

The 4th best State of the Union address: "Axis of evil"

1/25/14 by Janice Fuller Washington Post

President George W. Bush's State of the Union address in 2002 was memorable because of one line Americans will remember from that speech -- even if they can't pinpoint the phrase's origin. Or, as Elizabeth Bumiller at the New York Times [put it](#), "Nobody ever remembers much from State of the Union speeches, but one thing they do remember is the 'axis of evil' formulation that President Bush brandished in last year's address to describe Iraq, Iran and North Korea."

[Here's the context for the phrase](#): "States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic."

The first State of the Union since September 11 -- and Bush's first as president -- this speech set the tone for the rest of the Bush presidency, and made it clear that foreign policy in the Middle East was the administration's new priority. And "axis of evil," -- which was originally written as "[axis of hatred](#)" until an edit changed the wording to the ubiquitous phrasing we know today -- became the shorthand we used to reference that policy and issue judgment on the policymakers. As Washington Post reporters Glenn Kessler and Peter Baker put it in 2006: "Nearly five years after President Bush introduced the concept of an 'axis of evil' comprising Iraq, Iran and North Korea, the administration has reached a crisis point with each nation: North Korea has claimed it conducted its first nuclear test, Iran refuses to halt its uranium-enrichment program, and Iraq appears to be tipping into a civil war 3 1/2 years after the U.S.-led invasion."

Not only did the speech lay out who the Bush administration considered the biggest threats to America -- it also set the War on Terror in motion. Presidential historian Michael Beschloss sees the speech as the "definitive statement -- more concrete and exact than Bush's post-9/11 speech to Congress -- of the president's intention to make the war on terror a worldwide crusade for democracy, however different regimes like Iran, Iraq and North Korea might otherwise be." In short, the address was the curtain raiser prepping the nation for the Iraq War, which would define American life for the next decade and dominate the next few election cycles. Stephen Zunes at Foreign Policy wrote this soon after the speech: "Despite widespread accolades in the media and strong bipartisan support in Congress, a careful examination of the language and assumptions in the address raise disturbing questions about the direction of U.S. foreign policy under the current administration."