

**Woodrow Wilson, the Rhetorical Presidency,
and Congress
An Introductory Essay
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What is the object of oratory? Its object is persuasion and conviction—the control of other minds by a strange personal influence and power. What are the fields of labor open to us in our future life career as orators? The bar, the pulpit, the stump, the Senate chamber, the lecturer’s platform.

–Woodrow Wilson

Woodrow Wilson wrote the above lines on oratory as part of an editorial in *The Princetonian* at the end of his sophomore year in June 1877. Not only had he just become editor of the paper, but he was also an active member of the school’s debating club, the Whig Society, and, in February 1878, he was elected Speaker of the society—its highest honor. It is not surprising that Wilson took such a strong interest in the arts of persuasion when one considers that his father, a Presbyterian minister, was also a teacher of rhetoric at seminary and was Wilson’s idol and mentor.

Alexander and Juliette George, in their “personality study” of *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House*, recount how, as an undergraduate student, young “Tommy” Wilson would go into the woods near Princeton (or, during vacations, into his father’s empty church) and recite aloud the great orations of statesmen like Burke, Gladstone, Bright, Patrick Henry and Daniel Webster. Although Wilson’s parents hoped he would follow in his father’s footsteps and become a minister, he was more drawn to the world of government and politics. He especially admired the British parliamentary system and the great oratory that distinguished its debates (the root word of “parliament” is “parler” – the French verb, “to speak”-- he would later remind his students). He lamented to a fellow student in the fall of 1876 about the decline of American oratory. He only wished the American system of government could be more like the British system, with a strong party leader at the head of the government and the legislature, and rigorous floor debates over government policies.

Wilson considered the American Constitution’s separation of powers doctrine outmoded and a hindrance to more perfect governance. The U.S. Congress, unlike the British Parliament, was dominated by a fragmented committee system, and in the late 19th century there was little evidence of any policy coordination or discipline by the parties. Nevertheless, Congress was where the power was, as Wilson saw it, and that was unlikely to change. The president was little more than a routine administrator, “the titular head of the Executive,” Wilson would later write in his classic treatise and doctoral dissertation, *Congressional Government* (1885) while at Johns Hopkins University. Both the president and cabinet secretaries were the servants of Congress, bound to obedience and directions from “the masters of policy, the Standing Committees.” The best that could be hoped for was to convert government by committee into a government by party.

It is little wonder, then, that in his sophomore year Wilson and a close friend, Charles Talcott, vowed to each other, that one day they would become U.S. senators (not president). As Wilson later

recalled their “solemn covenant” to each other, “...we would acquire knowledge that we might have power; and that we would drill ourselves in all the arts of persuasion, but especially in oratory...that we might have facility in leading others into our ways of thinking and enlisting them in our purposes.”

Wilson and his close friends saw the art of persuasion as a means to an end, which was to become a statesman who could influence public policy. As a sophomore at Princeton he worked out his own definitions of “statesmen” and “statesmanship,” the former being “men of independent conviction, full of self-trust, and themselves the spirit of their country’s institutions;” and the latter being “that resolute and vigorous advance towards the realization of high, definite, and consistent aims which issues from the unreserved devotion of a strong intellect to the service of the state and to the solutions of all the multiform problems of public policy.”

After the initial blush of success with the publication of *Congressional Government* in 1885, Wilson became despondent about not realizing his real dream. In a February 1885 letter to his fiancé, Ellen Axson, Wilson wrote:

I do feel a very real regret that I have been shut out from my heart’s first–primary–ambition and purpose which was to take an active, if possible a leading, part in public life and strike out for myself, if I had the ability, a statesman’s career....I have a strong instinct for leadership, an unmistakably oratorical temperament, and the keenest possible delight in affairs; and it has required very constant and stringent schooling to content me with the sober methods of the scholar and the man of letters.

He added that he had no patience for the “tedious toil” of research and that his real passion was for “interpreting great thoughts to the world.” He would be complete if he could “inspire a great movement of opinion” and “impel” the great mass of the people “to great political achievements.” Wilson said he considered his literary talents as secondary to his equipment for other things: “that my power to write was meant to be a handmaiden to my power to speak and to organize action.” Yet Wilson would have to content himself with life as an academic for the next quarter century, supplemented by frequent lectures and published works. His was the life of a “literary statesman” until he first sought elective office in 1910.

