

House Speaker Pelosi asks Trump to postpone State of the Union address

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Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi sent a letter to President Donald Trump Wednesday requesting that he either postpone his State of the Union address, currently scheduled for January 29, or submit it in writing, citing “security concerns” resulting from the partial government shutdown, now in its fourth week.

The shutdown, now the longest in American history, was brought on by Trump’s demand for more than \$5 billion in funding for a wall along the US-Mexico border. The Democrats have refused to provide Trump with funding for a wall, while making clear their support for intensified repression on the border, including funding more border agents, detention facilities, fencing and the use of drones.

In her letter Pelosi noted that the US Secret Service and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) had gone without any funding for 26 days as of yesterday. Many of the federal agents who work for these agencies are among the 420,000 government employees deemed “essential” who are being compelled to work without pay. Others are among the 380,000 who have been furloughed, forced to stay home without pay.

Pelosi explained that the State of the Union had been deemed a National Security Special Event by DHS, requiring “‘the full resources of the Federal Government to be brought to bear’ to ensure the security of these events.” However, guaranteeing Trump’s safety during his address in the House chamber would be impossible, she claimed, “with critical departments hamstrung by furloughs.”

Notably, she made no mention of Trump’s repeated threats to bypass Congress altogether by declaring a state of emergency and directing the military to construct the wall, a maneuver which would be unconstitutional and provide grounds for Trump’s impeachment.

Pelosi had extended an official invitation to Trump to address a joint session of Congress on January 3, when the shutdown was nearing the conclusion of its second week. At the time she gave no indication that she would ask for a delay if the shutdown continued.

But there is clearly concern that if Trump is accorded the usual ceremonial welcome and ovations in the House chamber, it will discredit congressional Democrats politically by exploding the pretense that they are actually engaged in a serious struggle against Trump’s right-wing policies.

Moreover, there is a real chance that the address could become the occasion for protests that go well beyond the intentions of the Democratic leadership—particularly if unpaid federal workers descend on the Capitol to vent their anger at a shutdown that, by January 29, will have gone on for 39 days, with at least two payless paydays.

Pelosi justified her request Wednesday for a delay or the delivery of a written address observing that this had been the tradition during much of the 19th and early 20th centuries. She also noted that in the last four decades a State of the Union address has not been delivered during a federal government shutdown.

Responding to Pelosi’s letter House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer declared on CNN that “the State of the Union is off.” His office subsequently walked back his remarks as a “mischaracterization.”

Rep. Hakeem Jeffries, the chair of the House Democratic Caucus, went further than Pelosi Wednesday declaring on Twitter that Trump “will not be permitted to deliver his state of the union address until government is reopened. Welcome to life in the New Democratic Majority. Get used to it.”

While CNN characterized the letter as a “major power move” by the Speaker there are no indications

that Trump would heed Pelosi's request or shift his position on keeping the government closed until he gets funding for the wall.

In lieu of an official response from Trump himself, Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen rejected Pelosi's claim of a security risk, tweeting Wednesday afternoon that DHS and the Secret Service "are fully prepared to support and secure the State of the Union." Nearly 6,000 out of 7,222 Secret Service agents and other employees remain on the job despite the shutdown.

Even though the President is required by the Constitution to "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," he or she is not required to give a speech.

The modern tradition of addressing a joint session of Congress in person was started by Woodrow Wilson in 1913. Every president since then, except Herbert Hoover, has delivered at least one State of the Union speech before Congress.

Only once, 33 years ago, has a State of the Union speech been postponed, when Ronald Reagan delayed a planned address by one week, after the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger killed seven astronauts in 1986.



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