

SHOULD WE CELEBRATE THANKSGIVING?

15 Minutes of Freedom by Aaron Ferguson

Thanksgiving was intended to unite Americans, but today it is used to divide us. What happened?

The Origin of Thanksgiving

What comes to mind when you think of Thanksgiving? Probably family and food, and many other things for which you are grateful. But what about plunder, genocide, and colonialism? Probably not. However, this beloved holiday has been hijacked to become something that was never intended. There is “a war” on Thanksgiving.

In his article entitled, “War on Thanksgiving,” Jonathan Beecher Field of the Boston Review provides this brief origin of the holiday.¹

The first Thanksgiving took place in Plymouth colony (Massachusetts) in the autumn of 1621. The Separatist Puritan settlers of Plymouth, known as the Pilgrims, held a feast after their first harvest, as a way of *thanking God for His blessings*. Invited to their observance were members of the neighboring Wampanoag tribe.

In his 1623 Thanksgiving proclamation, Pilgrim Governor William Bradford wrote, “Now I, your magistrate, do proclaim that all ye Pilgrims, with your wives and ye little ones, do gather at ye meeting house, on ye hill..., there to listen to ye pastor and *render thanksgiving to Almighty God for all His blessings.*”

However, Thanksgiving did not become an annual event. Rather, residents of Plymouth and the other colonies held days of thanksgiving over the years, at different times of the year, for a variety of reasons. During the American Revolution, the practice continued. Colonial legislatures set aside days of prayer to recognize military victories against the British army. The Continental Congress supported similar thanksgiving proclamations through 1784.

Then, as the first U.S. President, George Washington issued a proclamation in 1789, designating Thursday, November 26, as a National Day of Thanks. In his

proclamation, Washington declared that the necessity for such a day sprung from *the Almighty’s care* of Americans prior to the Revolution, assistance to them in achieving independence, and help in establishing our constitutional government.

Later Presidents declared days of thanksgiving. But it was not until 1863 that Abraham Lincoln initiated a regular observance of Thanksgiving. Lincoln proclaimed, “These bounties are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come... *They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins (referring to the Civil War), hath nevertheless remembered mercy.*”

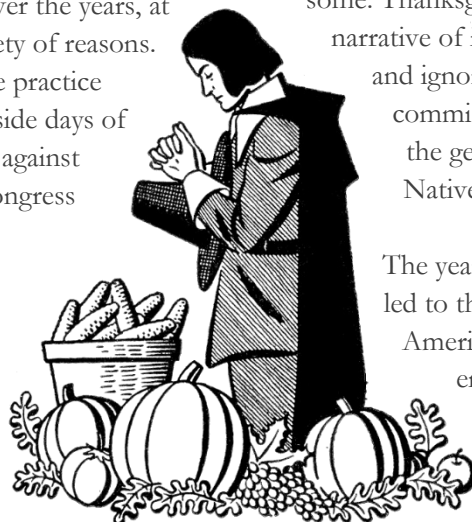
Lincoln continued, “It has seemed fit and proper that they (God’s gracious gifts) should be solemnly, reverently, and gratefully acknowledged, as with one heart and one voice, by the whole American people. I do therefore invite my fellow-citizens in every part of the United States... to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November as *a day of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father* who dwelleth in the heavens... *to fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty hand* to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it, as soon as may be consistent with the divine purposes, to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility, and union.”²

From the beginning, Thanksgiving has been about gratitude for God’s blessings. It was intended to be an occasion for unity, peace, and goodwill, attributes which all nations need and for which all people long.

