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# Thanksgiving

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## Thanksgiving

### Who made Thanksgiving a national holiday?

It was a president -- or rather two presidents -- who made Thanksgiving a national holiday. But as most schoolchildren learn, the Thanksgiving story on which the holiday is based goes back further than any president. The so-called first Thanksgiving of 1621 recalls Governor William Bradford and fellow Pilgrims gathering in gratitude with Squanto, Massasoit, and other Native Americans whose harvest would provide enough food for the coming winter.



This hallowed tale has many grains of truth, to be sure, but the English harvest feast that came to be known as Thanksgiving actually has a more complex history. In the first place, the Virginia colonists at Jamestown were setting aside days of Thanksgiving and Praise more than a decade before the Pilgrims in Massachusetts Bay Colony were. Second, the Thanksgiving of children's books bears little resemblance to the harvest celebration that actually took place among Wampanoag Indians and English colonists. For a better understanding of the real deal, tour Plimoth Plantation outside Plymouth, Massachusetts, or visit the website at <http://www.plimoth.org/visit/what/exhibit.asp>.

Carolyn Freeman Travers of Plimoth Plantation summarizes the early history of American thanksgivings: "Over the 17th century, Plymouth Colony held many of these special [[Thanksgiving] observances as circumstances required. Beginning in the 1680s, officials called for public thanksgiving and fast days 'for the mercies of the years' on an annual basis. In the 1700s, they settled into a cycle of spring Fast Days and autumn Thanksgivings."<sup>[1]</sup>

Colonial Massachusetts was hardly unique in setting aside a day of gratitude after the fall harvest. Each of the thirteen colonies periodically proclaimed its own thanksgiving days. But for more than 150 years, the celebration was not uniformly observed in British North America. The first attempt to celebrate an *all-American* Thanksgiving in the 13 states came in October 1777 during the War for Independence, when the Continental Congress asked that Patriots observe a day to give thanks to a higher power.

The first president to proclaim a day of *national* thanksgiving was -- who else would it be? -- George Washington. His eloquent proclamation set aside Thursday, November 26, 1789, "to be devoted by the people of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being who is the beneficent author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be; that we may then all unite in rendering unto Him our sincere and humble thanks for His kind care and protection of the people of this country...."<sup>[2]</sup> For the full proclamation, see the text appended to the end of this answer.

President Washington's proclamation was technically the first national thanksgiving, but three-quarters of a century would pass before the idea of an *annual national holiday* took hold. During the first decades of our nation's existence, the day was regarded not as a national but as a state event. Finally, during the Civil War, President Lincoln was prevailed upon by the editor *Godey's Lady's Book*, Sarah Josepha Hale, to proclaim a national day of thanksgiving for the last Thursday in November. <sup>[3]</sup> He issued the proclamation on the same day that George Washington had -- October 3. It was a doubly symbolic gesture for reunifying the war-torn nation. For the full proclamation, see the text appended to the end of this answer.

Since Lincoln, each president has issued a Thanksgiving Day proclamation, usually designating the fourth Thursday of each November as a national holiday. In 1939 President Franklin D. Roosevelt tinkered with the custom, moving Thanksgiving from the fourth to the third Thursday of November. The historical context for the move is important: it was during the Great Depression, and FDR had been lobbied to extend the holiday shopping season by a week. The tinkering proved unpopular, however, and two years later Congress passed a joint resolution stating that Thanksgiving should be observed on the fourth Thursday of November. The sentiment behind the 1941 act has stuck.

Later in the 1940s, a light-hearted tradition began with President Harry S. Truman: the pardoning of a Thanksgiving turkey. For 57 years now, this tradition "has been compassionately enforced" by our presidents in a White House ceremony. The lucky turkey is spared the indignity of ending up on a dining room table and is instead given to a petting zoo (Kidwell Farm) in Herndon, Virginia.<sup>[4]</sup>

## DOCUMENTS

### President George Washington's Thanksgiving Proclamation (1789)

#### PROCLAMATION

#### A NATIONAL THANKSGIVING

Whereas it is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey His Will, to be grateful for His benefits, and humbly to implore His protection and favor; and

Whereas both Houses of Congress have, by their joint committee, requested me "to recommend to the people of the United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer, to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many and signal favors of Almighty God, especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness:"

Now, therefore, I do recommend and assign Thursday, the 26th day of November next, to be devoted by the people of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being who is the beneficent author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be; that we may then all unite in rendering unto Him our sincere and humble thanks for His kind care and protection of the people of this country previous to their becoming a nation; for the signal and manifold mercies and the favorable interpositions of His providence in the course and conclusion of the late war; for the great degree of tranquility, union, and plenty which we have since enjoyed; for the peaceable and rational manner in which we have been enabled to establish constitutions of government for our safety and happiness, and particularly the national one now lately instituted; for the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed, and the means we have of acquiring and diffusing useful knowledge; and, in general, for all the great and various favors which He has been pleased to confer upon us.

