

The State of the Union: What the Words Reveal

On Jan. 8, 1790, George Washington delivered his first address to the nation, now known as the annual State of the Union. He told the House and Senate from Federal Hall in New York City that he embraced the opportunity “with great satisfaction.”

Required by the Constitution in Article II, Section 3, the president was not only to provide information, but “recommend to their Consideration such Measures as he shall judge necessary and expedient.” It is the “recommend” portion that makes each speech less of a

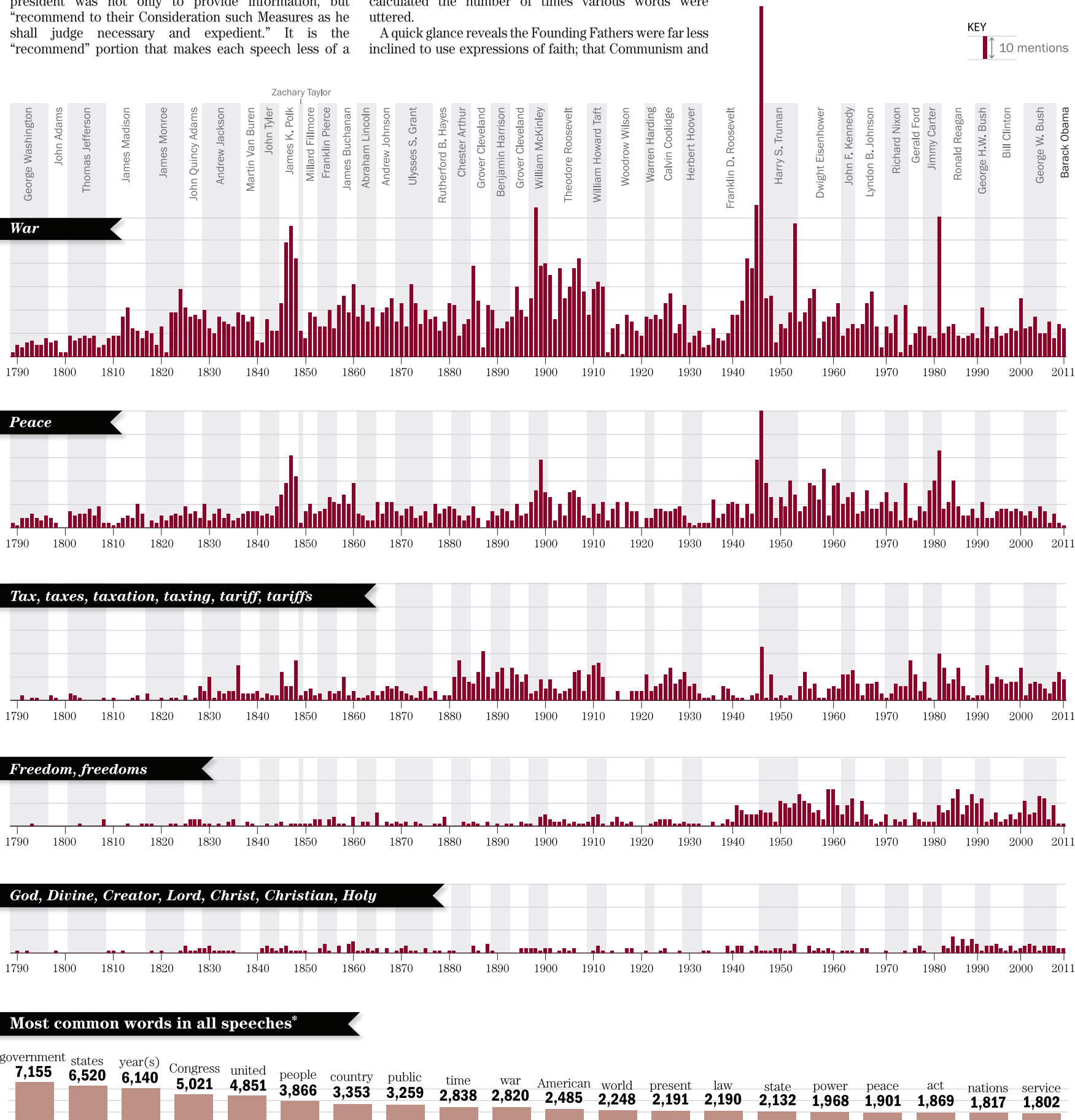
report card and more of a wish list.

Since 1790, the challenges facing the nation and the aspirations of its chief executive have shifted and evolved, as reflected by the words used in the State of the Union speeches. POLITICO analyzed all the speeches (made available by the American Presidency Project) and calculated the number of times various words were uttered.

A quick glance reveals the Founding Fathers were far less inclined to use expressions of faith; that Communism and

terrorism prompted many references to freedom; that taxes were also a hot-button issue in the Gilded Age.

But the chart also rewards careful study. Note, for example, that Lincoln made fewer references to peace with every passing year — and that Jimmy Carter, who reads the Bible every day, never mentioned God.



*Excludes pronouns, articles, conjunctions

Note: The numbering of years is not at even intervals in order to reflect the dates of speeches; in 1790, 1953 and 1961, there were two State of the Union addresses, and in 1933, 1989, 1993, 2001 and 2009, there were no official State of the Union speeches given.

TEXT OF SPEECHES COURTESY OF THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY PROJECT