A Day of Mourning

However, Thanksgiving has a dark history, according to some. Thanksgiving is when the nation “teaches a false narrative of its beginnings. It perpetuates colonialism and ignores more than 400 years of atrocities committed against Native Americans. It disregards the genocide, land theft, and brutality that all Native peoples experience.”³

The years that followed the arrival of the *Mayflower* led to the unprecedented mass killing of Native Americans, the seizing of their lands, and the enslavement of their people. For the descendants of those who survived, it is not a thanksgiving, but rather it is a National Day of Mourning.⁴



In 1970, Wamsutta (Frank) James, the leader of the Wampanoag tribe (the people of Massasoit, pictured below), was invited to the 350th Anniversary of the *Mayflower's* arrival. He was asked to give a speech to mark the occasion, but one of the organizers requested to read the speech beforehand, to check its content.⁵

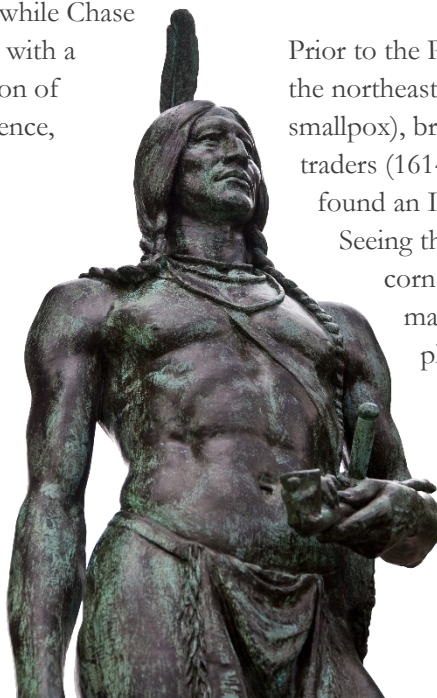
James had written a scathing indictment of the Pilgrims. The speech was deemed inappropriate and inflammatory. Though “uninvited” from the program, James gave his speech on Cole’s Hill in Plymouth, next to Massasoit. This event became the first National Day of Mourning.⁶

In 1998, a plaque was placed near Massasoit’s statue, commemorating the National Day of Mourning (which is on Thanksgiving). The plaque says, “Many Native Americans do not celebrate the arrival of the Pilgrims... To them, Thanksgiving Day is a reminder of the genocide of millions of their people, the theft of their lands, and the relentless assault on their cultures...”⁷

Today, Massasoit is viewed by many Indigenous people, even by some of the Wampanoag, as a traitor. What was his crime? He signed a peace treaty with the Pilgrims that lasted 50 years. James wrote, “This action was perhaps our biggest mistake. We, the Wampanoag, welcomed you, the white man, with open arms, little knowing that it was the beginning of the end.”⁸ Evidently, Massasoit and the Pilgrims are to blame for all that took place after them, even though they modeled a long and peaceful union.

In an article by *The Nation* (2023), Sean Sherman argues that we need to decolonize Thanksgiving, while Chase Iron Eyes calls for replacing Thanksgiving with a “Truthsgiving.”⁹ Why? The sanitized version of Thanksgiving neglects to mention the violence, land theft, and decimation of Indigenous populations.¹⁰

Peter Mancall of *Time* wrote a piece in 2021, in which he concludes, “In the face of such horrors, the legend of a feast in a small colonial town hardly seems the most important story we should be telling about America’s 17th century. We might do well to separate Thanksgiving from a reassuring story that masks the terrible violence Native communities suffered in an era of conquest and colonization.”¹¹



The Story That Needs to Be Told

Mancall’s words are insightful for two reasons. First, notice that he suggests that we “separate Thanksgiving from the terrible violence that Native communities suffered” during that era, which is, surprisingly, the right perspective. The Pilgrims, who befriended the Wampanoag people, were not responsible for the suffering but, somehow, they are indicted for it. Thus, Thanksgiving’s origin is soiled.

Second, Mancall trivializes what took place in Plymouth, as a “legend of a feast in a small colonial town.” That says it all, what Americans think of our heritage today. Isn’t Thanksgiving just a legend, a celebratory meal? What took place in Plymouth might be considered legendary (meaning outstanding), but it’s not a legend. A legend is an unbelievable, unauthentic narrative. Though the Pilgrim story is incredible, it is also authentic and true.

