they directly related to interests of the United States. Lyndon Johnson, used his State of the Union speech in 1965 to proclaim the "Great Society." He said:

" . . . we are only at the beginning of the road to the Great Society. Ahead now is a summit where freedom from the wants of the body can help fulfill the needs of the spirit.

We built this Nation to serve its people.

We want to grow and build and create, but we want progress to be the servant and not the master of man.

We do not intend to live in the midst of abundance, isolated from neighbors and nature, confined by blighted cities and bleak suburbs, stunted by a poverty of learning and an emptiness of leisure.

The Great Society asks not how much, but how good; not only how to create wealth but how to

² <http://www.infoplease.com/t/hist/state-of-the-union/index.html>

³ <http://www.infoplease.com/t/hist/state-of-the-union/74.html>

use it; not only how fast we are going, but where we are headed. It proposes as the first test for a nation: the quality of its people. This kind of society will not flower spontaneously from swelling riches and surging power. It will not be the gift of government or the creation of presidents. It will require of every American, for many generations, both faith in the destination and the fortitude to make the journey.”

He then went on to lay out the proposed agenda:

A NATIONAL AGENDA

I propose that we begin a program in education to ensure every American child the fullest development of his mind and skills.

I propose that we begin a massive attack on crippling and killing diseases.

I propose that we launch a national effort to make the American city a better and a more stimulating place to live.

I propose that we increase the beauty of America and end the poisoning of our rivers and the air that we breathe.

I propose that we carry out a new program to develop regions of our country that are now suffering from distress and depression.

I propose that we make new efforts to control and prevent crime and delinquency.

I propose that we eliminate every remaining obstacle to the right and the opportunity to vote.

I propose that we honor and support the achievements of thought and the creations of art.

I propose that we make an all-out campaign against waste and inefficiency.”⁴

It was a bold new agenda. The forward push of its thinking was the kind of far reaching rhetoric normally reserved for inauguration addresses. Some of the institutions that grew out of the Great Society were Medicare and Medicaid, Head Start, The National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities, and the Dept. of Housing and Urban Development. It should come as no surprise that one of the people who gave both voice and substance to the Great Society initiatives was then presidential assistant, Bill Moyers. The proposals given in this address are those that liberals and progressives in this day wish were at the top of the agenda. Fortunately, many are.

In 1941, President Roosevelt was preparing the nation to engage in war. His State of the Union speech spoke of this and more. This is where he so eloquently named what has become known as the “Four Freedoms.”

“In the future days, which we seek to make secure, we look forward to a world founded upon four essential human freedoms.

The **first** is freedom of speech and expression--everywhere in the world.

The **second** is freedom of every person to worship God in his own way—everywhere in the world.

The **third** is freedom from want—which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants—everywhere in the world.

The **fourth** is freedom from fear—which, translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor--anywhere in the world.

That is no vision of a distant millennium. It is a definite basis for a kind of world attainable in our own time and generation. That kind of world is the very antithesis of the so-called new order of

⁴ <http://www.infoplease.com/t/hist/state-of-the-union/178.html>

tyranny which the dictators seek to create with the crash of a bomb.

To that new order we oppose the greater conception--the moral order. A good society is able to face schemes of world domination and foreign revolutions alike without fear."⁵

Which brings us to the year 2003 and sixteen words that have changed the course of history, and not for the better: Four years ago the current President in his State of the Union Address uttered these words: "The British Government has learned that Saddam Hussein recently sought significant quantities of uranium from Africa ." These are the words that were used to set the wheels in motion for war. These are the words that began a tale of spies and intrigue that lead to the top levels of the White House. These are the words that underlie the trial just beginning in the Federal District Court of Judge Reggie Walton where the charges are perjury and obstruction of justice, but the underlying as yet uncharged crime is the "outing" of an undercover CIA agent. Almost four years later, more than 3000 American deaths and unknown hundreds of thousands of Iraqi deaths, one and one half billion dollars spent per week, and all of this traced to sixteen words in a State of the Union Address used to justify an unjustifiable war. For those wishing to learn more about the finer details of the Irving (Scooter) Libbey story, I recommend to you the book Anatomy of Deceit by Marcy Wheeler which should begin to appear in book stores this week.

