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WASHINGTON (AP) _ In a strangely strained setting, President ...
 WALTER R. MEARS
 Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) _ In a strangely strained setting, President Clinton is proclaiming the State of the Union to be strong as he begins his sixth year in the White House _ but he can make no such claim about the state of his presidency.

The State of the Union address is a president's grand stage, an occasion of state, his hour to set the agenda and declare his goals before Congress, the Cabinet, diplomats and the nation. This is prime time television on his terms, unlike the TV torrent over accusations, which he denies, that he was sexually involved with a former White House intern, now 24, and attempted to cover it up.

He does not plan to speak of it in his address tonight, but there's no avoiding the impact of the Monica Lewinsky case. That led him to a remarkable finale to a routine White House ceremony on education Monday.

"I want to say one thing to the American people," Clinton said, glaring at the TV cameras and shaking a finger for emphasis. "I want you to listen to me. I'm going to say this again.

"I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss Lewinsky. I never told anybody to lie. Not a single time. Never. These allegations are false, and I need to go back to work for the American people."

That certainly sounds categorical, but given the adroitly worded denials that enabled Clinton to brush off past questions about affairs, his draft record and the marijuana he didn't inhale, there were more.

Presidential spokesman Mike McCurry said there were indeed answers yet to be provided, and that they would be at the proper point, but that Clinton left no ambiguity on the central ones: sex with an ntern and allegations that she'd been asked to lie to conceal it.

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"I think every American that heard him knows exactly what he meant," McCurry said when he was asked whether the denial covered any form of sexual contact.

Ann Lewis, the White House communications director, said flatly that it did. "Sex is sex, even in Washington, I've been assured," she said.

The aim was to get past the allegations of scandal, back to the business Clinton wants addressed, telling Congress and the nation what he wants done, and boasting in an election year of what has been done during the Democratic administration so far.

The budget deficit is the lowest in 30 years, with the first balanced budget since 1969 in prospect next year. The economy has grown for seven years without a recession, the third longest expansion in history. Both inflation and unemployment are low, and despite stress abroad, in Iraq and with the extended U.S. military mission in Bosnia, it is peacetime.

But with the barrage of questions, accusations and rumors, Clinton's prospects have dimmed for getting things done his way in an election-year with a Republican Congress.

McCurry acknowledged the obvious, that what the White House is doing "has been in something of a shadow because of this incident."

He said Clinton's major address of the year is "being given in stranger circumstances" than in the past. That includes speculation about impeachment or resignation should allegations of perjury or encouraging it be proven.

There's been nothing like this since Watergate-worn Richard Nixon declared to Congress in his 1974 State of the Union address that he had no intention of resigning. Eight months later he quit, after Republican leaders told him he could not avoid impeachment for the cover-up role proven on his own tape recordings.

In his memoirs, he quoted a memo to himself, written on New Year's Day. "Fight, because if I am forced to resign, the press will become a much too dominant force in the nation, not only in this administration but for years to come," he wrote. "Fight, because resignation would set a precedent and result in a permanent and very destructive change in our whole constitutional system."

But after a long struggle, he surrendered.

This case and these times are different. It wasn't a week before

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there was talk, and not only from the fringes, that Clinton might be forced from the White House. All hedged with an if, since there's no proof.

But all said and replayed, along with allegations that not long ago would have been X rated beyond broadcasting. And all adding to the distraction as Clinton addresses the State of the Union and his audience tries to appraise his.

EDITOR'S NOTE _ Walter R. Mears, vice president and columnist for The Associated Press, has reported on Washington and national politics for more than 30 years.

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