Reconsidering Presidential Potential

In 1900, in his preface to the 15th printing of *Congressional Government*, Wilson noted a change both in Congress and the presidency since his original work of 1885. The Speaker of the House had, in the interim, emerged as a powerful party leader (epitomized by Thomas Brackett Reed of Maine). And, President William McKinley’s leadership of the country into the international arena in the Spanish-American War and subsequent imperial acquisitions reawakened the latent potential for greatness in that office. It may also happen, Wilson wrote, “that the new leadership of the Executive, inasmuch as it is likely to last, will have a very far-reaching effect upon our whole method of government....It may put this whole volume hopelessly out of date.”

Those words proved prophetic, especially with the elevation of Theodore Roosevelt to

presidency in 1901 after President McKinley's assassination. Roosevelt's expansive view of executive powers and his vigorous promotion of his programs and policies to Congress and the American people transformed the presidency into a "bully pulpit." By 1907, Wilson was busily rethinking and rewriting what he had written in the 1880s, and delivering the results in a series of lectures at Columbia University that would be published in 1908 as *Constitutional Government in the United States*. As Wilson put it in his "prefatory note" to the volume, he was bringing to the work "a fresh point of view...in the light of a fresh analysis of the character and operation of constitutional government." Whereas Wilson relegated "the Executive" to the third position in his discussion of the three branches in *Congressional Government* (behind two chapters on the House and one on the Senate), in *Constitutional Government* he elevated "the President of the United States" to first position over chapters on the House, Senate, courts, and states.

Just as Teddy Roosevelt opined in his autobiography that "the executive power was limited only by specific restrictions and prohibitions appearing in the Constitution or imposed by Congress in its constitutional powers," Wilson argued in *Constitutional Government* that, "the President is at liberty, both in law and conscience, to be as big a man as he can....The office will be as big and as influential as the man who occupies it," and, "the personal force of the president is constitutional to any extent to which he chooses to exercise it..."

How does this view square with the Founders' concept of divided and balanced powers between the branches? Wilson did not dismiss Congress out of hand as being practically irrelevant, as he had the presidency in 1885. Instead, he argued that the president had the capacity, if he so desired, to overwhelm Congress: "and if Congress be overborne by him, it will be no fault of the makers of the Constitution—it will be from no lack of constitutional powers on its part, but only because the President has the nation behind him, and Congress has not."

Wilson did not believe that the office now commanded the automatic respect and support of the people, or, conversely, that Congress did not. Nor was the key to the dominance of the presidency over Congress a mere matter of a forceful will and appealing personality, as important as those traits might be. No, the key lay elsewhere: "He has no means of compelling Congress except through public opinion." But Wilson was not arguing that the President must simply channel or pander to popular opinion to be successful. And this is where the "rhetorical presidency" comes into play—the art of persuasion. Wilson saw the president as being capable of molding, shaping, making public opinion by the power of his words and ideas. "The Constitution bids him speak....He has the ear of the nation, and a great person may use such an advantage greatly."

But how is the president heard over the din of Congress and the diverse interests reverberating in the views and voices of its popularly elected representatives of the people? Wilson explained that, "because he has the ear of the whole nation and is undoubtedly its chosen spokesman and representative, the President may place the House at a great disadvantage if he choose to appeal to the nation." The president, Wilson explained, may turn to the country when he will, with whatever arguments, whatever disclosures of plan, whatever explanations he pleases," and "everybody will read what he says...while few will read what is said in the House where no one speaks for the whole body or for the nation; and if the nation happens to agree with the president's view, if he can win it to his view, the leadership is his whether the houses relish it or not. They are at a disadvantage and will probably have to yield."

At another point in *Constitutional Government*, in discussing the Senate, Wilson notes that one of the most serious difficulties of politics in this country “is its provincialism—the general absence of national information and, by the same token, of national opinion.” So, the House represents localities and the Senate regions, but the president “is the one persona about whom a definite national opinion is formed and, therefore, *the one person who can form opinion by his own direct influence and act upon the whole country at once.*” [emphasis added] There, in a nutshell, was Wilson’s new outlook on the potential of the rhetorical presidency-- the ability of the person holding the office to actually form public opinion by his influence and move the country by it.

