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American Christmas, American New Year

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ON THE mezzanine floor of the Parker House Hotel in Boston hangs a mirror, still today. In the late fall of 1867, this mirror hung in the apartment at the hotel occupied by the great English novelist Charles Dickens, and he spent hours studying himself in it as he practiced for what would become immensely popular readings of his classic story, *A Christmas Carol*, which had been circulating in America for 25 years. Dickens gave his first public performance, with great success, on December 2, 1867, at the Tremont Temple in Boston. This was the same temple at which Frederick Douglass and thousands of others had waited for word of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation just a few years earlier, in the midst of the Civil War.



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After his Boston readings, Dickens traveled for months as far north as Portland, Maine, inland to Buffalo, New York, south to Washington, D.C., and always back to Boston, performing *A Christmas Carol* and other stories before enthusiastic audiences. Since that time, Americans have seen Dickens' story adapted in every medium invention can imagine, from the stage to silent films, radio, talking feature films, and animations. There is a Mickey Mouse version, a Fred Flintstone version, and a Muppet version. There have been television musicals, HBO specials, and video games accessible in cloud-based gaming libraries.

As was noted in *The New York Times* in the 1860s, "Dickens brings the old Christmas into the present out of bygone centuries and remote manor houses, into the living rooms of the very poor of today"—and over time, Dickens' Christmas became an inseparable part of American Christmas. Every year, the elderly miser Ebenezer Scrooge is transformed once again by visits, on Christmas Eve, from the ghost of his former business partner Jacob Marley and the spirits of Christmases Past, Present, and Yet to Come. Every year, Scrooge puts behind him his "Bah! Humbug!" response to Christmas and becomes as good a keeper of Christmas as any man alive and as good a man as could be found in good old London, or any other good old city, town, or borough in the good old world. And every year, Tiny Tim ends the story: "God bless Us, Every One!"

At the time of the American Founding, celebrations of Christmas in America varied widely, from Puritans and Quakers who shunned or ignored it, to other Protestant sects and Catholics who honored it in their own Christian ways, to those who spent the day in "riot and dissipation," like an ancient Roman Saturnalia. But *E Pluribus Unum*—out of many one—was the American motto on the Great Seal, and over the generations, out of many ways of celebrating or ignoring Christmas, came a recognizably American way.

Washington Irving, renowned author of *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* and *Rip Van Winkle*, contributed to this with Christmas sketches he published in 1819 describing the charms of old English Christmases, when all around is joyful, and sacred solemnity is blended with mirth and conviviality; where pious worship is joined by revelry, feasting, spiced wine, dancing, caroling, mistletoe, presents, decorations, Yule logs, and a "general call to happiness."

Irving became a special advocate for St. Nicholas and helped found the Saint Nicholas Society of the City of New York. Independently of his efforts, in 1823, the anonymously published poem "A Visit from St. Nicholas" created rhymes and images that became part of American Christmas ever after:

'Twas the night before Christmas,
when all through the house
Not a creature was stirring, not
even a mouse;
The stockings were hung by the
chimney with care,
In hopes that St. Nicholas soon
would be there. . . .
When what to my wondering eyes
should appear,
But a miniature sleigh, and eight
tiny reindeer,
With a little old driver, so lively
and quick,
I knew in a moment it must be
St. Nick.

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

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As years went by, cities grew, and commerce flourished, the private celebrations of American Christmas became more public. City, town, and village centers were decorated for the season. Department stores like Macy's and Woolworth found increasing numbers of customers shopping for Christmas gifts. They put on elaborate Christmas displays with lights, decorations, mechanical toys, and live Santas. By 1856, President Franklin Pierce put up the first Christmas tree in the White House. In 1870, President Ulysses S. Grant signed legislation declaring Christmas a federal holiday. In 1923, President Calvin Coolidge lit the first National Christmas Tree on the Ellipse.

FROM DICKENS TO *DIE HARD*, RUNNING THROUGH AND MAKING POSSIBLE ALL THESE CHARMING AND UPLIFTING STORIES THAT HAVE BECOME PART OF AMERICAN CHRISTMAS, IS THE ORIGINAL CHRISTMAS STORY, WHICH MOST AMERICANS FROM THE EARLIEST DAYS WOULD HAVE READ IN THE KING JAMES VERSION—EVEN AS LINUS DID IN THE 1965 ANIMATED CLASSIC *A CHARLIE BROWN CHRISTMAS*.

