

If it weren't for Woodrow Wilson, I'd be able to watch 'Vegas' on Tuesday night

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It can take generations to determine a president's full legacy. For even as heated debates over a president's historical actions rage, new developments bring fresh perspectives and pronouncements on his sagacity or stupidity.

For example, many lament President Woodrow Wilson's creation of the Federal Reserve Board and rampant internationalism. But these historical indictments pale before his presidency's most notorious "unforeseen consequence": He preempted Tuesday night's episode of "Vegas."

After a century of our free republic surviving its absence, it was Wilson who revived the "long-abandoned custom" of personally delivering the "Annual Message to Congress," i.e., the State Of The Union address. Now, Americans reap his bitter fruit on viewing screens cluttered with a preening political class preempting our favorite shows.

It shouldn't have been like this. Only in an age sans electronic media could any political advisor deem it a good idea to plop the stern, austere, didactic Wilson at a podium in front of anyone except some Princeton students serving detention. Heedless of this new tradition's future toll when the day came print didn't rule the news, on December 2, 1913, the dour former New Jersey governor — a.k.a., the "anti-Christie" — got off to a rollicking start:

I shall ask your indulgence if I venture to depart in some degree from the usual custom of setting before you in formal review the many matters which have engaged the attention and called for the action of the several departments of the Government or which look to them for early treatment in the future, because the list is long, very long, and would suffer in the abbreviation to which I should have to subject it [Yawn, mine].

This is why, a century later, I can't watch Sheriff Ralph Lamb chase mobster Vincent Savino around the Strip?

Oh, some will argue not to jump the gun. Maybe Wilson's "Annual Message" provided some electrifying policies or farsighted predictions. Well, here's a rich one from the realm of international relations: "The country, I am thankful to say, is at peace with all the world. ... There is but one cloud upon our horizon ... Mexico."

Doubtless, this news relieved the Kaiser. But what I want to know is whether Jack is going to tell Mia he shot her father; and, if he does, what will it do to their interpersonal relations?

As for any Wilson apologists who argue that the 28th president couldn't have foreseen the advent of our media-saturated age, here's a hint of Wilsonian foreshadowing from his address: "I hope that it may not be deemed an impertinent intrusion of myself into the picture ..."

Sixteen presidents later, the answer to Wilson's rhetorical question is: "Yeah, dude, it *is* an impertinent intrusion on my prime-time viewing." In fact, so is every televised State of the Union/media extravaganza, because all contain echoes of Wilson's turgid prose, fleeting promises, flawed predictions and self-serving rhetorical questions. In sum, none of these

“Annual Messages” enlighten the American people as to whether Sheriff Jack will finally “get the message” from Assistant District Attorney Kathleen’s coquettish hints.

Fortunately for Wilson, some new developments have insulated his legacy from his new tradition’s impertinent intrusion on prime-time viewers. The Instant Age provides a multiplicity of media options other generations were denied. Consequently, we’re not bound by the major networks’ old monopoly on prime-time entertainment. There are ways for us to be entertained Tuesday night.

Ironically, this also applies to the president’s “Annual Message.” Our age provides unprecedented technological tools that empower Americans to make their own determinations about the State of the Union — and to express their views on achieving a more perfect one. So do Americans still need the State of the Union speech aired live when they can find it online at their convenience?

Regardless, until the day President Obama or one of his successors starts the truly new tradition of an “Annual Email to Congress,” President Wilson’s somnambulant prime-time television legacy should keep his apologists awake at night (unlike State of the Union viewers).

Why?

Because Vincent Savino brooks no disrespect.

Guitarist Thaddeus G. McCotter is a recovering Congressbum and counsel at the Detroit law firm of Ottenwess, Allman & Taweel, PLC.