

Bush Gets Good Grades For Speaking Techniques - But Can Still Improve

Toastmasters weigh in on President's State of the Union Speech

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By now, the political pundits and partisan spin-masters have thoroughly dissected and interpreted each piece of content in President Bush's latest State of the Union address. But there's another question to be asked about this speech -- the last one of its kind Bush is slated to deliver during his presidency.

And that question is this: How did Bush do as an orator?

Forgetting about his political message and judging the man just on the basis of his public-speaking performance, did he do an effective job of communicating to the nation?

Who better to answer that question than members of Toastmasters, the prestigious nonprofit organization dedicated to helping people master the art of speaking in front of an audience. A Toastmasters club in Santa Monica, Calif. listened to the President's talk on Monday and then critiqued it -- in much the same manner they evaluate speeches given by fellow club members each week.

Also offering his observations of Bush's oration techniques is Lance Miller, a Toastmasters International World Champion of Public Speaking in Glendale, Calif.

Despite the President's reputation for embarrassing speaking gaffes over the years, the Toastmasters said their overall impression of his talk was positive.

"Throughout both terms of President Bush's presidency, he has been criticized as an ineffectual speaker," writes the Santa Monica group in its evaluation. "Yet, his delivery of the State of the Union address ... was presidential. He was dignified, prepared, serious and determined that the citizens of the United States continue to experience the freedoms incumbent in living in this country."

Below are highlights of how the Toastmasters rated Bush's speaking performance.

On the positive side:

- Excellent eye contact! "The President spoke to the entire room and avoided concentrating on any one area," Miller writes. Of course, he also points out that it's easier to maintain strong eye contact when you have the help of Teleprompters.
- Good use of humor as a speaking strategy. Not that he'll start drawing comparisons to Jay Leno, but Bush tossed out a nifty one-liner about people who would like to see a tax increase. Feel free to pay one if you want, he said: "The IRS accepts both checks and money orders."
- He did his homework. It was clear that Bush had practiced and rehearsed this speech over and over. How do we know? Miller notes the lack of Bush's typical "thought-searching moments that lead the listener to feel like [the President] just forgot his next word."
- Strong and powerful! Bush was confident and direct in his speaking manner. His speaking pace was even and deliberate, giving the audience ample time to digest each phrase and concept. And he paused at just the right moments for dramatic effect. Also: No "ahs" or "ums" -- a common misstep made by nervous speakers.

In the "needs improvement" category:

- More teeth, less lips. Miller says the President would have been more effective if he smiled more during his talk. In addition, he licked his lips too much. Observes the Santa Monica club: "Body language can

be effective, even when standing behind a podium, through facial expressions."

- Too casual. Bush repeatedly leaned slightly with his left arm on the lectern, conveying the informal image of a college professor delivering a lecture to his class. Miller's prescription: "The President should balance his weight evenly on both legs to avoid the 'sway' behind the lectern."
- Feel the words! Bush lacked the forceful emotion that characterized the speeches of some of his presidential predecessors. "To support his views, his initiatives and his measures, the President was short on passion," said the Santa Monica members. "Rather, his delivery was evenly modulated, lacking various levels of vocal variety. Had there been more emotion to underline his programs, his vision for the wealth and health of our country would have been more persuasive."

How history will ultimately judge George W. Bush as an orator remains to be seen. But on this particular night, he did a number of good things as a speaker, say his Toastmaster evaluators. On the other hand, as every good Toastmaster knows, learning to communicate effectively in front of an audience is a never-ending education -- and Bush can still pick up a lot of tips.

Toastmasters International has spent the last 83 years helping people all over the world become more confident in front of audiences large and small. Headquartered in Rancho Santa Margarita, California, the non-profit educational association has 220,000 members in 90 countries. For more information and to find a meeting near you, visit <http://www.toastmasters.org/>.

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