Hollywood, of course, joined in the festivities. As America was just getting started in World War II, Bing Crosby, co-starring with Fred Astaire in *Holiday Inn*, sang Irving Berlin's "White Christmas," which went on to become—and remains—the most popular record ever made. The war was no sooner over than director Frank Capra gave us the Christmas classic *It's a Wonderful Life*, in which protagonist George Bailey, in his own way, needs as much Christmas redemption as Scrooge. *Miracle on 34th Street* came out the next year—another Christmas classic. Soon Gene Autry was recording *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* and selling two million copies during its first Christmas season. Later generations would get *Home Alone* and *Die Hard*.

And from Dickens to *Die Hard*, running through and making possible all these charming and uplifting stories that have become part of American Christmas, is the original Christmas story, which most Americans from the earliest days would have read in the King James Version—even as Linus did in the 1965 animated classic *A Charlie Brown Christmas*:

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they

were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

And this *shall be* a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

New Year's Day is the morning of the year. Like the mornings of mere days it inspires fresh hope, but on an immensely grander scale. Each morning we wake, after disappearing in sleep for a split second of eternity, surprised again to find ourselves still here. Like strong coffee, the discovery is rejuvenating. Then we reflect that

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we have once again successfully spun around earth's axis; if we're at a northern latitude somewhere between Santa Fe and Cheyenne, we have traveled 20,000 miles since yesterday, just spinning from day to night and back to day. We begin to wonder at ourselves and take on small but innocent airs. When we further reflect that without batting an eye or breaking a sweat, we have rocketed over a million and a half miles in our orbit around the sun since this time a day ago, and that we are now going to start over and perform these same mysteries and miracles again in a mere 24 hours, we become almost tempted to the sin of pride; we feel that the Frenchman might have stumbled onto something when he counseled that audacity is always the right approach, unless it is more audacity that is required.

So it is every New Year's Day, but on a scale at least 365 times more inspiring. Now we reflect that just in our daily rotations, we have spun

over 7,000,000 miles since last year, and in our orbiting, we have sailed an unthinkable 568 million miles through space. Once again, astonishingly and without mishap—leaving aside the odd war, depression, or plague—we have revolved around the sun and come back to where we started, to begin anew. Winter has turned to spring, summer to fall, and back to winter. This cosmic new beginning inspires no mere quotidian optimism, but a kind of Napoleonic ambition. It's a new year with no mistakes in it! The world is ours to conquer! And this no doubt is what inspired the ancient custom of New Year's resolutions.

Often our New Year's resolutions are lighthearted, and usually, the flesh being weak, they are fleeting. Before Valentine's Day or maybe even before Epiphany, we have slipped back into our old ways. But these lighthearted resolutions reflect a deeper, more serious impulse. Inspired by the miracle of the New Year, we sense

anew, as Thomas Jefferson put it, that “Almighty God hath created the mind free,” that this freedom of the mind equips and therefore obliges us to seek the truth that we should be guided by—that all nobility, all that is worthwhile in life, depends on finding this truth and living by it, and failing to seek it with all our heart, mind, and soul is to let our lives slip through our fingers like water.

Animated by something approaching such New Year’s Day ambition, Benjamin Franklin once conceived “the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection.” Like most of us, he thought he knew well enough what was right and wrong and saw no reason why he shouldn’t be able always to do the one and avoid the other. He soon found that it was not as easy as he supposed it would be. On further reflection, it occurred to him that his effort to achieve perfection might even be what he laughingly called a kind of “foppery in morals.” Still, looking back on his efforts, he was confident that they had made him a better and a happier man than he otherwise would have been. So it is, I think, with our New Year’s resolutions. Even if we fall short, we are better men and women for having resolved to try.

“Resolution,” in fact, was one of the virtues Franklin listed among a dozen others he aspired to acquire in his effort to achieve moral perfection. He defined resolution this way: “Resolve to perform what you ought. Perform without fail what you resolve.” It was precisely this that he found most hard to do. And failing at this, of course, he could not succeed in achieving temperance, justice, moderation, or any of the other virtues he put on his aspirational list. Not even humility. Resolution seemed to be the key.

In his epistle to the Romans, St. Paul described what Franklin experienced and what we annually experience with our New Year’s resolutions: “[T]he good

that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do.”

Shakespeare’s Hamlet assessed the problem memorably from another angle, reflecting how

the native hue of resolution
Is sickled o’er with the pale cast
of thought,
And enterprises of great pith and
moment . . .
their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action.