In discussing the choice of presidential nominees by party conventions, Wilson asks in *Constitutional Government*, what it is that a nominating convention seeks in the person it chooses as its nominee (obviously in a time before such nominees were chose in presidential primaries). He answers his own question as follows:

A man who will be and who will seem to the country in some sort an embodiment of the character and purpose it wishes its government to have—a man who understands his own day and the needs of the country, and who has the personality and the initiative to enforce his views both upon the people and upon Congress.

Wilson concedes that such conventions are an odd way to choose a nominee, “but in simple fact the convention picks out a party leader from the body of the nation.” The party does not expect the nominee to direct the inner workings of the party “but it does of necessity expect him to represent it before public opinion and to stand before the country as its representative man, as a true type of what the country may expect of the party itself in purpose and principle.”

At the same time, even in an era when parties meant much more than they do today, Wilson does not contend that party identity is always the main criterion by which the voters will decide which person to elect as president:

What the country will demand of the candidate will be not that he be an astute politician, skilled and practiced in affairs, but that he be a man such as it can trust, in character, in intention, in knowledge of its needs, in perception of the best means by which those needs may be met, in capacity to prevail by reason of his own weight and integrity.

It is clear that Wilson is already envisioning himself as president some day. He even goes so far in *Constitutional Government* to suggest that the president need not be someone who has vast experience in public office: “If the matter be looked at a little more closely, it will be seen that the office of President, as we have used and developed it, really does not demand actual experience in affairs so much as particular qualities of mind and character which we are at least as likely to find outside the ranks of our public mean as within them.”

Wilson goes on to write that, “Sometimes the country believes in a party, but more often it believes in a man; and conventions have often shown the instinct to perceive which it is that the country needs in a particular presidential year, a mere representative partisan, a military hero, or some one who will genuinely speak for the country itself, whatever be his training and antecedents.”

Wilson, whose highest aspiration at one time was to be a U.S. senator, now writes, “Certainly the country has never thought of members of Congress as in any particular degree fitted for the presidency.” So, what type of person is best fitted for the office? “The men best prepared,” Wilson continued, “no doubt are those who have been governors of states or members of cabinets.” In 1910, just two years after the publication of those words, Wilson was catapulted from being the president of Princeton to being governor of New Jersey; and two years after that to being president of the United States. His career as a “literary statesman” had literally changed to that of practicing statesman.

The Orator on the Stump

Wilson finally realized his dream when, as president of Princeton, he was approached to run for governor of New Jersey. In accepting the nomination for governor at the New Jersey Democratic Convention, Wilson gave a powerful speech in which he effectively declared his independence from the party bosses who had put him there, and, as a result, brought around the reformers in the hall who had been defeated by the Wilson juggernaut. As biographer James Stannard Baker put it, “It is the universal testimony of those who were present that the speech, brief and simple as it was, produced an extraordinary effect....He literally brought around his bitterest opponents.” The Georges write that his speech was one of those occasions on which “he could inspire not merely mass submission to his domination but, as well, the wish to participate in an impassioned demonstration of joy and relief at the surrender....The delegates rose to their feet and cheered wildly.”

Ironically, despite his earlier self-professed belief in his talents to lead through oratory, Wilson initially declined to wage an active campaign on the stump, vowing to confine himself to “one dignified evening address in each county,” writes Robert Alexander Kraig in *Woodrow Wilson and the Lost Art of Oratorical Statesman*. Wilson did not think he had the spell-binding talents of a TR to win over campaign audiences. But his advisers would have none of such talk, and he was soon making dozens of short campaign stops daily, as well as giving two or three major speeches a day. Wilson’s brother-in-law, Stockton Axson, describes how Wilson quickly adapted his speaking style to the more informal setting of the campaign trail: “As a political speaker he developed a simplicity which combined with his natural powers as a teacher and man given to exposition, made him extraordinarily persuasive.” Kraig, drawing on Axson’s recollections in his book, *Brother Woodrow*, writes that:

Wilson managed to combine the roles of spellbinder and dignified orator. While his discourse was clean, straightforward, and leavened by anecdotes and homilies, he intelligently expounded on issues of policy and public philosophy. His speeches had the higher purposes of ringing declarations associated with the best of the oratorical tradition.

