

## NO THANKS

As its prayerful name announces, Thanksgiving Day involves the bending of knees. To whom, after all, would celebrants give thanks if not to “Him”? In what became the United States, residents of Plymouth in the Massachusetts colony headed by Governor William Bradford initiated the tradition in 1621, at least according to the conventional account. Historians have questioned whether Plymouth really was the site of the first Thanksgiving, whether the date is accurate, and whether early colonial events were not more akin to carnivals with feasts than holy days with formal services. Regardless of when, where or how they did so, the grateful didn’t thank goodness or luck; they thanked God.

The date for collectively acting on this religious impulse remained unsettled for the next couple of centuries. All the colonies gave thanks simultaneously for the first time during the Revolutionary War in October 1776. Congress designated December 18 as the day for doing so the following year. Thanksgiving Days occurred on various dates of state governors’ choosing until the Civil War, when Abraham Lincoln decided a president “had as good a right to thank God as a Governor.” His October 3, 1863, Thanksgiving Day Proclamation, which transformed what had been a patchwork of regional festivals held at different times of year into a uniform national holiday, explicitly invokes devotion to a deity by calling on citizens “in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next as a day of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the heavens.”

American Thanksgiving Day from the start also mixed worldly stuff with its sacred ingredients. Unlike holidays with scriptural bases, such as Easter, it relies on mythical tales about the founding and development of the United States, schoolhouse stories of pilgrims appreciatively receiving the blessing God bestowed on their colonial project and, implicitly at least, on the nation that grew out of it. The popular imagery involving black-clad, log cabin-dwelling pilgrims with buckles on their shoes sitting down to a meal with corn on the cob and cranberries – none of that has any historical basis. Pilgrims and Puritans – which are not the same things – may have both migrated to America for religious reasons, but whether they ate turkey on the first Thanksgiving, wherever and whenever that took place, remains unknown. Indeed, days of thanksgiving actually predated the trip across the ocean from England to what became Massachusetts. In the 1500s, Puritans, opposed to the numerous Catholic holidays cluttering the calendar, including Easter and Christmas, initiated the practice of instead holding days of thanksgiving in response to what they perceived as special blessings from God. The first American Thanksgiving of legend probably was one of these days, held because of a good harvest.

Thanks-givers may have always acknowledged what Lincoln calls “the everwatchful providence of almighty God,” but they did so for specific incidents of beneficence received – or desperately sought. “Through all stages of historic development feasts were linked to moments of crisis, of breaking points in the cycle of nature or in the life of society or man,” literary philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin writes in *Rabelais and His World* (1965). “Moments of death and

revival, of change and renewal always led to a festive perception of the world.” Plymouth colonists may have started the ritual routine (perhaps in the summer of 1623) because a lengthy drought finally ended. Nearly two and half centuries later, the president recruited God to the side of the Union forces in the Civil War. Lincoln commended to His care “all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged.” He also “fervently implore[d] the interposition of the almighty hand to heal the wounds of the nation, and to restore it, as soon as may be consistent with Divine purposes, to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility, and union.” He repeated these same sentiments in his second inaugural address, as historian Doris Kearns Goodwin notes in *Team of Rivals* (2005). Lincoln may not have been the most devout of presidents. As an adult he never joined a congregation. His former law partner, William Herndon, called him a rationalist with no taste for the supernatural and doubts about the immortality of the soul. Nonetheless, the document he signed says what it says (and that second inaugural address does contain many biblical references, reflecting either a late-in-life turn to sincere religiosity or politically calculated hypocrisy).

Of course, for many Thanksgiving proponents, the day isn't about politics or providence; it's about poultry. It is a feast, after all. In *Pudd'nhead Wilson* (1894), Mark Twain writes of Thanksgiving Day: “Let all give humble, hearty, and sincere thanks, now, but the turkeys.” While this lacks Twain's usual incisive wit, it implies that just a few decades after Lincoln set the date, Americans thought mainly about the meal. “Gratitude and treachery are merely the two extremities of the same procession,” Twain writes in the same novel. “You have seen all of it that is worth staying for when the band and the gaudy officials have gone by.” Hungry Revolutionary Warriors might have noticed the same connection. On the eve of their march to Valley Forge to set up winter quarters, George Washington's ill-provisioned troops wondered why they should feel thankful as directed. One soldier wrote in his diary: “this being the third day we have been without flour or bread – & are living on a high uncultivated hill, in huts & tents lying on the cold ground, upon the whole I think all we have to be thankful for is that we are alive & not in the grave.” In a late story, “Hunting the Deceitful Turkey” (1906), Twain says the fowl is born both with a bone that makes a perfect hunter's bird-call and a talent for tricking pursuers and getting itself out of trouble. As an emblem of “Nature's treacheries,” it's a suitable dish for Thanksgiving Day, when some enjoy a grand feast while others get only a taunting reminder of want.

