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History, Evolution, and Practices of the President's State of the Union Address: Frequently Asked Questions

Updated February 22, 2022

Congressional Research Service
https://crsreports.congress.gov
R44770

CRS REPORT
Prepared for Members and
Committees of Congress

Summary

The State of the Union address is a communication from the President to Congress in which the chief executive reports on the current condition of the United States and provides policy proposals for the upcoming legislative year. The address originates in the Constitution (Article II, Section 3, clause 1), which 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."

Over time, the State of the Union address has evolved considerably. The President's State of the Union address was known as the President's Annual Message to Congress until well into the 20th century. Presidents George Washington and John Adams delivered their messages to Congress in person, but President Thomas Jefferson abandoned the practice as "monarchical" and time consuming, sending written messages instead. This precedent was followed until President Woodrow Wilson personally appeared before Congress in 1913. President Franklin Roosevelt adopted Wilson's practice of personal delivery, and it has since become a contemporary tradition. With the advent of radio (1923), television (1947), and live webcast (2002) coverage of the address, it has gained greater importance by providing a nationwide platform for the President.

In recent presidencies, the annual State of the Union address typically is delivered by the President at a joint session of Congress on an evening in late January or early February. Some Presidents, however, have chosen not to deliver a State of the Union address in the January of their departure from office, or the year they were inaugurated. Since 1981, Presidents have addressed a joint session of Congress closely following their inauguration, but not as an official "State of the Union" address. As the address is now broadcast and webcast to a "prime time" national and international audience, it serves several functions: as a report to Congress and the nation on national conditions; as a platform to announce and rally support for the President's legislative agenda for the coming year; and as a unique opportunity for the chief executive to convey a vision for the nation to Congress and the American people. To ensure continuity of government, one Cabinet officer (and in more recent years, selected Members of Congress) are absent from the Capitol during the address.

This report takes the format of answers to frequently asked questions about the State of the Union address.

Contents

What Is the State of the Union Address? ... 1
In Contemporary Practice, Is There a State of the Union Address Every Year? ... 1
What Precautions Are Taken at the Address to Assure Security, Continuity of Government, and to Accommodate Pandemic Protocols? ... 1
What Section of the Constitution Is the Formal Basis for the State of the Union Address to Congress? ... 2
Who Gave the First State of the Union Address? What Was the Early Practice? ... 2
Which President Stopped Delivering the Speech in Person, and Why? How Long Did This Practice Last? ... 3
Who Revived the Tradition of Delivering the Speech in Person? ... 3
When and Where Does the Ceremony Take Place? ... 3
Has It Always Been Called "The State of the Union Address?" ... 4
Which Was the Shortest Message? The Longest Message? ... 4
Which President Delivered the Most Messages? Which the Fewest? ... 5
Has Any President Not Delivered a Message or Address? Has an Address Ever Been Delayed? ... 5
How Have Advances in Technology Affected the Address? ... 6
Who Is Invited to the State of the Union Address? ... 6
When Did the Tradition of Acknowledging Guests Sitting in the House Gallery Begin? ... 7
What Procedures Are Currently Followed When the President Delivers the Message? ... 7
What Are the Origins of the Opposition Response? ... 7

Contacts

Author Information ... 8

What Is the State of the Union Address?

The State of the Union Address is a communication from the President of the United States to Congress and the nation in which the chief executive reports on the general state of affairs in the United States, provides an assessment of key issues impacting conditions in the country, recommends a legislative program for the coming session of Congress, and frequently presents a vision for the future.[1]

In Contemporary Practice, Is There a State of the Union Address Every Year?