Perhaps even more important than his speaking style, Wilson managed to convey a new message of progressive change during the New Jersey gubernatorial campaign. Not only had he transformed his speaking style to fit the situation, but he had transformed himself from a man of conservative temperament and ideas into a “radical,” as he sometimes now described himself. All this brought him national attention even before he was elected governor, with national coverage in major newspapers in New York and Philadelphia. By the time he won the election in a landslide,

“he immediately became one of the front-runners for the Democratic presidential nomination in 1912,” writes Kraig. And Wilson was not one to discourage such talk.

During his campaign for governor Wilson ran on four reform planks: election reform (providing for direct primaries), a corrupt practices law, workers compensation, and utility regulation, borrowing heavily from policies championed over the years by the New Idea Republicans in his own state and Governor “Fighting Bob” LaFollette of Wisconsin. Though Wilson hewed to his idea of party leader, he was not averse to reaching out to progressives in both parties to build a winning coalition for his programs. He demonstrated a willingness to compromise with the legislature if it did not mean sacrificing the basic principles behind his program. Kraig tells us that on one occasion Wilson broke with longstanding tradition and addressed the Democratic caucus in the legislature, speaking for three hours. As one legislator present described it, “We all came out of that room with one conviction; that we had heard the most wonderful speech of our lives, and that Governor Wilson was a great man. Even the most hardened of the old-time legislative hacks said that.” The performance was proof, said the legislator, that old style oratory was not dead.

When it came to the election reform bill, Wilson met with stiff resistance from the machines of both parties. To overcome this, he decided to go over the heads of the legislature and went on a speaking tour to promote his proposals. By appealing directly to the people in a series of highly successful speeches he was able to bring sufficient pressure on legislators to pass the election reform bill.

Wilson succeeded in passing all four of his reform measures in the first four months of office, a precursor to his later success as president. With his legislative agenda enacted into law and the legislature adjourned, Wilson embarked on a national speaking tour in May 1911 to test the presidential waters. His swing around the country included speeches in Missouri, Colorado, California, Oregon, Minnesota, North Carolina, and South Carolina. All told, he traveled 8,000 miles and delivered 25 speeches to enthusiastic audiences on a wide variety of topics, but with special emphasis on issues that would have appeal to western populists such as the state initiative, referendum, and recall—all things he had opposed when he taught government classes.

The fame from his western speaking tour led to more invitations from around the country to speak. Biographer Arthur Link estimates that in the run-up to the Democratic convention in Baltimore in 1912, Wilson had made 40 speeches in 12 states, mostly in the South and Midwest. In so doing, he was able to pick up sufficient delegates to be considered a major player at the convention. But his biggest obstacle was House Speaker Champ Clark of Missouri who was considered the frontrunner. Indeed, as the balloting continued, Clark moved from having a plurality of the delegates to a majority. But, a two-thirds majority was needed for the nomination. After a good deal of maneuvering, Wilson managed to secure the two-thirds necessary on the 46th ballot

Teddy Roosevelt, who had decided to reenter presidential politics after sitting it out for four years, went into the Republican convention with 276 delegates he had captured in the 13 states that had primaries (compared to just 46 for President Taft and 36 for Bob LaFollette). Nevertheless, since most delegates were chosen at state party conventions, Taft won the nomination and Roosevelt and his supporters bolted from the convention and turned to the Progressive (or “Bull Moose”) Party which nominated TR by acclamation.

From Campaigning to Governing

Even before the candidates of the three parties were chosen, journalist William Bayard Hale predicted in April 1911 that the presidential campaign would be “an oratorical tournament never equaled in the country’s history.” And, with Wilson and TR on the stump, Hale’s prediction was realized. Author John Milton Cooper has written that the election “pitted the most vivid political presence since Andrew Jackson against the most accomplished political mind since Thomas Jefferson” in “the greatest debate ever witnessed in an American presidential campaign.” Cooper, in his book, *Pivotal Decades*, goes on to note that the campaign was conducted on a very high level of public discourse with both candidates addressing the most fundamental economic and political questions of the age. Kraig quotes the editors of Wilson’s papers as terming Wilson’s campaign orations in 1912 “his greatest forensic achievement,” ranking “among the greatest speeches of modern history.”