The war to establish rather than preserve the nation gave rise not only to famished Thanksgiving Day questioners; it also initiated a different holiday of appreciation, albeit a local one. “For more than a century,” biographer Ron Chernow says in *Alexander Hamilton* (2004), “November 25, 1783, was commemorated in New York City as Evacuation Day, the blessed end to seven years of British rule and martial law.” Of course, there had been more than seven years of British rule if one considers the years prior to the Revolutionary War, but in September 1776 the British army made its headquarters in New York. During the occupation, the city was ravaged by a massive fire and thousands of revolutionary soldiers and supporters were held in prison ships. So the conflict's conclusion (“blessed” or otherwise) and the departure of redcoats warranted special notice there. According to a *Harpers New Monthly Magazine* article on Evacuation Day's centenary, on the actual day in 1783, American soldiers tried to raise the Stars and Stripes after the Union Jack had been taken down at Fort George in lower Manhattan only to

find that the British had taken the rope and tackle along with their flag and had also greased the flagpole. Undeterred, a resourceful young soldier equipped himself with cleats and nails and managed to work his way up the pole, install new halyards and raise the flag. The image of that event came to symbolize the day and its resonant secular significance: a successful fight for liberty.

Before the more spiritual holiday displaced it from the calendar, no-nonsense Evacuation Day marked change and renewal – the death of one type of society and the birth of a new one – with a refreshing freedom from theological overtones. It suggested the realization of just the sort of republic envisioned by Thomas Paine, who contributed to both the U.S. and the French Revolutions: one subservient to neither gods nor kings. At the 1883 centennial celebration, New York Mayor Franklin Edson, confident of the holiday’s sustaining resonance, said it should be honored by all people who “found upon these shores a refuge from exactions and acts of oppression by ruler of foreign countries.”

During the decade I lived in the city, I mentioned Evacuation Day to acquaintances, including many lifelong New Yorkers, and not one had ever even heard of it. Possible explanations for Evacuation Day’s demise immediately present themselves. Perhaps the very specificity of the defunct day’s reason for being – troops leaving the city – undermined its ability to endure. Even though Lincoln in 1863 envisioned Thanksgiving Day on the day he selected as a one-time, morale-boosting, war-time event, it ended up recurring annually on the last Thursday of November because the holiday’s broadness – its call to reflect on whatever one might feel grateful for – allowed it to adapt and persist. With the Fourth of July recognized as the annual celebration of independence, Evacuation Day could be considered redundant. When, during World War I, the United States and Britain joined forces as allies, cheering the long-in-the-past end of British occupation came to seem unseemly, if not irrelevant. However, if banks and other businesses can close for days connected with both the birth and the death of one religion’s messiah, then I see nothing wrong with holidays marking both the start and the end of the Revolutionary War. (One of the better aphorisms from Pudd’nhead Wilson’s calendar concerns Independence Day: “Statistics show that we lose more fools on this day than in all the other days of the year put together. This proves, by the number left in stock, that one Fourth of July per year is now inadequate, the country has grown so.”) Besides, glorifying the end of hostilities, rather than their commencement, gave Evacuation Day an especially upbeat tone.

Still, the war angle, I suspect, could be an issue for some. The forgotten regional November holiday ties directly to the fighting that formally concluded in the interval between the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. The undiminished national holiday connects meaningfully to the Civil War, but this bit of history, apparently, can easily be ignored.

Indeed, most Americans do overlook it. After all, Thanksgiving is popularly associated with events that predate the War Between the States. Secessionists and unionists just do not factor into it. Instead, it’s about pilgrims fleeing religious persecution and friendly Indians welcoming them to a new land and sharing its bounty. Unless it’s about imperialism and genocide. Differences of opinion exist on that score. If you put forth the interpretation less amenable to children’s pageants involving elaborate, old-fashioned headwear, the one that

touches on the dishonorable treatment of the native population that lived in what became the United States, then you are likely to be dismissed as some sort of crank, or so I have found.

Focusing on Thanksgiving Day's religiosity – either to endorse it or to explain an aversion to the holiday – can also raise eyebrows among the go-with-the-flow set. In an essay about “religiously minded supporters of Thanksgiving” and their efforts to amplify the day's spirituality, Andrew Santella wonders: “Do we really have to choose between the extremes of calling Thanksgiving a religious holiday or a civic celebration, a day more like Easter or more like the Fourth of July? Or can't we assume that the holiday has evolved as some more subtle mix of the secular and the spiritual, one that each of us can adjust according to our own values?” This sort of it-means-whatever-I-want-it-to-mean attitude might accord with most Americans' actual observations of Thanksgiving (and some other holidays), but it doesn't sit well with me. If, as Santella writes in *Slate*, “expressing gratitude for the good things in life is in some sense an inherently spiritual act,” then Thanksgiving is in a very definite sense a religious holiday.

As someone who sees no evidence of Lincoln's “most high God, who while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy” or the divine plan that permits both “fruitful fields” and “the waste that has been made in the camp, the siege, and the battlefield,” I have no use for a government-sanctioned call to devotion. Memorializing vanquished soldiers' departure from a land that revolted against monarchy and started down the road to democracy appeals to me in a way that thanking “our beneficent Father,” whether for a bountiful harvest or for presumed intervention in military campaigns, does not. Something in me rebels against observing religious holidays, even diluted, indeterminate, supposedly “evolved” ones. Instead of thanking God (or even “goodness,” as some euphemistically call him), I prefer celebrating independence. This, I hasten to add, can be done at Evacuation Day feasts featuring turkeys, Benjamin Franklin's preferred choice for the national bird.