

The Rhetorical Presidency of Bill Clinton: Evidence from the State of the Union

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With a State of the Union address, the president seeks to exert leadership by setting the nation on a path, outlining an agenda, and using the art of persuasion to achieve his policy goals. One means that a president uses to signal his legislative agenda to Congress and the American public is the State of the Union address (SUA). While the policies mentioned in this speech do not encompass the whole of the president's legislative agenda, the policies mentioned indicate the items which the administration has chosen to highlight publicly before both Congress and the rest of the country. The president is not only addressing Congress with his State of the Union address, but he is also appealing to the American public to support his policy initiatives, signaling to them that he is attempting to address their problems and concerns. The SUA is no ordinary speech and can be helpful in assessing key aspects of presidential leadership.

Using content analysis, we will examine President Bill Clinton's SUAs as a form of presidential-congressional communication in a public setting. First, the SUA is a rhetorical vehicle which the president may use to convey both substance and symbolism. Substance is found in requests for legislative action and in the policy successes advertised. Symbolism is incorporated to inspire the audiences and appeal to shared values. Second, the SUA is a way for the president to seek rhetorical leadership of the public and Congress by using deliberative rhetoric. This form of rhetoric addresses problems and offers solutions to those problems. Deliberative rhetoric in SUAs can be evaluated to determine how successful the president was in convincing Congress to fulfill his legislative proposals. In addition, one danger with the use of deliberative rhetoric is that it can serve to exacerbate the expectations gap that exists between what the public expects of a president and what the president can actually deliver. Using this framework, we will evaluate how Clinton in his role as chief legislator wielded the SUA as a tool of the rhetorical presidency.