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November 2016 · Volume 45, Number 11

Thanksgiving and America

Melanie Kirkpatrick

Author, *Thanksgiving: The Holiday at the Heart of the American Experience*



MELANIE KIRKPATRICK is a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute. She received her A.B. from Princeton University and her M.A. from the University of Toronto. A long-time member of *The Wall Street Journal* editorial board, she is the co-editor of several editions of the *Index of Economic Freedom* and the author of two books, *Escape from North Korea: The Untold Story of Asia's Underground Railroad* and *Thanksgiving: The Holiday at the Heart of the American Experience*.

The following is adapted from a speech delivered on October 18, 2016, at Hillsdale College's Allan P. Kirby, Jr. Center for Constitutional Studies and Citizenship in Washington, D.C., as part of the AWC Family Foundation Lecture Series.

One Fourth of July in the 1980s, when I was living in Hong Kong, I read a tidbit in a local newspaper about America's Independence Day. Across the United States today, the columnist declared, families are celebrating the birth of their nation by sitting down to turkey dinners with all the trimmings.

The expatriate American community in what was then a British colony shared a chuckle over the columnist's confusion about America's national holidays. But it also set me to thinking. In some sense, the error was a natural one. A non-American could be forgiven for conflating these two home-grown American holidays. Both bind celebrants to the larger history of our nation.

Thanksgiving isn't a patriotic holiday per se, but it is full of patriotic feeling as Americans give thanks for our shared blessings as a nation. The best expression of this aspect of Thanksgiving comes from Benjamin Franklin, who called it a day "of public Felicity," a time to express gratitude to God for the "full Enjoyment of Liberty, civil and religious."

Just about every country has a national day—a holiday when citizens stop to honor their constitution or celebrate a monarch’s birthday or recall their day of liberation from colonial rule. The United States isn’t unique in celebrating its Independence Day. But Thanksgiving is something else. Only a few other countries set aside a day of thanksgiving. Most of these are harvest festivals, celebrations that trace their origins back to when life beat to the rhythm of the agricultural cycle.

America’s Thanksgiving holiday is something different. We live in a less religious age than did the Pilgrims. But it would be a mistake to claim, as some do, that Thanksgiving is not religious. It is that rarest of religious holidays, one that all religions can celebrate. The Pilgrims came to our shores seeking freedom to worship as they pleased. On Thanksgiving, Americans of all faiths—and of none—can give thanks that they found it.

Thanksgiving has grown up with the country. Many of our greatest historical figures are associated with it: George Washington, who proclaimed our first national Thanksgiving amid controversy over his constitutional power to do so—and who included in his proclamation Americans of every faith; Abraham Lincoln, who wanted to heal a war-torn nation when he called for all Americans, North and South, to mark the same day of Thanksgiving; and Franklin Roosevelt, who set off a national debate when he changed the holiday’s traditional date.

Ordinary Americans played their part too: Sarah Josepha Hale, the 19th-century magazine editor who campaigned to make Thanksgiving a national holiday; the New England Indians who boycotted Thanksgiving in the 1970s, calling it a day of mourning; and the 92nd Street Y in New York City, which recently launched Giving Tuesday, following in the long American tradition of remembering the poor and needy around Thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving says a lot about Americans. It reflects our national identity as a grateful, generous, and inclusive people. When an American takes his place at the Thanksgiving table or volunteers at a local food bank he is part of a continuum that dates back to 1621, when the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag Indians sat together for three days to share food and fellowship. The friendly coexistence between the English settlers and the Native Americans would last only a few decades longer. But that original Thanksgiving pointed the way to the diverse people we have become.

Many aspects of the holiday are of interest, including the days of thanksgiving in Florida, Texas, and Virginia that predate the more familiar one in Plymouth and compete for the title of “first”; a now almost forgotten holiday called Forefathers Day, which influenced the modern Thanksgiving; the way in which football became part of our Thanksgiving rituals; and, of course, how it came to pass that on the fourth Thursday in November most Americans sit down to the same meal of turkey, cranberries, potatoes, and pie.

Imprimis (im-pri-mis),
[Latin]: in the first place

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ISSN 0277-8432

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What I want to emphasize, though, is the aspect of the holiday that Ben Franklin particularly admired: that it is a time for expressing gratitude for the “full Enjoyment of Liberty, civil and religious.” In doing so, I’ll give an illustration from each of the centuries since America’s original Thanksgiving, from the 17th to the 21st.