The past seven Presidents have chosen not to give an official State of the Union address the year they were first inaugurated, having just previously delivered an inaugural address. In each instance their first speech to a joint session of Congress closely followed their inauguration, but was not officially categorized as a "State of the Union Message." For example, President Donald Trump's 2017 address was entitled "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress."[2]

Some recent Presidents have also preferred not to deliver a State of the Union address immediately prior to their departure from office, although several have given farewell addresses. President Dwight Eisenhower's farewell message, broadcast to the nation on January 17, 1961, became famous for its warnings against the "military-industrial complex."[3]

Nevertheless, occasionally outgoing and incoming Presidents have given successive State of the Union addresses within weeks of each other. President Harry Truman's final message, delivered in printed form to Congress on January 7, 1953, was closely followed by President Eisenhower's first message, delivered in person at the Capitol on February 2, 1953.[4]

What Precautions Are Taken at the Address to Assure Security, Continuity of Government, and to Accommodate Pandemic Protocols?

Customarily, one member of the President's Cabinet (commonly known as the *designated survivor*) does not attend.[5] This precaution is taken to provide continuity in the presidency in the event a catastrophe were to result in the death or disablement of the President, the Vice President,

[1] More information about the State of the Union Address can be found on the History, Art & Archives website (a collaboration between the U.S. House of Representatives' Office of the Historian and the Clerk of the House's Office of Art and Archives), "State of the Union Address," at http://history.house.gov/Institution/SOTU/State-of-the-Union/.

[2] Government Publishing Office, Daily Compilation of Presidential Documents, 2017 DCPD No. 150, at https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/DCPD-201700150/pdf/DCPD-201700150.pdf.

[3] Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Farewell Radio and Television Address to the American People," in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1960-61* (Washington: GPO, 1961), pp. 1035-1040.

[4] John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, "Length of the State of the Union Addresses and Messages in Words," The American Presidency Project, at https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/presidential-documents-archive-guidebook/annual-messages-congress-the-state-the-union-3.

[5] For example, then-Secretary of Energy Rick Perry was the designated survivor in 2019. See "Cabinet Members Not in Attendance ("Designated Survivor," from 1984), and Frequency By Department," at https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/presidential-documents-archive-guidebook/annual-messages-congress-the-state-the-union-1.

and other officials in the line of presidential succession gathered in the House chamber.[6] In recent years, selected Members of Congress were also absent from the Capitol during the address.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, for the April 2021 joint session, a limited number of Members of Congress was in the House chamber, some Members were seated in the House gallery to meet social distancing protocols,[7] and Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi maintained face mask guidance inside the House chamber.[8] As with 2021's joint address, the 2022 speech has been designated as a National Special Security Event.[9]

What Section of the Constitution Is the Formal Basis for the State of the Union Address to Congress?

Article II, Section 3, clause 1 of the U.S. Constitution refers to the President's State of the Union message, stating 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."

Who Gave the First State of the Union Address? What Was the Early Practice?

President George Washington delivered the first "State of the Union" address before a joint session of Congress, in New York, on January 8, 1790. At that time, the speech was known as the "Annual Message." This ritual originated from the British practice of giving "a speech from the throne" to open every new session of Parliament.[10] Washington's first address, which was the shortest to date, at 1,089 words, was delivered before both houses of Congress.[11] When Washington gave his second Annual Message, he established the precedent that the President would provide information to Congress on an annual basis.[12] During the Washington and John

[6] For more information on the line of presidential succession, see 3 U.S.C. §19, available from the Government Publishing Office at https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/USCODE-2006-title3/html/USCODE-2006-title3-chap1-sec19.htm.

[7] Matt Viser, "Biden Will Close the First Chapter of His Presidency Before a Sparse Crowd—and With a Historic Backdrop," *Washington Post*, April 24, 2021, at https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/biden-congress-speech/2021/04/23/d82dc59a-a44e-11eb-a7ee-949c574a09ac_story.html.

[8] "Congress Prepares for 'strange' and 'extraordinary' presidential address," ABC News, at https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/congress-prepares-strange-extraordinary-presidential-address/story?id=77318542.