In a country with no religious liberty, the Pilgrims had the courage to separate from the Church of England and face the wrath and persecution of King and countrymen. They believed that all people had a right to worship God according to conscience. As a result, they became outlaws and sought refuge in Holland (1608), then America (1620).

Against all odds, the Pilgrims put their faith in God to show them the way, to provide for their needs, and to protect them from harm. He proved faithful every day. The group of 102 endured an arduous trek across the Atlantic, surviving contemptuous sailors, furious storms, continuous seasickness, and a damaged ship, only to be rerouted by weather from Virginia to Massachusetts.

Prior to the Pilgrims’ arrival (1620), many of the tribes in the northeast were decimated by disease (probably smallpox), brought about by European explorers and traders (1614). Thus, when the Pilgrims arrived, they found an Indian village (Patuxet) with no inhabitants.

Seeing that the area was empty and finding caches of corn and sources of fresh water, the Pilgrims made themselves at home and began to build a plantation called Plymouth. They didn’t steal any land, and they made an oath to pay back whatever corn they borrowed.

The Pilgrims were a peaceful people, looking for a place where they could be free to govern themselves and to build a Christian commonwealth. They were not looking to conquer or kill anyone.

Throughout the first winter, a great sickness fell upon the Pilgrims, and half of them died. They buried their dead at night, without markers, so that local tribes would not know how many of them had fallen. In the spring, a Native named Samoset boldly walked into Plymouth. He told the Pilgrims of another Indian who spoke better English than he did. Soon, Samoset returned with Squanto.

Squanto had been taken captive several years earlier and sold into slavery in Spain. After he escaped, he made his way to England, learned the language, and eventually made his way back home (Patuxet). However, upon his return, he discovered that his entire tribe had died from disease. After living with the Wampanoag for a while, he returned home to live with the Pilgrims.

In the spring of 1621, the Pilgrims began to farm. Squanto, whom Governor Bradford noted was a godsend, showed them how to survive in the New World. He also mediated a friendship between the Pilgrims and Massasoit, the local sachem or chief. Soon, they made a covenant of peace. The Pilgrims viewed the Wampanoag as equals, and they lived peacefully as neighbors. Thus, they kept their word and respected the covenant.

With Squanto's help, the Pilgrims survived and flourished. To commemorate the occasion, they held a celebration feast in the fall of 1621. The 53 remaining Pilgrims joined with Squanto, Massasoit, and 90 natives for a three-day event. This peaceful gathering was the first Thanksgiving. The Pilgrims' intent was to recognize how God had blessed them in the New World. He had been faithful to provide for and protect them.

Having braved the oceans "for the glory of God and advancement of the Christian faith," the Pilgrims were the first people to form a self-governing Christian republic under the Mayflower Compact.¹² God also used the Pilgrims to plant the seeds of the gospel in New England. In time, those seeds grew into a great nation.

The Hidden Agenda

The fact that the gospel is at the heart of America's origins explains the attack on Thanksgiving. We have a spiritual enemy who hates our Christian heritage. The Pilgrims sought to honor the Lord, so any attempt to diminish their story, or their contribution, is an attempt to ignore or abolish our Christian foundation. That's the hidden agenda behind those who desecrate Thanksgiving — the destruction of what God did here.

Those who hate America and want to see her ruined claim that our entire history is evil, built on conquest, genocide, and discrimination. They desire for Americans to hate their country and call for it to be dismantled. These enemies will use whatever tactics they can to achieve their goal, even call into question a wholesome holiday.

Take Howard Zinn, for example, the Marxist professor who, since 1980, has sold Americans a bogus history of its origins. In his book *A People's History of the United States*, Zinn avoids the details of colonial development, but instead characterizes the situation crudely. In his account, colonists, who were unable to enslave the Indians and unable to live with them, decided to exterminate them.¹³

The attack on Thanksgiving is another chapter in the long line of attempts to secularize our nation's beginning, to ignore our Christian heritage, and to create a sense of guilt, in order to execute a political agenda. If America's story is painted in a negative hue, omitting its unique place in the world, then citizens will defer to whatever new story is put in its place. Thus, the Marxist axiom is proven true, "A people without a heritage are easily manipulated."

