

The First State-of-the-Union Address

By George Washington

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Overlooked by scholars and most standard reference texts, George Washington's first ever State-Of-The-Union Address is nonetheless important on two counts. First, it began an historic tradition that continues to this day and also set the tone for a President appearing before Congress in a formal setting.

After his election to the presidency and his inauguration in April of 1789, Washington decided that the beginning of the new year would be an appropriate time to address the Congress. In that address he expressed his philosophy relative to the governance of the fledgling nation....and set forth the most pressing and important actions he felt Congress should take in the year ahead.

Washington wrote his speech on January 3 and presented it to the full Congress in the Senate Chamber on January 8, 1790.

He felt that one of the most important tasks confronting the nation was "providing for the common defence....To be prepared for war is one of the most effectual means of preserving peace."

Especially, "....we ought to be prepared to afford protection to those parts of the Union....(the southern and western frontiers)...."from (the) depredations (of the)hostile tribes of Indians...."

Other mandates outlined in his Address:

"The interests of the United States require" that compensation to persons employed by the government and who are engaged in foreign affairs "....be defined by law."

Washington considered "it expedient that the terms on which foreigners may be admitted to the rights of Citizens should be speedily ascertained by a uniform rule of naturalization."

He stressed that "uniformity in the currency, weights and measures....is an object of great importance."

He encouraged "new and useful inventions from abroad." And, "the promotion of science and literature."

Also of importance: "Facilitating the intercourse between the distant parts of our country by attending to the post office and post roads."

Other admonitions:

"A free people ought not only to be armed but disciplined. And to be independent of others" by becoming self-sufficient domestically.

It was the duty of Congress to encourage "....teaching the people themselves to know, and to value their own rights....to distinguish between oppression and the necessary exercise of lawful authority...."

Concluding: "The welfare of our Country is the great object to which our cares and efforts....be directed....of ensuring to our fellow citizens the blessings to which they have a right to expect from a free, efficient and equal government."