And also that we may then unite in most humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations, and beseech Him to pardon our national and other transgressions; to enable us all, whether in public or private stations, to perform our several and relative duties properly and punctually; to render our National Government a blessing to all the people by constantly being a Government of wise, just, and constitutional laws, discreetly and faithfully executed and obeyed; to protect and guide all sovereigns and nations (especially such as have shown kindness to us), and to bless them with good governments, peace, and concord; to promote the knowledge and practice of true religion and virtue, and the increase of science among them and us; and, generally, to grant unto all mankind such a degree of temporal prosperity as He alone knows to be best.

Given under my hand, at the city of New York, the 3d day of October, A. D. 1789.  
Go. WASHINGTON

### President Abraham Lincoln's Thanksgiving Proclamation (1863)

#### BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

#### A PROCLAMATION.

The year that is drawing toward its close has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added which are of so extraordinary a nature that they can not fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever-watchful providence of Almighty God.

In the midst of a civil war of unequal magnitude and severity, which has sometimes seemed to foreign states to invite and to provoke their aggression, peace has been preserved with all nations, order has been maintained, the laws have been respected and obeyed, and harmony has prevailed everywhere, except in the theater of military conflict, while that theater has been greatly contracted by the advancing armies and navies of the Union.

Needful diversions of wealth and of strength from the fields of peaceful industry to the national defense have not arrested the plow, the shuttle, or the ship; the ax has enlarged the borders of our settlements, and the mines, as well as the iron and coal as of our precious metals, have yielded even more abundantly than heretofore. Population has steadily increased notwithstanding the waste that has been made in the camp, the siege, and the battlefield, and the country, rejoicing in the consciousness of augmented strength and vigor, is permitted to expect continuance of years with large increase of freedom.

No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy.

It has seemed to me fit and proper that they 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, and also those who are 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. And I recommend to them that while offering up the ascriptions justly due to Him for such singular deliverances and blessings they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to His tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners, or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the imposition of the Almighty hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it, as soon as may be consistent with the divine purpose, to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquillity, and union.

In testimony whereof I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed. Done at the city of Washington, this 3d day of October, A.D. 1863, and of the Independence of the United States the eighty-eighth.

By the President: Abraham Lincoln

William H. Seward, Secretary of State.

#### **George W. Bush's 2004 Thanksgiving Proclamation**

For Immediate Release  
Office of the Press Secretary  
November 23, 2004

President's Thanksgiving Day 2004 Proclamation

By the President of the United States of America

A Proclamation

All across America, we gather this week with the people we love to give thanks to God for the blessings in our lives. We are grateful for our freedom, grateful for our families and friends, and grateful for the many gifts of America. On Thanksgiving Day, we acknowledge that all of these things, and life itself, come from the Almighty God.

Almost four centuries ago, the Pilgrims celebrated a harvest feast to thank God after suffering through a brutal winter. President George Washington proclaimed the first National Day of Thanksgiving in 1789, and President Lincoln revived the tradition during the Civil War, asking Americans to give thanks with "one heart and one voice." Since then, in times of war and in times of peace, Americans have gathered with family and friends and given thanks to God for our blessings.

Thanksgiving is also a time to share our blessings with those who are less fortunate. Americans this week will gather food and clothing for neighbors in need. Many young people will give part of their holiday to volunteer at homeless shelters and food pantries. On Thanksgiving, we remember that the true strength of America lies in the hearts and souls of the American people. By seeking out those who are hurting and by lending a hand, Americans touch the lives of their fellow citizens and help make our Nation and the world a better place.

This Thanksgiving, we express our gratitude to our dedicated firefighters and police officers who help keep our homeland safe. We are grateful to the homeland security and intelligence personnel who spend long hours on faithful watch. And we give thanks for the Americans in our Armed Forces who are serving around the world to secure our country and advance the cause of freedom. These brave men and women make our entire Nation proud, and we thank them and their families for their sacrifice.

On this Thanksgiving Day, we thank God for His blessings and ask Him to continue to guide and watch over our Nation.

NOW, THEREFORE, I, GEORGE W. BUSH, President of the United States of America, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Constitution and laws of the United States, do hereby proclaim Thursday, November 25, 2004, as a National Day of Thanksgiving. I encourage all Americans to gather together in their homes and places of worship to reinforce the ties of family and community and to express gratitude for the many blessings we enjoy.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto set my hand this twenty-third day of November, in the year of our Lord two thousand four, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and twenty-ninth.

GEORGE W. BUSH[5]

*(Question from Brian B. of Wheeling, West Virginia)*

[1] George Washington, "Proclamation: A National Thanksgiving," in *Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, ed. James D. Richardson, vol. 1 (New York: Bureau of National Literature, 1897), p. 56.

[2] Carolyn Freeman Travers, "Fast and Thanksgiving Days of Plymouth Colony," at <http://www.plymouth.org/learn/history/thanksgiving/fastandthanks.asp>.

[3] David Herbert Donald, *Lincoln* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995), p. 471; for the full text of the proclamation, see Abraham Lincoln, "A Proclamation," in *Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, ed. James D. Richardson, vol. 8 (New York: Bureau of National Literature, 1897), pp. 3373-74.

[4] Erin Martin, "Presidential Pardon: The Turkey that Lives to See Another Day," Infoplease at <http://www.infoplease.com/spot/tgturkey2.html>.

[5] <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/11/20041123-4.html>.