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# OPINIONS & VIEWPOINTS



**HISTORICALLY SPEAKING**  
 current events through a historical lens  
**Dr. James Finck, USAO History Professor**

## State of the Union Theatrics

By James Finck, Ph. D.

On March 7, 2024, President Joe Biden gave his third official State of the Union Address to Congress where he used his time to criticize his predecessor, talk about border security and tout his economic successes.

As has become tradition, Biden invited several guests to sit with the First Lady in her viewing box. When this tradition first began the guest list was small, but it has grown exponentially.

The State of the Union is more about political theater than substance. This past year Biden invited 20 guests, all of whom in some ways related to the subjects of his speech. Historically speaking, while the guest lists have grown, this practice was started differently— and by one of the greatest showmen of all time.

The State of the Union is as old as the Constitution, which in Article II, Section 3, Clause 1 states the president must periodically “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.”

Both George Washington and John Adams delivered their address to a joint session of Congress. However, without the TV coverage these were not political theater and were short in comparison to today where half the time seems to be taken up by one side clapping while the other side scowls. I would say not clapping, but what they do seems more than simply not clapping, it’s like sending death rays with their eyes. It’s these theatrics that cause many Americans like me to not want to watch these speeches.

Thomas Jefferson saw the State of the Union as too ceremonial and began sending a written address that was read by a clerk—a practice I could get behind. It was not until 1913 that the practice of giving a live performance was reintroduced by Woodrow Wilson but then dropped again until Franklin Roosevelt. FDR, who was a master of political theater not only did live performances, but put them on the radio for everyone to hear. From that point on, most address have been in person, but not all. Jimmy Carter sent in a written address at the end of his presidency. Then, in 1982, Ronald Reagan, “The Great Communicator,” invited Lenny Skutnik to sit next to his wife and started a trend that has lasted until today.

Skutnik was a retired Congressional Budget Office worker who on January 13, 1982, was driving on I-395 heading towards the 14th Street Bridge that crossed over the Potomac River when disaster struck. For kids like me who grew up in the Washington D.C. area, this is an eerie story we all remember and thought about whenever we crossed that bridge.

On that day, Air Florida Flight 90 took off from what is now Reagan Airport headed to Florida when it crashed into the bridge. Of the 79 passengers and crew, only four made it out alive. The plane also hit seven cars on the bridge killing four and injuring four more. Being January, the river had frozen over and blizzardlike conditions made hypothermia a real fear. Any rescue

attempts would be next to impossible.

Passersby did what they could to try and reach the plane, but the ice was too broken up to walk on and the water too cold to swim. A few still tried but were forced to come back and just yell at survivors to hold on.

The weather also made it difficult for rescue vehicles to reach the accident, especially now with gridlock traffic in both directions.

Fortunately, a rescue helicopter finally arrived. Most surviving passengers made their way to the tail of the plane and one by one survivors plunged into the icy water as the helicopter crew rescued them with a lifeline, dragging him or her to shore. Arland D. Williams caught the line but was still trapped in the wreckage so he passed the line to the flight attendant who was rescued. On the third trip, Williams passed the now two lines to other survivors who were pulled out, but two passengers lost their grips and fell back into the water. The chopper returned and pulled in one, but the other, Priscilla Tirado, was too weak to hold on. At that point, Lenny Skutnik, who was now one of the many onlookers, stripped off his boots and jacket, dove into the water, swam to Tirado and pulled her to safety. By the time the helicopter returned for Williams, the plane had shifted pulling him under.

In response for his heroism, Reagan asked Skutnik to join him a few days later at the State of the Union where Reagan said, “Just two weeks ago, in the midst of a terrible tragedy on the Potomac, we saw again the spirit of American heroism at its finest—the heroism of dedicated rescue workers saving crash victims from icy waters. And we saw the heroism of one of our young government employees, Lenny Skutnik, who, when he saw a woman lose her grip on the helicopter line, dived into the water and dragged her to safety.”

A year later, Reagan invited U.S. Army Sgt. Stephen Trujillo, a medic in the 2nd Ranger Battalion, who “was in the first helicopter to land at the compound held by Cuban forces” during the U.S. invasion of Grenada. With this, a new trend had begun. And, to this day, guests of the president are still known as ‘Lenny Skutniks.’