[9] As of this report's publication, the Department of Homeland Security does not appear to have released a public notice regarding the 2022 address's designation as a National Special Security Event (NSSE). However, other agencies, like the Federal Aviation Administration, have acknowledged the NSSE designation in announcing security restrictions for the event. See https://www.faasafety.gov/files/notices/2022/Feb/2022_SOTUAFAA_Flight_Advisory.pdf. For more information on National Special Security Events, see CRS Report R43522, *National Special Security Events: Fact Sheet*, by Shawn Reese.

[10] Arthur M. Schlesinger, "Introduction," in *The State of the Union Messages of the President 1790-1966*, vol. 1, ed. Fred L. Israel (New York: Chelsea House, 1966), p. xiii.

[11] John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, "Length of the State of the Union Addresses and Messages in Words," The American Presidency Project, at https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/presidential-documents-archive-guidebook/annual-messages-congress-the-state-the-union-3.

[12] Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, "Introduction," in *The State of the Union Address: Presidential Rhetoric from Woodrow Wilson to George W. Bush*, eds. Deborah Kalb, Gerhard Peters, and John T. Woolley (Washington: CQ Press, 2007), p. 2. Also, the Constitution does not mandate this level of frequency; only reading that the communication should be given "from time to time."

Adams Administrations, the President customarily appeared before a joint session of Congress to deliver the address personally. Each house subsequently made official replies to the President's message, which were delivered personally to the President, and each such response received formal presidential acknowledgement.[13]

Which President Stopped Delivering the Speech in Person, and Why? How Long Did This Practice Last?

President Thomas Jefferson changed the procedure followed by his predecessors with his first annual message (December 8, 1801). Instead of delivering an in-person speech, his private secretary delivered copies of the message to both houses of Congress, to be read by clerks in the House and Senate. Jefferson likened the oral delivery of the message to the British monarch's "speech from the throne," and felt it unsuitable to a republic.[14] Some historians also speculate that Jefferson was a poor public speaker and did not want to deliver it orally, because his inaugural address had been barely audible and was unfavorably received.[15] Jefferson's precedent of sending the yearly report as a formal written letter to Congress was followed throughout the 19th century (and part of the 20th century), until 1913.

Who Revived the Tradition of Delivering the Speech in Person?

Over a century later, on December 2, 1913, President Woodrow Wilson revived the tradition of delivering the Annual Message to Congress as an in-person speech.[16] President Wilson is also widely credited with expanding the scope of the annual message, transforming it from a report on the activities of the executive departments into a tool to draw widespread attention to the policies he supported. From 1914 to 1933, the message varied between being a written and a spoken message. President Franklin Roosevelt reestablished the personal appearance as a tradition with his 1934 State of the Union message, but he and several later chief executives also chose to deliver a written message in preference to a personal appearance on at least one occasion.

When and Where Does the Ceremony Take Place?

The annual message was delivered in December (or shortly before), until the Twentieth Amendment was ratified in 1933, which changed the opening time for congressional sessions. Since 1934, messages have been delivered on a range of dates, typically between January and February of each year. Before the Capitol moved to Washington, DC, the annual message was often delivered in the Senate chamber (in New York and Philadelphia, until 1800).[17] The first annual message to be given in the new Capitol building in Washington, DC, was in 1800 (by

[13] Arthur M. Schlesinger, "Introduction," in *The State of the Union Messages of the President 1790-1966*, vol. 1, ed. Fred L. Israel (New York: Chelsea House, 1966), p. xiii.

[14] Ryan L. Teen, "Evolution of the Modern Rhetorical Presidency: Presidential Presentation and Development of the State of the Union Address," *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 33, no. 2 (June 2003), p. 337.

[15] Gerhard Casper, "Executive-Congressional Separation of Power during the Presidency of Thomas Jefferson," *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 47, no. 3 (February 1995), p. 480.

[16] Earlier in 1913, Wilson delivered three special messages to Congress in person on tariff reform, currency and bank reform, and Mexican affairs—the first of which made headlines, because no President had addressed Congress in person since John Adams. For further information, see Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia, "Woodrow Wilson: Domestic Affairs," at https://millercenter.org/president/wilson/domestic-affairs.

