

Meeting of the Federal Congress and Lincoln's State of the Union Address **<http://civilwar150.longwood.edu>**

Abraham Lincoln's first State of the Union address was given on December 3, 1861. Prior to 1934, U.S. Presidents gave this annual speech in the last month of the calendar year. Beginning with Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1934, the speech has been given in January or February and given the title State of the Union address. In Lincoln's time, the speech was known as the President's Annual Message to Congress.

The annual speech normally allows a president to not only outline the nation's current condition but also to give an idea of his legislative priorities for the coming year. The address is actually required by Article II, Section 3 of the United States Constitution, which states that "He shall from time to time give Congress information of the State of the Union and recommend to their Consideration such measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient."

Lincoln's speech that December was written and given in a time of horrendous national turmoil. His speech began with a recognition that the war's balance might hang upon the choices made by foreign powers such as England and France:

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

In the midst of unprecedented political troubles we have cause of great gratitude to God for unusual good health and most abundant harvests.

You will not be surprised to learn that in the peculiar exigencies of the times our intercourse with foreign nations has been attended with profound solicitude, chiefly turning upon our own domestic affairs.

A disloyal portion of the American people have during the whole year been engaged in an attempt to divide and destroy the Union. A nation which endures factious domestic division is

exposed to disrespect abroad, and one party, if not both, is sure sooner or later to invoke foreign intervention.

Nations thus tempted to interfere are not always able to resist the counsels of seeming expediency and ungenerous ambition, although measures adopted under such influences seldom fail to be unfortunate and injurious to those adopting them.

The disloyal citizens of the United States who have offered the ruin of our country in return for the aid and comfort which they have invoked abroad have received less patronage and encouragement than they probably expected. If it were just to suppose, as the insurgents have seemed to assume, that foreign nations in this case, discarding all moral, social, and treaty obligations, would act solely and selfishly for the most speedy restoration of commerce, including especially the acquisition of cotton, those nations appear as yet not to have seen their way to their object more directly or clearly through the destruction than through the preservation of the Union. If we could dare to believe that foreign nations are actuated by no higher principle than this, I am quite sure a sound argument could be made to show them that they can reach their aim more readily and easily by aiding to crush this rebellion than by giving encouragement to it.”

Lincoln then turned his attention to domestic geography, stressing the need to connect the loyal Union inhabitants of western North Carolina and eastern Tennessee with those in Kentucky by railroad. He asked congress to provide funds for such a railroad as quickly as possible.

After surveying the state of the nation’s finances and resources in depth, Lincoln returned to the subject of the war. He outlined where Union forces had gotten a foothold on Southern soil and stated that “these things demonstrate that the cause of the Union is advancing steadily and certainly southward.”

Lincoln ended with a look to the past and future. After outlining how the nation’s population had grown eight-fold in its short existence, he exclaimed

“There are already among us those who if the Union be preserved will live to see it contain 250,000,000. The struggle of to-day is not altogether for to-day; it is for a vast future also. With a reliance on Providence all the more firm and earnest, let us proceed in the great task which events have devolved upon us.