Perhaps more important than their oratorical value, Wilson’s speeches pointed to what he wanted to do and how he intended to govern once elected. In a speech in Indianapolis Wilson drew the connection between campaigning and governing. Through the campaign, Wilson said, a leader is building public support for the candidate and the policies he proposes. The leader will be as big as the number of people who believe in him, as the convictions that move him, and the trust and confidence the people place in him. With that trust and confidence, the leader can proceed to reform the government. As Kraig has written, the campaign can thus be seen not only as a means to win election, but also “as an attempt to prepare the public mind both for his reform agenda and for his personal style of rhetorical leadership.”

Wilson would make 70 campaign speeches between Labor Day and the election, while Roosevelt made more than twice as many campaign appearances (150) covering some 32 states. The central theme of Wilson’s campaign was the danger posed by large corporate monopolies, “the trusts,” as they were called. His speeches played upon the anxiety over threatened loss of individual economic and political freedom in the new industrial age. In fact, he referred to his campaign platform as “the New Freedom,” as contrasted with Roosevelt’s “New Nationalism.” The main difference between the two approaches, according to presidential scholars Sidney Milkis and Michael Nelson, was that Roosevelt accepted the growth of corporations as a reality that must be offset by strict regulation from the federal government while Wilson wanted to free business from monopolies and special interest privilege and thereby make increased federal centralization and regulation unnecessary.

It is instructive to look at the book of Wilson’s campaign speeches that was published in 1913 under the title, *The New Freedom*, for the choice of speeches made by Wilson is indicative not only of what he thought the campaign was about, but where his presidency would take the country. As Wilson put it in the preface to the book:

The book is not a discussion of measures or of programs. It is an attempt to express the new spirit of our politics and to set forth, in large terms which may stick in the imagination, what it is that must be done if we are to restore our politics to their full spiritual vigor again, and our national life, whether in trade, in industry, or in what concerns us only as families and individuals, to its purity, its self-respect, and its

pristine strength and freedom. The New Freedom is only the old revived and clothed in the unconquerable strength of modern America.

The chapter headings alone, for the 12 speeches included in the volume, give a fair taste of the progressive thrust of Wilson's campaign, the choices posed by the election, and his vision for the country beyond the election:

- The Old Order Changeth
- What is Progress?
- Freemen Need No Guardians
- Life Comes from the Soil
- The Parliament of the People
- Let There Be Light
- The Tariff—"Protection" or Special Privilege
- Monopoly or Opportunity?
- Benevolence or Justice
- The Way to Resume is to Resume
- The Emancipation of Business
- The Liberation of a People's Vital Energies

In reading those speeches, taken directly from a stenographer's notes at the time of delivery (since Wilson did not like to prepare written texts in advance), one gets the sense of a candidate grappling with the realities of a changed society in which the individual is being "submerged" and "swallowed" by the large corporation, and how best to address this dehumanizing force. "We are in new times, struggling under old laws," Wilson said in the speech included as the first chapter. And yet, he continued, government, for the past few years has been "under the control of heads of great allied corporations with special interests" who press for laws that favor them and oppose laws to protect the people. Is it any wonder, Wilson asks, why people see no reason for voting. "We know that the machines of both parties are subsidized by the same persons, and therefore it is useless to turn in either direction." In that same speech, Wilson said, "We are in the presence of a revolution—not a bloody revolution... but a silent revolution" in which Americans will insist on recovering "those ideals which she has always professed, upon securing a government devoted to the general interest and not to special interests." And this will require "some radical changes... in our law and practice."

Wilson proposed several specific changes in law to help recover the American ideals and realize the "new freedom" of which he spoke, none of which was particularly new to the party or its platforms. He wanted to reduce the high tariffs enacted by Republicans because he considered them a cruel tax on the poor in the form of higher prices for basic goods. Moreover, they constituted a Federal subsidy for the wealthiest corporations. And, he wanted to bust the trusts.