[17] U.S. House of Representatives, Office of the Clerk, Office of Art and Archives, "Joint Meetings, Joint Sessions, & Inaugurations," at http://history.house.gov/Institution/Joint-Sessions/Joint-Sessions/.

President John Adams).[18] The State of the Union address is now customarily delivered at the Capitol, in the chamber of the House of Representatives, before a joint session of both houses of Congress.

The 2022 State of the Union address will be delivered by President Joe Biden on March 1, which is the latest in the year that any U.S. President has delivered the address.[19]

Has It Always Been Called "The State of the Union Address?"

The message was generally known as "the President's Annual Message to Congress" until well into the 20th century. It was informally known as the State of the Union message or address from 1942 to 1946, and has been officially known as the State of the Union address since 1947.[20]

Which Was the Shortest Message? The Longest Message?

George Washington's first annual message was the shortest (in words), at 1,089 words.

In contemporary practice, the address tends to be measured in delivery time, rather than in the number of words it contains. The American Presidency Project at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB) has data on length of State of the Union addresses (in minutes) back to 1964. Within this timeframe, it would appear that Ronald Reagan gave the shortest address in 1986, at approximately 31 minutes.[21] However, even this address was more than 3,500 words (three times as long, text-wise, as Washington's first message), so it is likely that Washington's was one of the shortest (if not *the* shortest) in delivery time as well.

President Jimmy Carter's 1981 message was the longest written message to date, at 33,667 words. President Bill Clinton's 1995 address was the longest in-person speech, at 9,190 words.[22]

From the available UCSB data dating back to 1964, Clinton's 2000 State of the Union address holds the record of being the longest by delivery time—at just under one hour and 29 minutes.

Since 1964 (Lyndon Johnson), the average length of the address by each President has ranged between 35 minutes and 80 minutes.[23] For example, President Barack Obama's final State of the Union address in 2016 took just under 59 minutes to deliver, which also includes time for applause interruptions.[24]

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[18] U.S. Senate Historical Office, "November 17, 1800: The Senate Moves to Washington," at https://www.senate.gov/about/historic-spaces/senate-moves-to-washington.htm.

[19] "State of the Union 2022," Associated Press, at https://www.ap.org/services/live-and-location-services/events/state-of-the-union.

[20] U.S. House of Representatives' Office of the Historian and the Clerk of the House's Office of Art and Archives, "State of the Union Address," at http://history.house.gov/Institution/SOTU/State-of-the-Union/.

[21] John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, "Length of State of the Union Addresses in Minutes," The American Presidency Project, at https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/presidential-documents-archive-guidebook/annual-messages-congress-the-state-the-union-0.

[22] John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, "Length of the State of the Union Addresses and Messages in Words," The American Presidency Project, at https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/presidential-documents-archive-guidebook/annual-messages-congress-the-state-the-union-3.

[23] The Congressional Research Service's calculations of the average length of State of the Union speeches based on data available from The American Presidency Project. See John Woolley and Gerhard Peters, "Length of State of the Union Addresses in Minutes," The American Presidency Project, at https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/presidential-documents-archive-guidebook/annual-messages-congress-the-state-the-union-0.

[24] Manuela Tobias, "Obama's final State of the Union, by the numbers," *Politico*, January 12, 2016, at

Which President Delivered the Most Messages? Which the Fewest?

The longest-serving President, Franklin Roosevelt, holds the record for the most State of the Union addresses delivered—12—of which 11 were personal appearances before Congress. President Zachary Taylor submitted one written annual message, in 1849.

Has Any President Not Delivered a Message or Address? Has an Address Ever Been Delayed?

