

Focus | WASHINGTON

# STATING THE UNION

By Sonya Quick and Maxwell Henderson / The Register

President Barack Obama will address Congress and the nation at 6 p.m. PST Tuesday. President George Washington established the precedent that an annual speech be given to meet the constitutional obligation of reporting on the country to Congress.

**WHY IT MATTERS**

The State of the Union address gives us the president's snapshot view of the nation and legislative priorities for the year.

Article II, Section 3, Clause 1 of the Constitution requires that the President "... 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."

**Speaker**

**Speech content**

Word type colors: Foreign Domestic America Other  
Size of word denotes frequency throughout speech. Opening sentences are shown above.

**Measures of the U.S.**

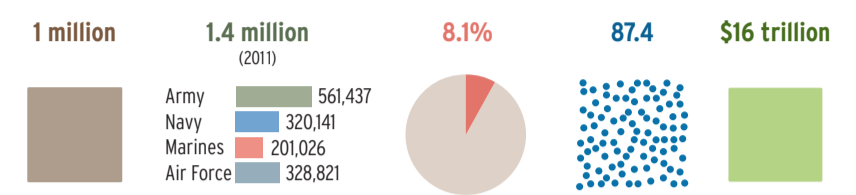

Legal immigration Active duty military Unemployment (percent of labor force) People per square mile Debt



Last year: 2012  
**Barack Obama**

"Last month, I went to Andrews Air Force Base and welcomed home some of our last troops to serve in Iraq."

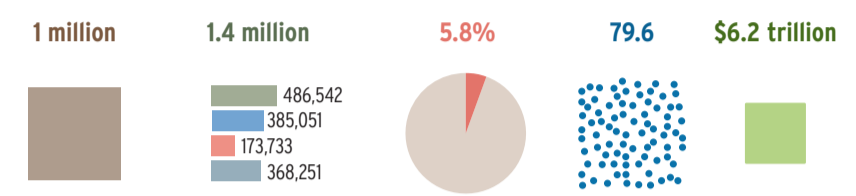
american right people help work  
jobs new one energy country time need  
america every americans now year  
get tax like back congress world

11 years ago: 2002  
**George W. Bush**

"As we gather tonight, our nation is at war; our economy is in recession; and the civilized world faces unprecedented dangers. Yet, the state of our union has never been stronger."

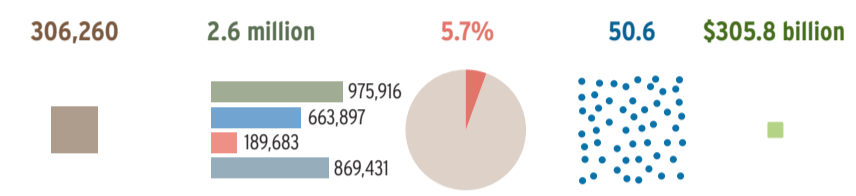

america new terrorist terrorists citizens  
must security weapons jobs country war  
world american people great states americans  
terror now congress afghanistan  
nation allies good camps




50 years ago: 1963  
**John F. Kennedy**

"I congratulate you all—not merely on your electoral victory but on your selected role in history. For you and I are privileged to serve the great republic in what could be the most decisive decade in its long history."

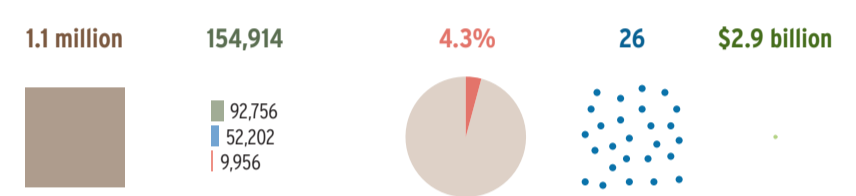
must free peace nations national freedom  
world need new defense nuclear american  
people tax every alliance help long end years  
now year billion communist reduction

100 years ago: 1913  
**Woodrow Wilson**

"In pursuance of my constitutional duty to 'give to the Congress information of the state of the union,' I take the liberty of addressing you on several matters which ought, as it seems to me, particularly to engage the attention of your honorable bodies, as of all who study the welfare and progress of the nation."