There are two eyewitness accounts of the first Thanksgiving, written by Pilgrims William Bradford and Edward Winslow—although I should stipulate that the word “thanksgiving” does not appear in them. If you could travel back to 1621 and ask a Pilgrim to define “Thanksgiving Day,” his answer might surprise you. For the Pilgrims, “days of thanksgiving” were not marked by feasting, family, and fellowship—the happy hallmarks of the holiday we now celebrate—but by religious observance. They were called to express gratitude to God for specific beneficences such as successful harvests, propitious weather, or military victories. For the Pilgrims and other early immigrants to our shores, a “thanksgiving day” was set aside for prayer and worship.

From the Pilgrims’ perspective, their first Thanksgiving in New England took place two years after the event we recall as the first. It was July 1623, and the governor declared a day of thanksgiving in gratitude for rainfall that had saved their harvest. These religious days, observed in all 13 colonies, were the most direct influence on the development of Thanksgiving as we celebrate it today.

At some point in the 1600s, each New England colony began to designate annual thanksgiving days, usually in the autumn. These celebrations were deemed “general” thanksgivings—that is, they weren’t called for a specific event or blessing, but for ordinary, everyday blessings. And they were usually designated by civil authorities rather than religious ones.

Connecticut was the first colony to name a specific day of general thanksgiving—September 18, 1639—and make it an annual event. This decision was controversial and the subject of spirited theological debates. Opponents argued that an annual thanksgiving for general reasons would lead people to take God’s generosity for granted. But the idea caught on. Massachusetts was the last holdout, not following Connecticut’s lead until late in the 17th century.

Moving to the 18th century, the story of the political controversy surrounding our first Thanksgiving as a nation speaks volumes about our civil and religious freedoms.

The controversy began on September 25, 1789, in New York City, then the seat of our federal government. The venue was the inaugural session of Congress. The senators and representatives had been meeting since March 4 at Federal Hall in lower Manhattan and were about to take a well-deserved break when Representative Elias Boudinot of New Jersey rose to introduce a resolution. He asked the House to create a joint committee with the Senate to “wait upon the President of the United States, to request that he would recommend to the people of the United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer.” Boudinot made special reference to the Constitution, which had been ratified in 1788. A day of public thanksgiving, he believed, would allow Americans to express gratitude to God for the “opportunity peaceably to establish a Constitution of government for their safety and happiness.”

This resolution sparked a vigorous debate. There were two objections. The first concerned federalism. A congressman from South Carolina argued that the federal government did not have the authority to proclaim days of thanksgiving; that was among the powers left to individual state governments. “Why should the President direct the people to do what, perhaps, they have no mind to do?” he asked. “If a day of thanksgiving

must take place, let it be done by the authority of the several States.”

The South Carolinian’s second objection was that proclaiming a day of thanksgiving “is a religious matter, and, as such, is proscribed to us.” The Bill of Rights would not be ratified until 1791, but Congress had just approved the wording of the First Amendment, and the debate about the proper role of religion was fresh in everyone’s mind.

In the end, the resolution passed. It moved to the Senate, which quickly approved it, and on October 3, President Washington issued his now-famous Thanksgiving Proclamation. He designated Thursday, November 26, 1789, as “a day of public thanksgiving and prayer.” He did not *decree* a Thanksgiving. Rather, cognizant of the limits of his power, he asked that the governors of the 13 states comply with his request. He also made it clear that Thanksgiving was an inclusive holiday—not just for Christians but for Americans of every faith.

The next president to designate a day of national thanksgiving for general blessings was Lincoln in 1863. That’s not to say Americans did not celebrate Thanksgiving during the intervening years. They did. By the time of the Civil War, just about every state had established an annual day of thanksgiving. The holiday was celebrated by a day off from work, attendance at religious services, and, usually, a festive family gathering. The date was set by the individual governors, who sometimes coordinated but usually didn’t. The result was that while most states celebrated in November, a few marked the day in October or early December.

The story of how Thanksgiving became a regular national holiday is itself a classic American story of how an enterprising individual with a good idea can have an impact. In this case, a penniless young widow from New Hampshire, Sarah Josepha Hale,

rose to become the editor of the most popular magazine of her era, *Godey’s Lady’s Book*, and used that position to generate grassroots support for a national Thanksgiving.

Mrs. Hale’s genius as an editor was to focus on American topics and American authors at a time when other magazines typically reprinted articles pirated from English publications. She used every feature of her magazine—editorials, short stories, recipes—to encourage the celebration of Thanksgiving. At the same time, she conducted a letter-writing campaign to presidents, governors, congressmen, and other influential figures.