Two Presidents did not serve long enough to submit an annual message: William Henry Harrison, who died of an acute illness on April 4, 1841, 32 days after his inauguration, and James Garfield, who served 199 days and was assassinated in 1881.[25]

The State of the Union address was previously delayed on at least two known occasions in recent history:

- On January 28, 1986, the *Challenger* explosion claimed the lives of seven astronauts and stunned the nation. President Reagan's fifth State of the Union address had been scheduled for that same evening, but after discussion with White House aides and congressional leaders, the speech was postponed for a week.[26]
- In a letter dated January 3, 2019, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi invited President Trump to address a joint session of Congress to deliver the State of the Union address.[27] On January 16, Speaker Pelosi again wrote to President Trump and suggested that the speech be delayed (or submitted in writing) due to security concerns arising from a continuing partial government shutdown, which had begun on December 22, 2018.[28] Two more letters were exchanged during the partial shutdown (both dated January 23, 2019), in which President Trump initially objected to the proposal to postpone,[29] and Speaker Pelosi responded that the House of Representatives would not consider a concurrent resolution authorizing the President's address in the House chamber until government reopened.[30] After the partial government shutdown ended, Speaker Pelosi wrote to President Trump on January 28, 2019, and referenced a conversation between the Speaker and President about a mutual agreement to set the date for the address to be delivered before a joint session of Congress in the House chamber on February 5, 2019.[31]

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https://www.politico.com/story/2016/01/state-of-the-union-2016-by-the-numbers-217691.

[25] As noted previously, prior to the Twentieth Amendment, Congress did not assemble until December in most years, by which time both Harrison and Garfield had died.

[26] David Hoffman, "The Shuttle's Blown Up!" *Washington Post*, January 29, 1986, at http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/01/24/AR2006012401037.html?noredirect=on.

[27] See https://www.speaker.gov/newsroom/1318-3/.

[28] See https://www.speaker.gov/newsroom/11619/.

[29] See https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/DCPD-201900047/pdf/DCPD-201900047.pdf.

[30] See https://www.speaker.gov/newsroom/12319-3/.

[31] See https://www.speaker.gov/newsroom/12819-2/.

How Have Advances in Technology Affected the Address?

Advances in technology have dramatically affected the format, audience, and impact of the address. President Calvin Coolidge delivered the first annual message by radio broadcast, in 1923. President Truman's 1947 State of the Union message was the first to be broadcast by television. Free air time for the President's message and the opposition response is currently provided as a public service by commercial, public broadcast, and cable networks. President George W. Bush's 2002 address was the first to be streamed live from the White House website. In his 2013 address, President Obama's Administration produced an "enhanced broadcast" that included infographics that accompanied his remarks.[32] Social media has also served as an increasingly important platform in connecting audiences with the address, culminating most recently in President Trump's 2020 remarks generating 14.1 million social media interactions across Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.[33]

Commanding a steadily growing audience of listeners and viewers, successive Presidents learned to use the occasion as an appeal to the nation. The message evolved from being a report to Congress to a direct address to the American people, a platform from which the President announced, explained, and promoted his legislative agenda for the coming year. In 1965, Lyndon Johnson changed the time of his address from the traditional mid-afternoon to 9:00 P.M., to better attract the largest number of television viewers. The message traditionally draws a large audience: President Obama averaged 38.8 million television viewers over the eight addresses he made.[34] The largest audience recorded in recent years was 66.9 million, for President Clinton's 1993 Address to the Joint Sessions of Congress (not officially a State of the Union address), whereas President Obama's 2016 address attracted the fewest viewers in recent times, at 31.3 million.[35]

Who Is Invited to the State of the Union Address?

Traditionally, Members of the House and Senate are invited, along with the President's Cabinet (with the exception of one planned absentee Cabinet member), Vice President, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Justices of the U.S. Supreme Court, former Members of Congress, and members of the diplomatic corps. Seating in the House gallery is for ticket holders only, and it is coordinated by the Sergeant at Arms of the House.

However, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, for the April 2021 joint session, attendees were limited and Members' guests were not permitted. Member seating was also be extended to the House gallery to allow for social distancing protocols.[36]

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[32] "President Obama's 2013 State of the Union" available at https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2013/02/13/president-obamas-2013-state-union.