There does seem to be one difference between Reagan’s choice and presidents after. Skutnik and Trujillo were there to highlight American heroism. Most guests today are there to promote their agendas. Case in point: this year’s guest, Kate Cox from Texas, whose White House press release said, “has experienced the devastating consequences of state abortion bans and courageously spoke out about her experience.” There was nothing political about Skutnik, other than reinforcing American pride. Today’s guests are positioned for very specific reasons of political theater.

*James Finck, Ph.D. is a professor of history at the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma and writes for the Southwest Ledger. You can follow Historically Speaking on Facebook or at Historicallyspeaking.blog.*

## A word, please

By June Casagrande

Recently I was hired to write a 200-word article based on an 800-word press release about a new coffee shop. I finished and turned it in, then it hit me: It’s just a matter of time before the client who hired me realizes AI programs can write these things for free.



To size up my competition, I pasted the original press release into ChatGPT and asked it to create its own 200-word article, then I compared our work.

ChatGPT bases its writing on lots and lots of online documents and databases, guessing what word should come next based on the words all those other articles used next. The result is a very slick, polished voice, along with a ton of cliches and empty sentences. But ChatGPT’s biggest weakness is that it has no idea what interests humans. What’s more, it doesn’t understand what words mean.

Compare our leads (note: I’ve changed some names and details because my work-for-hire doesn’t belong to me). ChatGPT’s opening sentence: “Caffe Maximo, the brainchild of industry veterans John Doe and Jack Jones, has unveiled its newest jewel in the crown — a bright and modern coffee haven nestled in Redondo Beach.”

A coffee shop is a “brainchild”? That’s a bit of a stretch. “Brainchild” usually means something that arose from an innovative idea, and I’m pretty sure these guys didn’t invent coffee shops. Also: “jewel in the crown”? That cliché only works when the reader knows what “crown” you’re talking about. Then there’s “a coffee haven,” which is odd, and “nestled,” which is shopworn and at the same time not quite accurate.

Here’s my first sentence: “Redondo Beach is finally getting a taste of the ‘farm-to-you’ coffee beloved by L.A.’s most discriminating chefs and connoisseurs.” My thinking here, as a human being, is that when a truly high-end coffee joint comes to town, readers care more about the coffee than, say, “unveiling a jewel in a crown.”

Because here’s what you wouldn’t know from reading ChatGPT’s version: This coffee brand is among the best — a Michelin-starred chef serves it in his restaurants, as do a number of other chichi California eateries. But ChatGPT never mentions this coffee brand’s impressive bona fides.

ChatGPT follows that first sentence with: “This marks the seventh location for the duo, who have been at the forefront of L.A.’s farm-first coffee movement since their inception in 2006.” This is hardly the type of information readers are dying to learn. And notice “their inception.” Technically, this means Doe and Jones’ inception, like when they were born — or possibly conceived. A logical fail for ChatGPT.

Now the AI program’s third sentence: “With a steadfast commitment to quality and community, Caffe Maximo’s expansion into Redondo Beach symbolizes its dedication to fostering local connections.”

In a book I published in 2010, I spent a whole chapter explaining why writers should not do this, which I will summarize here in two syllables: Who cares? Such a vacuous collection of words wastes the reader’s time and, in a tight article, wastes precious space too.

My next sentences talk about that Michelin-starred restaurant cred, what Caffe Maximo means by “farm-to-you” and the impressive scores their coffees earn from expert tasters.

ChatGPT continued: “To celebrate each new venture, Caffe Maximo introduces an exclusive coffee blend, and the Redondo Beach Blend is no exception.” My version cut straight to the custom blend, without wasting space explaining that every Caffe Maximo location gets one. And note that the blend itself doesn’t make sense with the hackneyed “is no exception.” It’s the location (which ChatGPT oddly called a “venture”) that’s “no exception,” not the blend itself.

ChatGPT wraps up with an avalanche of cliches: “all within a thoughtfully designed space that seamlessly blends classic and modern elements” and “as the doors of Caffe Maximo swing open, residents and visitors alike are invited to indulge in more than just coffee — it’s an invitation to savor the essence of community, one cup at a time.”

The human beings I know would rather drink great coffee than “savor the essence of community.” But I doubt that will matter when my client starts looking at freelancer budgets.

— June Casagrande is the author of “The Joy of Syntax: A Simple Guide to All the Grammar You Know You Should Know.” She can be reached at JuneTCN@aol.com.