In 1863—in the midst of what is arguably the bloodiest year in American history—Lincoln, inspired by a letter from Mrs. Hale, took the extraordinary step of naming a national day of thanksgiving. He called on every American, North and South, to celebrate Thanksgiving “with one heart and one voice.” Following Washington’s example, he set Thanksgiving for the last Thursday of November. Lincoln’s 1863 proclamation was the first in an unbroken string of annual Thanksgiving proclamations by every subsequent president up to the present day. It is regarded as the beginning of our national Thanksgiving holiday.

But there remained a snag. While the overwhelming majority of governors went along in their state proclamations with the dates that Lincoln and later presidents designated, they were under no obligation to do so. The president’s proclamation had no force of law outside the District of Columbia and U.S. territories. That would require an act of Congress. For that, the country would have to wait until 1941.

In August 1939, FDR announced that he had decided to move Thanksgiving back a week—from what had by then become the traditional last Thursday of the month. The country was still in the midst of the Great Depression, and Roosevelt’s reasoning was economic. There were five Thursdays in November

that year, which meant that Thanksgiving, if celebrated on the last, would fall on the 30th and leave only 20 shopping days till Christmas. Moving the holiday to November 23 would allow Americans more time to shop and—so the President’s dubious theory went—spend more money, thus lifting the economy.

Roosevelt, usually an astute politician, made the mistake at a press conference of saying there was “nothing sacred” about the date of Thanksgiving. He might as well have suggested that roast beef replace turkey as the star of the holiday meal. His announcement was front-page news the next day, and the public outcry was swift and vociferous.

“We here in Plymouth [Massachusetts] consider the day sacred,” the town’s first selectman said. “Plymouth and Thanksgiving are almost synonymous, and merchants or no merchants I can’t see any reason for changing it.” College football coaches were apoplectic, since most colleges scheduled their football seasons, which ended on Thanksgiving weekend, well in advance. Alf Landon, FDR’s Republican opponent in 1936, compared the President to Hitler.

The date of Thanksgiving in 1939 became a political hot potato. Politicians in every state had to read public opinion, examine the local business climate, and consider political loyalties before deciding which date to endorse. In the end, 23 states chose to stick with November 30, while 22 celebrated on November 23. Three states—Texas, Mississippi, and Colorado—decided to celebrate on both days.

It wasn’t long before people started referring to November 30 as the “Republican Thanksgiving” and November 23 as the “Democratic Thanksgiving” (or as some had it, “Franksgiving”). Senator Styles Bridges of New Hampshire asked sarcastically: “Has the President given any thought to abolishing winter?”

In 1941, President Roosevelt admitted defeat and declared that Thanksgiving would return to its traditional date. Congress passed legislation fixing the date of all future Thanksgivings as the

fourth Thursday of November and FDR signed it into law.

In conclusion, I’d like to recount a personal story that gives special meaning to Ben Franklin’s characterization of Thanksgiving.

While researching my book, I met with teenagers attending Newcomer’s High School, a high school for immigrants in the borough of Queens in New York City. I led discussions in three classes about the Thanksgiving holiday, which most of the students were about to celebrate for the first time.

These high schoolers had a personal understanding of the Thanksgiving story. For them, the Pilgrim story was their story, and the Pilgrim fathers and mothers were historical reflections of themselves. The Pilgrims had been divided into two groups: those who came to the New World seeking religious freedom and those who came here seeking better lives. The same was true for these students.

A girl from Ivory Coast explained how her father had worked as a houseboy in the old country. Now, she proudly told me, he has a job with the Metropolitan Transit Authority. “My dad came here to have a better life,” she said.

A boy from Tibet, a country that hasn’t formally existed since China annexed it in 1950, explained that his family couldn’t practice the Buddhism of the Dalai Lama in China. But here in America they could do so without fear.

Talking to these students, I was reminded of the words of the late historian Samuel Eliot Morison, who called the Pilgrims “the spiritual ancestors of all Americans, whatever their stock, race, or creed.”

Shades of the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag Indians sit at every American’s Thanksgiving table, along with those of Washington, Lincoln, Sarah Josepha Hale, and others who have enriched our Thanksgiving tradition and helped to knit us together as a nation. This history, and more, is worthy of our remembrance, with grateful hearts, on every Thanksgiving Day—including this one. ■