In an article for the Daily Beast, Matt Lewis wrote, "The war on Thanksgiving is America at its worst. A nation that can't honestly tell its own story, and find nobility in it, is a nation without a future. I'm not sure that a country which doesn't believe in its own noble narrative can survive."¹⁴

One of the side-effects of this revisionism is ingratitude. Duke Pesta of the New American magazine agrees. "Being grateful for your nation is now considered toxic nationalism and racist," he says. "Kids today are not taught to love their country, be thankful for America, or to value what we have here. We should not be surprised that this generation wants to ruin the country. By not teaching them gratefulness, we are naturally teaching them ungratefulness."¹⁵

Pesta continues, "Gratitude is necessary for civilization to survive. How can you improve your country if you have nothing to be grateful for? When national gratitude goes away, destruction is right around the corner."¹⁶



Moving Forward

By observing a day of thanksgiving, Americans are not celebrating colonialism, conquest, or genocide; neither are we purposefully ignoring the unjust crimes that were perpetrated by both sides throughout American history. There have been a great many wrongs committed, all of which are a foul stain on our national story.

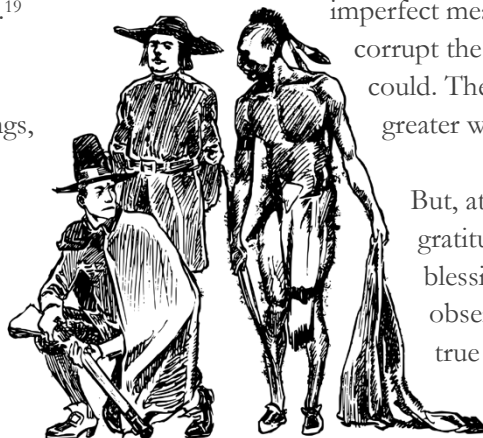
We should honor and celebrate our Native American heritage, and perhaps even institute Indigenous People's Day, but that is another issue. To replace Thanksgiving with a Day of Mourning is to neglect an instance and a model of peace and goodwill; and to say that we must choose one or the other is unfair, which is the tension that America's enemies want us to feel. That tension destroys our patriotism.

But what are we to do with our national story? How do we retell our faults and redeem our failures? First, we must never hide the truth of our past, no matter how vile. Second, we must acknowledge the failures of our past, no matter how painful; and third, we must be willing to work together going forward, no matter how difficult.¹⁷

As Christians, we should apply the gospel to our past, present, and future. First, we should call the abominations of our past what they are — sin. Sinful, selfish, prideful, greedy people did terrible things to others. None of it was biblical, Christian, moral, or kind. All of it was evil.¹⁸

As Christians, we must not ignore the wrongs of the past. They are numerous, terrible, and heart-breaking. The pride, greed, prejudice, and self-supremacy of preceding generations were ungodly and damaging. While there is much good in our past, it cannot be denied that Satan sowed seeds of weeds. At times, it is difficult to see “the wheat for all of the tares” (*Matt. 13:25*). The demons of our past still haunt us today. This is true whether we have been beneficiaries or victims of this sin.¹⁹

But we live in the present. We cannot change the past or rights its many wrongs, though we wish that we could. Neither can we judge previous generations without first judging ourselves. The same pride, greed, prejudice, and self-supremacy exist in our hearts today.²⁰



Since the problem is sin, then Christ is the solution. In Christ, we are “new creatures. The old passes away, and all things are made new” (*2 Cor. 5:17*). The Lord empowers us with His Spirit to live in a way that glorifies Him and edifies others. Our minds are renewed to think and act more like Christ (*Eph. 4:22-24*), and we are able to “walk in humility, gentleness, and patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve unity in the bond of peace” (*Eph. 4:13*).²¹