When he was a relatively unknown lawyer in Illinois in his early 30s, Abraham Lincoln wrote a letter to his good friend Joshua Speed, showing that he had experienced what Franklin, St. Paul, and Hamlet had experienced:

I must regain my confidence
in my own ability to keep my
resolves when they are made.
In that ability, you know, I once
prided myself as the only, or at
least the chief, gem of my char-
acter; that gem I lost—how, and
when, you too well know. I have
not yet regained it; and until I do,
I can not trust myself in any mat-
ter of much importance.

Franklin was not wrong to aspire, however imperfectly, to be a man whose resolves are what they ought to be and who keeps his resolves. Such a man is worthy of complete trust. Lincoln was hesitant to trust himself in any matter of much importance until he knew he was such a man. And he became one; so that, in the greatest crisis of his country, he could with utter rectitude invite a whole people to join him and “highly resolve . . . that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” His example, which he learned from the original American revolutionaries, gives us eternal reason

to hope that, though the flesh is weak, we might yet ourselves succeed in living up to the most needful New Year's resolution, and highly resolve to live "with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right."

On New Year's Day 1863, after a sleepless night and three hours of shaking hands at a New Year's reception in the White House, President Lincoln returned to his office to sign the document he had promised 100 days before. On September 22, Lincoln had proclaimed "That on the first day of January, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State, the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free." Now the day had come.

Allen Guelzo tells the story in his fine book, *Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation*. As Lincoln prepared to sign the historic document, at first his hand was trembling so much from all the handshaking that he couldn't do it. He told those present, "I never in my life, felt more certain that I was doing right than I do in signing this paper. . . . If my name ever goes into history it will be for this act, and my whole soul is in it. If my hand trembles when I sign the Proclamation, all who examine the document hereafter will say, 'He hesitated.'" When his hand recovered its steadiness, he wrote out his full name, as he did only for state documents. Then he smiled and said, "That will do."

The Proclamation was the cause of great jubilation among many abolitionists, black and white. In Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Chicago, and other cities, salutes of 100 cannon were fired on New Year's Day. In Tremont Temple in Boston, Frederick Douglass spoke to a mostly black crowd of 3,000. When the Proclamation was read aloud, "the joyous enthusiasm manifested was beyond

description . . . the whole audience rising to their feet . . . shouting at the tops of their voices, throwing up their hats." But the jubilation was far from universal.

Many—not just in the South—condemned the Proclamation as the act of a dictator. The newly elected Democratic Governor of New York denounced it as a "bloody, barbarous, revolutionary, and unconstitutional scheme." There was talk that the people of the West would withdraw from a war they had entered for the sake of Union and which Lincoln had turned into an anti-slavery crusade. Many feared that Union armies would mutiny. The border states, on which Lincoln depended desperately, worried that the Proclamation would send tens of thousands of escaped slaves pouring across their borders.

No one understood the political vulnerabilities of the Proclamation better than Lincoln. Following his September announcement, the Democratic Party declared political war on emancipation and spoke of the Proclamation as the death knell of the Republican Party. On the other side, the radical Republicans were furious that Lincoln hadn't made emancipation universal and immediate, and they threatened to cut off funding for the war.

Lincoln also understood better than anyone the constitutional challenge to emancipation. He took the greatest care to draft the Proclamation in terms that could be defended before the highest court in the land, and he knew well that it was vulnerable to a hostile or even a merely scrupulous Court. On New Year's Day, in the reception just before signing the Proclamation, he had shaken the hand of Supreme Court Chief Justice Roger Taney, before whose Court emancipation would certainly not be safe.

In any case, Lincoln was keenly aware that it was far from certain he



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would win a second term as president, and his successor would in all likelihood be a foe of emancipation. Even if he won a second term, it was by no means certain that the Union would win the war. Failure to win would certainly put an end to emancipation. And even if the Union did win, when the war was over, what standing would the Proclamation have, given that Lincoln had felt constitutionally constrained to issue it as a matter of military necessity? Constitutionally and politically, the Emancipation Proclamation was a profound mixture of a great statesman's goodness, caution, and daring.

As it turned out, Lincoln did win a second term and the Union did win the

war. And so, in the last weeks of his life, he “left no means unapplied” to getting the Thirteenth Amendment, abolishing slavery, approved by Congress. A constitutional amendment, he said, would be “a King’s cure for all the evils. It winds the whole thing up.” He did not live to see the Thirteenth Amendment ratified. But this was the consummation, the completion, of the Proclamation he had signed on New Year’s Day two years before—the Proclamation he called “my greatest and most enduring contribution to the history of the war . . . the central act of my administration, and the great event of the 19th century.”

Merry Christmas America, and Happy New Year! ■