



The State of the Union 2019

Emma Kilheeny considers Trump's 2019 address in the light of those from previous years and past presidencies

In his 2019 State of the Union Address President Trump vowed to end 'the politics of revenge, resistance and retribution' but remained committed to building his wall.

What did Trump say?

2018 pledges and what has happened

- **Build the wall** Only \$1.6 billion was agreed by Congress in 2018 to build just 33 miles of bollard fencing on the US–Mexico border.
- **Immigration reform** This has not happened despite promises made during the 2018 government shutdown. Democrats rejected Trump's offer to extend protection for DACA recipients for 3 years in January 2019 in exchange for funding for his wall.
- **Pass an infrastructure bill** This plan was abandoned shortly after a \$1.5 trillion plan was proposed in February 2018.
- **Reduce crime** A bipartisan 'First Step Act' criminal justice reform bill was passed in December 2018 which will give judges more freedom in sentencing.

It was passed 87–12 in the Senate and 360–59 in the House.

- **Withdraw US troops from the Middle East** Trump announced in December 2018 that he would withdraw all US troops from Syria and half the 14,000 troops in Afghanistan. The president was forced to defend this decision in his 2019 speech after receiving opposition from many senior Republicans and national security officials.
- **Keep Guantanamo Bay open** Trump signed an executive order in January 2018 to keep it open. However, in May 2018 Ahmed al-Darbi was the first prisoner to be released under Trump's presidency after being transferred to a prison in Saudi Arabia. This leaves approximately 40 prisoners still in Guantanamo Bay.

2019 pledges

- **Build the wall and receive the \$5.7 billion from Congress** There was no mention of protecting DACA recipients — Trump plans to use the wall to deal with immigration.
- **Health** Reduce the price of prescription drugs and invest in more research on child cancers and HIV/AIDS. This was popular with both Republicans and Democrats.

- **Infrastructure bill** Arrive at a deal with the Democrats.
- **North Korea** Attend a second meeting with leader Kim Jong-un in February 2019. Trump claimed personal credit for preventing war with North Korea. This is a significant change from his position during the 2018 address when Trump condemned the 'depraved character' of the country.
- **Abortion** Encourage Congress to prohibit late-term abortions after Democrat law makers in Virginia defended a failed bill that sought to make late-term abortions easier to access.

Key points from the 2019 address

- Trump failed to mention the increasing federal debt, government shutdown, gun violence or the Middle East.
- The longest applause of the evening came from a number of Democratic Congresswomen, dressed in white, the colour of the Suffragettes, when Trump claimed that 'no one has benefitted more from our thriving economy than women'. They also chanted 'USA, USA' when Trump took credit for creating more jobs for women.

How the address has evolved

The Constitution requires presidents to give Congress and the public an annual report, but from 1801 to 1913 it was not given in person. President Jefferson delivered his in writing via a clerk for fear of looking too monarchical. The first annual address was an 833-word speech delivered by George Washington in New York in 1790. Trump's 2019 speech lasted 82 minutes. Table 1 shows the number of TV viewers of selected addresses.

Who attends?

In 2019 Trump invited 17 people, including family members of a couple from Nevada who were allegedly killed by an undocumented migrant, Alice Johnson who he had pardoned in 2018 from a life sentence for a drug conviction and a boy named Joshua Trump who had been bullied at school because of his surname.

Table 1 TV viewers of the address

President	Year	Viewers
Trump	2018	45.6 million
Obama	2009	48 million
G. W. Bush	2002	51.7 million

Democrats invited an employee at Trump's golf club who had been sacked for being an undocumented migrant.

In 1982 President Reagan invited a guest to make a political point — he brought a federal employee, Lenny Skutnik, who had rescued a woman from drowning. The word 'skutnik' was coined, meaning a human prop used to make a political point.

The government shutdown

Trump was forced to delay his initial address after Nancy Pelosi cancelled his invitation, which is her right as speaker, due to the president's refusal to end the 35-day government shutdown. The shutdown occurred because Trump had demanded \$5.7 billion to build the wall but the Democrats only agreed to \$1.3 billion to fund security measures, and so the budget could not be finalised.

Questions:

- 1 To what extent is the State of Union Address an effective presidential power?
- 2 How successful have Trump's addresses been?
- 3 Find out why the speech audience was the most partisan since 2001. (See this CNN article: www.tinyurl.com/ycruc4ft)

Further research

Watch highlights from Trump's speech:
www.tinyurl.com/yxltp859

Find out more about our full range of magazines and online archives of back issues at www.hoddereducation.co.uk/magazines

Did you like this article?
Tell us what you think