When we view others through the lens of the gospel, we will recognize that all people are equal image-bearers of God, with inherent dignity and value. We will “love our neighbor as ourselves” (*Mk. 12:31*) and “treat them the way we want to be treated” (*Lk. 6:31*). We will “take the log out of our own eye before we notice the speck in others’ eyes” (*Matt. 7:1-5*).²²

Finally, as we look to the future, we must commit to being part of the healing process. We do that by promoting and celebrating unity with diversity. For “Christ is our peace, and He made all groups into one by breaking down the barrier and abolishing the hostility” (*Eph. 2:14, 15; Gal. 3:28*). Christ brings together people of all colors, social status, political parties, giftings, nationalities, and ethnicities, and makes them one in Him (*Eph. 4:4-6*). We must not focus on those things that divide us (as Marxism does); rather we must focus on those that unite us — a common Savior and a common mission.²³

God's plan from the beginning was to redeem fallen men through Christ (*Gen. 3:15*). However, Satan has used every trick in his arsenal to hinder God's plan and to keep people from the knowledge of Christ. For example, God loved Native Americans, and He desired for them to know Him and His Messiah, but how would He get His message to them? How would they hear of the glorious news of salvation? He would have to use imperfect men and imperfect means; and Satan, of course, would further corrupt the means and disrupt the message as best he could. The result was a mixed bag of great good and greater wrong.²⁴

But, at least, Thanksgiving promotes unity and gratitude, giving thanks to God for His many blessings, an important tradition for a nation to observe. This Thanksgiving, take time to tell the true story of what God did among the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag. Then, take time to thank Him for what He's done for you.

¹ “Is There a War on Thanksgiving? - Boston Review.” 2023. Boston Review. November 21, 2023. <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/jonathan-beecher-field-war-on-thanksgiving/>.

² “George Washington’s Mount Vernon.” 2024. George Washington’s Mount Vernon. Mount Vernon. 2024. <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/thanksgiving>.

³ Citizen Potawatomi Nation. 2020. “The True, Dark History of Thanksgiving.” Potawatomi.org. November 25, 2020. <https://www.potawatomi.org/blog/2020/11/25/the-true-dark-history-of-thanksgiving/>.

⁴ “The Story of Thanksgiving and the National Day of Mourning.” n.d. Mayflower. <https://www.mayflower400uk.org/education/who-were-the-pilgrims/2019/july/the-story-of-thanksgiving-and-the-national-day-of-mourning/>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ “National Day of Mourning Monument (1998).” n.d. Plimoth Patuxet Museums. <https://plimoth.org/yath/unit-5/national-day-of-mourning-monument-1998>.

⁸ “Suppressed Speech - U.A.I.N.E.” n.d. [www.uaine.org](http://www.uaine.org/suppressed_speech.htm). http://www.uaine.org/suppressed_speech.htm.

⁹ Sherman, Sean, and Chase Iron Eyes. 2023. “Should America Keep Celebrating Thanksgiving?” www.thenation.com. November 20, 2023. <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/thanksgiving-debate/>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Mancall, Peter C. 2021. “The ‘First Thanksgiving’ Story Covers up the All Too Real Violence in Early America.” *Time*. November 24, 2021. <https://time.com/6123111/first-thanksgiving-story-covers-up-real-violence/>.

¹² Mayflower Compact — MayflowerHistory.com. 2014. “MayflowerHistory.com.” MayflowerHistory.com. 2014. <http://mayflowerhistory.com/mayflower-compact>.

¹³ Graber, Mary. 2019. *Debunking Howard Zinn : Exposing the Fake History That Turned a Generation against America*. Washington, Dc: Regnery History.

¹⁴ Lewis, Matt. 2021. “The War on Thanksgiving Is America at Its Worst.” *The Daily Beast*. November 25, 2021. <https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-war-on-thanksgiving-is-america-at-its-worst/>.

¹⁵ TNA Video. 2019. “Attack on Thanksgiving | Duke’s Take.” *The New American*. December 2, 2019. <https://thenewamerican.com/video/attack-on-thanksgiving-dukes-take/>.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ *The Liberty Pyramid*, Aaron Ferguson, 2020.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