Wilson's campaign style was different from Roosevelt's. While Roosevelt attacked him, Wilson did not counter-attack. As Ray Stannard Baker writes, "He would not make a personal issue of what he considered a 'campaign of principles.'" Unlike Roosevelt and LaFollette, Wilson did not get carried away by the fury of denunciation, and unlike William Jennings Bryan, he did not try to arouse his audiences to emotional revolt. In reflecting on Wilson's campaign speeches years later,

Baker concludes that they were “extraordinarily calm, steady—tending to the academic and expository.” They were not lacking in fire and did not ignore the evils of the day, “but the orator seems, above everything else, to reach his effect by the cool processes of reason,” and is “never denunciatory, never dismal.” Baker concludes that one of the essential elements of Wilson’s speech-making powers that was lacking in those of other orators of the day-- perhaps the chief element--“was the sense of confidence he inspired, confidence in the nation, confidence in himself,” and what he won from the people in return was their confidence in him.

When one reads the sampling of campaign speeches published in *The New Freedom*, one is struck with how much he remained a teacher, lecturing his audiences on problems of the day, whether economic, spiritual, or moral, and how much his speaking style and way of putting words together must have mesmerized his audiences for such historic, contemporary, and intellectual observations to hold their rapt attention for so long at one sitting. “He was easy, he had humor, he was urbane,,,, [and] had the gift of liking his audiences,” writes Baker. And while he wove the political issues of importance into his speeches—the same issues that other Progressives hammered on like high tariffs, regulations of railroad rates, and the trusts, Wilson was much more national minded than the others. He said that the “items of reform” were not so important as was the spirit of reform, and he was for restoring the spirit on which democratic institutions were founded in order to give government back to the people. Only through that process could government address national problems with national solutions rather than with special interest protections. Wilson had learned the trick of successful oratory, and that was not to bore his audiences with factual recitations of the nature of the problems and laundry lists of promised solutions, but to directly involve the people in the very processes making the solutions their vested responsibility. It is a rhetorical device still used today by politicians, perhaps to pandering excess, but it always hits a responsive chord when the speaker confirms the voters’ suspicions that they no longer control their own government and must do something to get it back.

The Rhetorical Presidency

Given the split among Republicans, Wilson won the election handily with 435 electoral votes to Roosevelt’s 88 and Taft’s 8. Wilson ended up with 43 percent of the popular vote—1.3 million votes less than the combined votes of TR and Taft who garnered 27 percent and 23 percent, respectively. Wilson clearly had a strong electoral mandate, and he set about thinking how best to implement it. Dating back to his academic days, he had long been cultivating ideas of how a president should act, and, not surprisingly, the maximum use of rhetorical skills was at the heart of his concept of effective leadership and governance. In his 1907 Columbia University lectures (compiled in *Constitutional Government* the following year), Wilson was critical of the passive presidencies that had been the rule since reconstruction, especially the excessive deference such presidents had paid to Congress in the initiation of legislative policies. “Those presidents who have felt themselves bound to adhere to the strict literary theory of the Constitution have scrupulously refrained from attempting to determine either the subjects or the character of legislation,” he wrote. And yet, such deference is not even consistent with what the Constitution expects of the president since it “explicitly authorizes the president to recommend to Congress ‘such measures as he shall deem necessary and expedient....’”

The only constitutional limitation, he wrote, is that “a president’s messages have no more

weight or authority than the intrinsic reasonableness and importance given to them.” Certainly, Wilson went on, the Constitution “does not forbid the President to back them up, as Washington did, with such personal force and influence as he may possess.” Such presidents felt the need to be a spokesman for the nation as a whole “in matters of legislation no less than in other matters, and have tried to supply Congress with the leadership of suggestion, backed by argument and by iteration and by every legitimate appeal to public opinion.” There in a nutshell was Wilson’s conception of a rhetorical presidency: “he is undoubtedly the only spokesman of the whole people,” and “the Constitution bids him speak,” and, in times of stress and change “must more and more thrust upon him the attitude of originator of policies.”

Thus, one of the keys to a successful presidency was in the effective utilization of presidential messages to crystalize public opinion and motivate congressional action in support of presidentially originated policy proposals. Wilson followed up on this belief by being the first president since John Adams to deliver a state of the Union address (the called the “annual message”) in person before a joint session of Congress. Jefferson had abandoned the practice because he thought it too much resembled the British monarch’s address from the throne setting forth an agenda for action by the Parliament. Wilson had no such compunctions given his special fondness for the British system (though he had no illusions about being king). Not only did he deliver the annual state of the Union address in person to Congress on December 2, 1913, but he preceded it with three special messages delivered in person in April, June, and August, on tariff reductions, currency reform, and relations with Mexico, respectively. And in January 1924 he delivered his message on “trusts” to a joint session of Congress. In his first two years in office Wilson appeared before nine joint sessions to address various issues. To this day, Wilson holds the record for the most appearances before joint sessions with 24 such addresses in eight years—even exceeding Franklin Delano Roosevelt who appeared 17 times during his 13-year tenure, and Truman’s 15 joint session addresses in eight years.