[33] Nielsen, "Over 37 Million Viewers Watch 2020 State of the Union Address," February 5, 2020, at https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/press-releases/2020/over-37-million-viewers-watch-2020-state-of-the-union-address/.

[34] Average calculated based on figures provided by Nielsen at https://www.nielsen.com/us/en/press-releases/2021/media-advisory-nearly-27-million-viewers-watch-pres-joe-bidens-first-address-to-congress/.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Brett Samuels and Cristina Marcos, "Biden to Address Congress on April 28," *The Hill*, at https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/548095-pelosi-invites-biden-to-address-joint-session-of-congress-on-april-28; and Speaker of the House, "Dear Colleague to All Members on Health & Safety Guidelines," press release, January 4, 2021, at https://www.speaker.gov/newsroom/1421.

When Did the Tradition of Acknowledging Guests Sitting in the House Gallery Begin?

The chief executive frequently invites citizens who have distinguished themselves in some field of service or endeavor to be personal guests in the gallery. President Ronald Reagan began the tradition in 1982 by acknowledging Lenny Skutnik in his speech. Since then, most State of the Union addresses have included the direct mention of at least one presidential guest who was in attendance.[37] Presidential speechwriters often refer to these guests as "Lenny Skutniks."[38] Usually, the achievements or programs for which the President publicly salutes these guests also serve to underscore some major element of the message. Some guests have included civil rights pioneer Rosa Parks, former President of Afghanistan Hamid Karzai, NBA star and humanitarian Dikembe Mutombo, former Treasury Secretary and Senator Lloyd Bentsen, baseball great Henry "Hank" Aaron, and numerous military servicemembers and veterans.

What Procedures Are Currently Followed When the President Delivers the Message?

A concurrent resolution, agreed to by both chambers, sets aside a certain date and time for a joint session of the House of Representatives and the Senate "for the purpose of receiving such communication as the President of the United States shall be pleased to make to them."[39] At the appointed time, the Senators cross the Capitol to the House chamber, where seats are reserved for them at the front of the chamber. The Speaker and the Vice President (in the capacity as President of the Senate) occupy seats at the dais, and the Speaker presides. Aside from reserved places for leadership, seats in the chamber are not assigned to particular Members.[40] The President is then escorted to the chamber by a specially appointed committee of Members from both houses, and upon entering the chamber, the President is announced by the Sergeant at Arms of the House of Representatives. The Speaker then introduces the President, who delivers the address.

What Are the Origins of the Opposition Response?

In 1966, Senator Everett Dirksen and Representative Gerald Ford made a televised joint Republican response to President Lyndon Johnson's message, a practice that has since become a regular feature and is usually broadcast shortly after the President has completed his remarks.[41] The format for the opposition response varies, but it usually includes remarks by one or more party leaders (almost always Senators, Representatives, or state governors), who are nationally known or generally considered to be promising, emerging political figures.

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[37] Gerhard Peters, The American Presidency Project, "List of Acknowledged Guests Sitting in House Gallery During State of the Union Addresses," at https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/presidential-documents-archive-guidebook/annual-messages-congress-the-state-the-union-2.

[38] Deborah Kalb, Gerhard Peters, and John T. Woolley, *State of the Union: Presidential Rhetoric from Woodrow Wilson to George W. Bush* (Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2007), p. 10. Lenny Skutnik was a government employee who dived into the Potomac River to rescue a survivor after a plane departing from Washington's National Airport crashed into the 14th Street Bridge. Reagan stated that Skutnik embodied "the spirit of American Heroism at its finest."

[39] For example, H.Con.Res. 282, in the 110th Cong., 2nd sess.

[40] Seats in the well of the House chamber are also reserved for the President's Cabinet, any Justices of the Supreme Court who choose to attend, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Members of the diplomatic corps, who are seated in the gallery, also frequently attend.

[41] See "Televised Opposition Responses to the President's Message," at http://history.house.gov/Institution/SOTU/Opposition-Speeches/.

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