By now many of you may be asking, "Why bring all of this up in church on Sunday morning?" My answer may not be satisfactory to you all but here it is. The Constitution is the "backbone" of our nation. It sets forth the structure and the aspirations that were given by the founding fathers and subsequent congresses that sought fit to amend it. As Unitarian Universalists we have no real equivalent. Every congregation has it's own by-laws which set forth the structure of the institution and how matters of governance and membership are determined. Each state has laws governing the legal incorporation of non-profit institutions and each require some kind of accountability written into that structure. Your bylaws call for an annual meeting at which reports are given on the state of the church. Very little of those documents or reports are wishful or visionary in their nature just as many of the historical State of the Union addresses were not particularly wishful or visionary either. Perhaps that is why so few of them stand out as works of great importance. So, lacking that vision in the by-laws, we turn to the vision that is proclaimed in the Principles of the Unitarian Universalist Association:

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person;
2. Justice, equity and compassion in human relations;
3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations;
4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning;
5. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large;
6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all;
7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Those are lofty goals and can and do provide us with a vision. So based on our Principles, this is what I would like to hear in Tuesday's State of the Union Address (though I am absolutely under no illusion that any of these thoughts or concepts will be echoed):

To the citizens of this proud Nation. I apologize for the shameful way I have conducted the affairs of this country for the past six years. I hereby pledge the following priorities for the next two years or

⁵ <http://www.infoplease.com/t/hist/state-of-the-union/152.html>

however long it takes:

The war in Iraq, at least our part in it will end forthwith. We will put in place all the operational personnel and equipment needed to affect a swift and careful redeployment of our troops. We will work with neighboring nations and the UN to help them establish a peace-keeping force to stabilize Iraq and allow for the rebuilding of that devastated country. At home we will provide for the needs of our returning military by fully funding the Veterans Administration and see to it that the physical and emotional needs of our brave service men and women are provided.

The rule of law will be re-established respecting the worth and dignity of every person. The Attorney General will be directed to reinstate the honest hard working prosecutors who have been dismissed because they have been attempting to investigate members of congress and the administration who have been committing crimes. The right of habeas corpus will be extended to all on our shores and in our care abroad. Every detainee will be treated with respect and have access to council. Those for whom we have a reason to believe have committed crimes against this country will receive fair trials according to the Constitutional rule of law. Those for whom we have no solid evidence will be released from custody with our apologies and transportation to their homes. Should restitution be needed, we will provide for it.

We will begin the serious work of diplomacy and peace-making between nations. We will call upon the most gifted and talented among our citizens to help in this endeavor. We will listen with open hearts and minds and work unsparingly to find common ground and equitable solutions to the problems that nations around the world are facing. We will work with the World Bank to find ways of alleviating poverty, firstly in the war torn nations as we know that poverty leads to despair and often to violence.

We will begin immediately with implementing the programs of the Apollo Alliance that have outlined a ten year plan to make this country energy self-sufficient. This will involve industries and creative thinkers across the board re-imagining how it is that we create and use power. If we can combine our efforts to send a man to the moon, we can do this as well. This program will also include the reduction of greenhouse gasses to pre-1990 levels. It is time to begin the long process of reversing the damage we have done to the environment.

We will concentrate efforts in scientific discovery in the prevention and fighting of disease. With that we will also begin the planning of a single-payer health plan modeled after Medicare so that every man, woman, and child in this nation will have access to excellent medical care without worry about the cost. Prescription drugs will be available to all in need through a plan that will set fair prices and reasonable costs.

We will respect your privacy in all matters. Who you choose to love and marry, how and when you choose to have children, how and where you choose to pray will be matters dictated by your own conscience without interference of the government.

We will introduce the federal funding of elections so that candidates no longer have to spend a large portion of their time raising funds for reelection. They will no longer be beholden to the corporations. We will also federalize the machinery used for elections. There will be verifiable paper trails for all voting machines and the source code will be open for inspection. Voter harassment or intimidation will be met with stiff fines and jail terms. Election fraud will not be tolerated.

There is much more to do, and things I forgot to list, but this is a start. And knowing that everything that is laid out above is antithetical to who I am as a human being and to the principles adhered to by the current administration, therefore I further announce that I, the Vice President, and the entire Cabinet are submitting our resignations so that a new administration can be elected to carry out this work.

That's what I'd like to hear this Tuesday night. Perhaps in my dreams I will. A girl can dream, can't she?