Obviously one cannot measure how much these addresses were responsible for changes in public opinion or congressional votes, but they no doubt had a significant effect. The addresses on tariffs, trusts, currency reform led to enactment of most of his New Freedom domestic agenda in his first two years in office: the Underwood Tariff Act and the Federal Reserve Act in 1913, and the Clayton Anti-trust Act and Federal Trade Commission Act in 1914.

In his first such appearance before a joint session, in urging tariff reductions, Wilson explained why he was breaking with the 113 year tradition of simply sending written messages to the Hill:

I am very glad indeed to have this opportunity to address the two houses directly and to verify for myself the impression that the President of the United States is a person, not a mere department of government hailing Congress from some isolated island of jealous power, sending messages, not speaking naturally with his own voice—that he is a human being trying to cooperate with other human beings in a common service. After this pleasant experience, I shall feel quite normal in all our dealings with one another.

Indeed, the very next day Wilson came to the Hill again to brief members of the Senate Finance Committee in the president’s room of the Capitol on his tariff proposal—the first president

to visit Congress in this manner since Lincoln had done so during the Civil War. Ray Stannard Baker has written Wilson's new approaches to presidential-congressional relations, together with his being the first president to hold press conferences, "occasioned an enormous amount of publicity. The country at large was vastly interested, amused, impressed." But perhaps more importantly, as presidential scholars Milkis and Nelson have noted, the appearances before Congress "also served Wilson's desire to break down the walls that long had divided the executive from the legislative branches" and "establish customs and make symbolic gestures that would strengthen the president's ties to Congress." They also helped Wilson to test and develop his theories of party government with the president as its leader. "Wilson had turned his fractious party into a disciplined body," write Milkis and Nelson, "and in the course of doing so, he enacted programs that progressives had been demanding for two decades." Wilson could accurately and triumphantly report in his 1914 state of the Union address that "our program with regard to regulation of business is now virtually complete."

Conclusion

In summing-up Wilson's successful execution of a rhetorical presidency, Milkis and Nelson write, "Wilson not only understood the popular aspirations of his day, but was able to translate them into words. In the course of doing so he consciously defended and, by example, established the legitimacy of public rhetoric as a principal tool of presidential leadership." The fact that we take such presidential behavior for granted today is a tribute to Wilson's vision of what the office of the president could be in our modern system of government.

The fact that Wilson later failed in his efforts to win Senate ratification of the Treaty of Versailles over the League of Nations issue is due largely to his refusal to include senators in the negotiating party and to consider any compromise that preserved Congress's power to declare war. Moreover, Wilson further exacerbated relations with the Senate by going over the heads of senators and taking his case directly to the American people in a national speaking tour. That decision proved fatal to the treaty and to his health. It also speaks to today's leaders about the limits of the rhetorical presidency and the need for inter-branch cooperation to achieve great things. Our tripartite system of government was designed to check those who might otherwise become too powerful by dominating the other branch or by manipulating public opinion through the abuse of their rhetorical powers. Wilson warned of this danger in his 1912 speech, "The Old Order Changeth:"

Don't you know that some man with eloquent tongue, without conscience, who did not care for the nation, could put this whole country into flame? Don't you know that this country from one end to the other believes that something is wrong? What an opportunity it would be for some man without conscience to spring up and say: "This is the way. Follow me!"—and leads in paths of destruction.

Wilson was acutely aware of the power of rhetoric—for good or ill. His marriage of theory and practice as academic and politician served him well as president in successfully enacting his domestic agenda and prosecuting a major war. His view that people would respond to reasoned arguments eloquently delivered is testament to his belief in the people and in the power of rhetoric to accomplish great things. His was a model of the rhetorical presidency that set the bar for others.

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