

## Pelosi asks Trump to reschedule SOTU because of shutdown

By Heather Caygle and Rachael Bade

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**The House speaker is citing security concerns, but Democrats also don't want to give Trump a platform to blame them for the shutdown.**



"I suggest that we work together to determine another suitable date after government has re-opened for this address or for you to consider delivering your State of the Union address in writing to the Congress on January 29th," Nancy Pelosi wrote in a letter to President Donald Trump. | M. Scott Mahaskey/Politico

Speaker Nancy Pelosi on Wednesday asked President Donald Trump to reschedule his State of the Union address — or deliver it in writing — as long as the government remains shut down.

The president was set to give his annual speech to Congress on Jan. 29. But Pelosi said the partial shutdown has hamstrung both the U.S. Secret Service and the Department of Homeland Security, potentially harming the security planning that precedes the primetime address.

"Sadly, given the security concerns and unless government re-opens this week, I suggest that we work together to determine another suitable date after government has re-opened for this address or for you to consider delivering your State of the Union address in writing to the Congress on January 29th," Pelosi wrote in [a letter](#) to Trump. She had given the White House no notice of her plans.

She later told CNN that the address requires hundreds of people to help organize and ensure security, and many of those staffers are now furloughed. She added that Trump could give the State of the Union from the Oval Office.

A Department of Homeland Security official said that the security preparations for the speech haven't been affected by the shutdown because the "vast majority" of Secret Service agents are on the job, working without pay.

Hours after Pelosi sent her letter, the White House had still not issued a formal response to the request to postpone the speech as of Wednesday evening. White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders' office door was closed throughout much of the day and Trump did not make any public appearances. The president even signed a bill to guarantee backpay to furloughed federal workers in private away from cameras and reporters.

While Sanders and Vice President Mike Pence issued statements about the four Americans who died in an apparent terrorist attack in Syria, Trump did not comment publicly on the matter.

Privately, administration officials acknowledged that they were caught off guard by the letter and they huddled throughout the day to come up with a response. Some people close to the president argued that the cancellation of the speech could be an opportunity to find an alternative venue that would allow the president to appeal more directly to his conservative base, perhaps at the U.S.-Mexico border.

Congressional Republicans quickly blasted Pelosi's move as a partisan stunt, arguing that Democrats have walked away from shutdown talks and turned their backs on federal workers.

"It's not a security issue, it's politics and she knows it," said House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.).

Rep. Rodney Davis (R-Ill.) agreed with McCarthy, calling Pelosi's move "a slap in the face for the TSA workers, the border patrol agents and air traffic controllers and many federal employees that she and her party says they're trying to protect."

Sen. John Kennedy (R-La.) called Pelosi's letter "petty" but predicted rescinding the invitation would backfire on Democrats.

"I don't want to see it happen, but as a political matter I strongly encourage her to keep doing it," Kennedy said. "I think she must think the American people are stupid. It's petty and most people are going to see that it's petty. And I strongly encourage her. Politically, it's great for us."

Democrats scoffed at that notion as they streamed out of a closed-door meeting Wednesday morning, where Pelosi first delivered the news of her letter to Trump.

"Why do we have to be concerned about escalating the war when [Trump] is the one who every day escalates the war and started this whole thing?" asked House Progressive Caucus Co-Chair Pramila Jayapal (D-Wash.). "If anyone is escalating this, there's one guy and he is in the White House."

Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich.) said Pelosi's letter was reasonable given the added security needed for the speech, and pointed out Trump would have the option to deliver it in writing.

"The question is, how do we emphasize the urgency of getting this done. We need to reopen the government now, people are being hurt," Stabenow said. "She's trying to underscore that point."

Under the Constitution, the president is required to deliver a report on the state of the union. Up until 1913, presidents gave those updates with a written document. But ever since then, with the exception of Jimmy Carter in 1981, the address has become a yearly, in-person speech that has been televised and watched by millions of Americans.

The announcement comes as a group of bipartisan House lawmakers in the Problem Solvers Caucus is set to meet with Trump on Wednesday to discuss border security. Trump, frustrated by his inability to secure any additional money for his border wall, has tried to peel off moderate Democrats from party leaders.

But Democrats are rallying fellow members to stay together. Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer attended the closed-door caucus meeting with House Democrats just as Pelosi announced her missive to Trump. His message was to stay united in their opposition.

"Stay together, stay unified," said Rep. Ed Perlmutter (D-Conn.), summarizing Schumer's message.

Meanwhile, a bipartisan group of senators is trying to force an end to the funding impasse their own way. The group was [hurrying to finish a letter](#) to Trump indicating they would work together on a border security package if the president agrees to open the government first.

In fact, Schumer (D-N.Y.) urged House Democrats to help during the closed-door caucus meeting Wednesday by lobbying GOP senators in their home states to sign the letter. But the gambit is a long-shot — and an idea the president has previously rejected.

Pelosi made the decision to postpone Trump's address on Tuesday after consulting with Homeland Security Chairman Bennie Thompson (D-Miss.). She didn't give other Democratic and Republican leaders a heads up on the final decision, though staff and members had been chatting about the possibility for days.

There were signs that a delay to the speech would be coming: Congress was supposed to adopt a concurrent resolution setting the date for the address. Lawmakers never did, though few noticed. Additionally, a practice security walk-through for the address, scheduled for Wednesday, was canceled.

Publicly, Democrats plan to argue that the parties need to focus on addressing the shutdown, now the longest in U.S. history. They're also angry about forcing security staff to work through a major national event without being paid.

"This shutdown is ridiculous and the people tasked with protecting him and protecting us are not getting a paycheck," said Rep. Jim McGovern (D-Mass.), the House Rules Committee chair. "So it's inappropriate to carry on with business as usual."

Rep. Eric Swalwell (D-Calif.) agreed: "The individuals who are called upon to protect the Capitol... these are people who by and large are not getting paid. It takes extraordinary resources for the State of the Union, so it's really not fair to them."

Privately, some Democrats also don't want to give Trump a major platform to slam them for the shutdown when Trump's demand for billions in wall funding has been the main driver. Trump has tried to pin the blame on the shutdown on Pelosi and Schumer, but polls shows the public largely blames the president.

Given the megaphone of a State of the Union address, Trump would "blame immigrants for everything, he would blame Democrats for everything," said Jayapal. "He would have so many lies that the fact-checkers would go all night."

*Andrew Restuccia, James Arkin and Matthew Choi contributed to this report.*

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