people government now every congress  
country may business hope part peace farmers  
must states set resources need toward  
make credit already life legislation  
mexico world




200 years ago: 1813  
**James Madison**

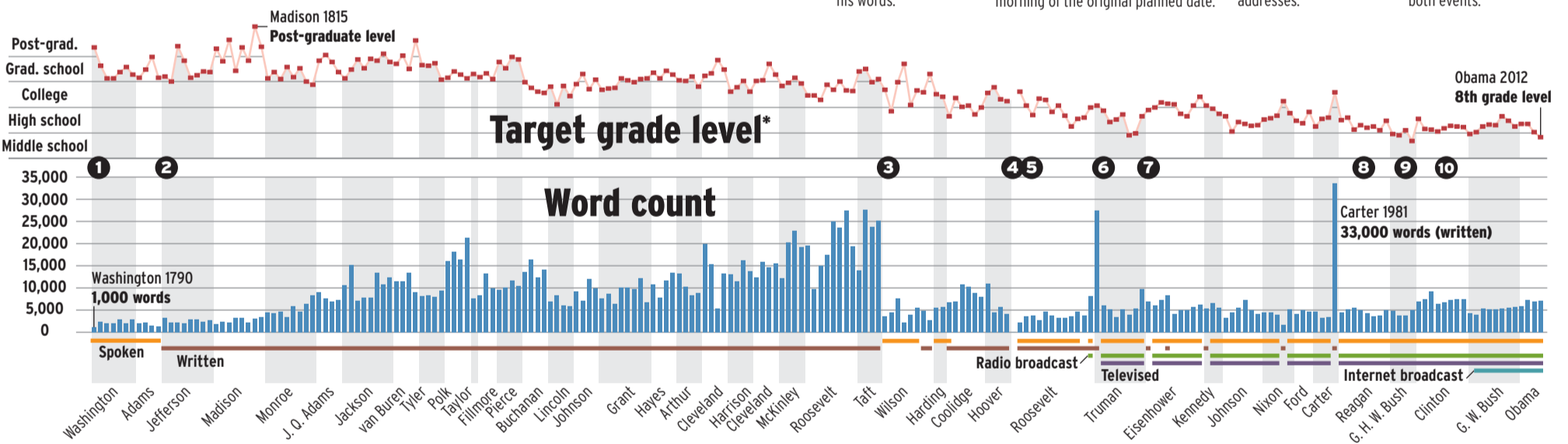
"In meeting you at the present interesting juncture it would have been highly satisfactory if I could have communicated a favorable result to the mission charged with negotiations for restoring peace."

war united enemy necessary honorable  
states prisoners much among britain also  
british american government may time arms  
great rights power best number force  
public may country



## Evolution of the address

- President George Washington set the precedent that an annual message be delivered to Congress. He gives the first speech on Jan. 8, 1790, in the Senate Chamber of Federal Hall in New York City (the temporary seat of government at the time).
- Thomas Jefferson is concerned that the oratory is too similar to the British speech from the throne. He sets precedent that the address be delivered in writing.
- Woodrow Wilson breaks the Jefferson written speech practice, believing the presidency should be dynamic and personal. Health reasons prevent him from speaking in 1919 and 1920.
- No address was given in 1933.
- The annual speech is called "State of the Union" for the first time in 1934.
- Harry Truman's 1947 speech is the first to be broadcast on TV. Time Magazine described Truman's "lack of specifics and the dull roundness of his words."
- In 1953, 1961 and 1981 both the outgoing and incoming presidents delivered addresses.
- Reagan's speech is delayed one week because the Challenger space shuttle explosion occurs the morning of the original planned date.
- The five most recent presidents each delivered a speech to Congress shortly after inauguration, but these messages are not official State of the Union addresses.
- Clinton's 1997 address ends just as the O.J. Simpson civil trial verdict was to be delivered, leading some stations to offer split-screen views of both events.



Sources: Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project, UC Santa Barbara; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics; U.S. Federal Reserve; U.S. Census Bureau; Office of Immigration Statistics; U.S. Department of Homeland Security; U.S. Department of the Treasury; U.S. Department of Defense; The White House

\*Readability of each address, measured using the Flesch-Kincaid score to suggest the grade level in an American school for which the text is comprehensible.

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