

Thanksgiving Hypocrisy

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In the US, Thanksgiving is celebrated on the fourth Thursday of November to give thanks for the year's blessings and bounty. At least that's how it began. It's not, however, the current practice. Most people defile the day's spirit in how they spend it over a full four day holiday weekend - with overindulgent eating, parades, "can't miss" football from Thursday through Sunday, and, key for merchants, the "official" start of the Christmas holiday shopping season. It begins Thanksgiving Friday, is now an orgy of holiday consumerism, continues through Christmas eve, ebbs for a day, then builds again for a final celebratory new year's welcome with more overindulgent eating, drinking, partying, and binge-shopping for nonessentials.

This holiday, like all others, is also replete with myths, and young minds are filled with them. They're taught the Pilgrims invited Native Indians to share their bounty in a show of brotherhood and friendship with an array of foods early settlers never heard of that were indigenous to the Americas and introduced to them by Native peoples. The Pilgrims had nothing to do with this tradition. It began with Eastern Indians observing fall harvest celebrations centuries before the first settlers arrived. After they did, there was no such observance as "Thanksgiving."

While George Washington had days for national thanksgiving, modern holiday celebrations date from the Civil War in 1863 when Abraham Lincoln wanted a way to boost morale and patriotic fervor of the Union Army. His idea was to proclaim a national Thanksgiving holiday for the first time ever. It had nothing to do with the Pilgrims nor were they ever mentioned until 1890, and the term Pilgrim was never even used until the 1870s. So much for tradition and what passes for history that, in fact, is pure myth.

The Thanksgiving holiday is also a way to promote what Edward Herman calls our "indispensable state," our innate goodness and the illusion of American exceptionalism, moral and cultural superiority, and the belief that the Almighty made us special the way ideological Zionists feel Jews are "the chosen people." It's a short step from these views to judging others inferior, especially those ranked low in the racial, religious, ethnic or cultural pecking order - blacks, Latinos, and today's number one target of choice for a nation at war and an enemy needed to justify it - Muslims hatefully portrayed as "radicals, extremists, gunmen, insurgents," and "Islamofascists."

Thanksgiving also serves another purpose. It has special religious significance in a nation with three-fourths of the population Christian, and the traditional separation of church and state now weakened. The US was founded as a secular state, and First Amendment constitutional law affirms it stay that way with freedom of religion guaranteed. In 1802, Jefferson called for a "wall of separation" between them, and earlier Supreme Courts agreed. They ruled this separation is required to prohibit any state religion and require

government avoid undue religious involvement, its trappings or expressions. That's now changed under radicalized right wing rule.

Today, the extremist Christian Right jeopardizes religious freedom with frightening implications to consider. Their movement became dominant in the Reagan 1980s and reemerged even more virulently under George Bush. It's close to the seat of power with ideologues like Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell while he was living, James Dobson, and radical Zionist Muslim hate-preacher John Hagee having enormous influence on the administration and Congress.

Religious freedom was jeopardized by the introduction of the "Constitution Restoration Act of 2004" that was reintroduced in near-identical form in 2005. So far it's gone nowhere, but if introduced again and adopted in the 110th or a later Congress, it would turn the US into a de facto theocracy even though its supporters deny that intent. Don't believe them.

Dominionists like Pat Robertson and others support the bill as do influential sponsoring members of both Houses. Their goal is simple, but they won't admit it - tear down the sacred wall between church and state so the US can be governed by their extremist Christian dogma. It would make believers of other faiths, or none at all, lawbreakers with their version of Christian canon the new law of the land - a very scary prospect for about 75 million non-Christians in the country and many of Christian faith who won't go along.

If it's ever adopted, this bill will prevent the Supreme Court from challenging the right of anyone in or affiliated with federal, state or local government to affirm "God as the sovereign source of law, liberty, or government" - an extremist Christian God, that is. Any judge at any level interpreting the law otherwise would henceforth be subject to impeachment and prosecution in the new USA ruled by the empowered Pat Robertson types in it. It would also likely make Thanksgiving an obligatory Christian observance, even for non-Christians, and make its religious overtones mandatory.

As it's now celebrated, Thanksgiving is already shameful. While barely giving thanks, if at all, we forget millions of poor, deprived and oppressed peoples everywhere and our government's role in their condition. We also ignore the systematic dismantling of our constitutional rights and denial of essential social services to growing millions without them. And we're too distracted by bread, circuses and overindulgence to oppose injustice and support the rights and needs of people everywhere.

This day and others should be times of reflection, thanks and much more. Blessings aren't given. They're earned and just as easily lost when rogue leaders threaten our freedoms, and democracy is an illusion. But it's not something new. Our tradition is long and disturbing with conflict, violence, and our framers design that the "supreme Law of the Land" give government unlimited power, the Executive unchecked amounts of it, and "we the people" meant only the privileged. It's pure fantasy thinking we have limited government, constitutionally constrained and one of, by and for the people. Look at the record.

Along with war, militarism, expansionism and free market fundamentalism, we're a nation addicted to privilege. It's always been this way despite our prevailing fiction of an egalitarian country respecting everyone's rights. That's nonsense in a nation glorifying wealth and power and those with it claiming a divine right for more.

It's always been that way and especially since WW II when the US emerged unchallenged as the world's only superpower. Since then we've had imperial wars, CIA-instigated coups, political assassinations, and disdain for the law to defend unfettered capitalism from beneficial social change. On November 22, we should do more than give thanks. We should ask for forgiveness and demand accountability.

Journalism Professor Robert Jensen is right calling for a "No Thanks to Thanksgiving" in his earlier writing. He suggests we'd be hugely uplifted by replacing our overindulgent "white supremacist" Thanksgiving ritual with a "National Day of Atonement" and have it include self-reflective fasting for our forefathers' "original sin" no matter where our own came from. Establishing that tradition would be an important step forward - toward a day to give thanks every day in a land with leaders resolved never to repeat the crimes of the past and equally committed to public service instead of just for the elite part of it.

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