

# The Politics of Thanksgiving Day

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*As family excitement builds over Thanksgiving, you would never know November was Native American History Month. President Barack Obama publicly announced the month, but many more Americans will be paying much greater attention to his annual declaration of thanksgiving with the ceremonial pardoning of a turkey.*

Thanksgiving has a treasured place in the hearts of Americans, established as a national holiday by President Abraham Lincoln in 1863 to rouse Northern patriotism for a war that was not going well. Since then, Thanksgiving has often served other political ends.

In 2003, in the age of U.S. Middle East invasions, President George W. Bush flew to Baghdad, Iraq, to celebrate Thanksgiving Day with U.S. troops. He sought to rally the public behind an invasion based on lies by having a host of photographers snap pictures of him carrying a glazed turkey to eager soldiers. Three hours later, Bush flew home, and TV brought his act of solidarity and generosity to millions of U.S. living rooms. But the turkey the President carried to Baghdad was never eaten. It was cardboard, a stage prop.

Thus, as an example of hypocrisy and insincerity, Thanksgiving 2003 had a lot in common with the first Thanksgiving Day celebrated in Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1621. A year earlier, 149 English Pilgrims aboard the Mayflower landed at Plymouth and survived their first New England winter when Wampanoug people brought the newcomers corn, meat and other gifts, and taught the Pilgrims survival skills.

In 1621, Governor William Bradford of Plymouth proclaimed a day of Thanksgiving – not for his Wampanoug saviors but in honor of his brave Pilgrims. Through resourcefulness and devotion to God, his Christians had defeated hunger.

Bradford claimed that Native Americans were invited to the dinner. A seat at the table? Really? Since Pilgrims classified their nonwhite saviors as “infidels” and inferiors — if invited at all, they were asked to provide and serve, not share the food.

To this day, we are asked to see Thanksgiving essentially through the eyes of Governor Bradford (albeit with a nod to the help provided by the Native Americans). Bradford’s fable about stalwart Pilgrims overcoming daunting challenges through God’s blessings was an early example of “Euro think” which cast the European conquest of the Americas as mostly heroic and even noble.

Having survived those first difficult winters, Pilgrim armies soon pushed westward. In 1637, Governor Bradford sent his troops to raid a Pequot village, viewing the clash as mortal combat between devout Christians and godless heathens. Pilgrim soldiers systematically destroyed a village of sleeping men, women and children.

Bradford was overjoyed: "It was a fearful sight to see them frying in the fire and the streams of blood quenching the same and horrible was the stink and stench thereof. But the victory seemed a sweet sacrifice and they [the Pilgrim militia] gave praise thereof to God."

Years later, Pilgrim Reverend Increase Mather asked his congregation to celebrate the "victory" and thank God "that on this day we have sent six hundred heathen souls to hell."

School books and scholarly texts still honor Bradford, ignoring his callous brutality. The 1993 edition of the Columbia Encyclopedia [p. 351] states of Bradford, "He maintained friendly relations with the Native Americans." The scholarly Dictionary of American History [p. 77] said, "He was a firm, determined man and an excellent leader; kept relations with the Indians on friendly terms; tolerant toward newcomers and new religions...."

The *Mayflower*, renamed the *Meijbloom* (Dutch for Mayflower), continued to carve its place in history. It became a slave ship carrying enslaved Africans to the Americas.

### **The Earliest Freedom-Fighters**

Thanksgiving Day in the United States celebrates not justice and equality but aggression and enslavement. It affirms the genocidal beliefs in racial and religious superiority that justified the destruction of millions of Native American people and their cultures, extermination campaigns that began soon after the Pilgrim landing in 1620 and continued through the U.S. Army's punitive campaigns in the West during the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth centuries.

Still, Americans proudly count themselves among the earliest to fight for freedom of the individual and independence from tyranny. In that sense, on Thanksgiving Day, Americans might think to honor the first freedom-fighters of the Americas - those who resisted the foreign invasion of these lands - but those freedom-fighters were not European and their resistance started long before 1776.

Even before the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth in 1620, thousands of enslaved Africans and Native Americans had united to fight the European invaders and slavers. In the early Sixteenth Century during the age of Columbus and the Spanish invasion, these brave freedom-fighters were led by Taino leaders on the island of Hispaniola. One, a woman poet named Anacoana was captured at age 29. Another, a man named Hatuey, led his 400 followers from Hispaniola to Cuba in 1511 to warn the people about the dangers from the foreigners.

The following year, Hatuey was captured, too, and, the next year in behavior fitting with the civilization represented by the European invaders, Anacoana and Hatuey were burned at the stake.

Resistance to the invaders and their reliance on slavery continued to erupt in other parts of the Americas. In 1605, 15 years before the Mayflower reached Plymouth, thousands of runaway Africans, known as "maroons," united with Indians in northeast Brazil to form the Republic of Palmares, defended by a three-walled fortress. From there, Genga Zumba and his 10,000 people repeatedly threw back Dutch and Portuguese armies. The Republic of Palmares survived until 1694, almost a hundred years, before finally being suppressed.

These early nonwhite freedom-fighters kept no written records, but some of their ideas about freedom, justice and equality found their way into the sacred parchment that

Americans celebrate each July Fourth, declaring that all people are created equal and endowed with fundamental rights.

So, the fairest way to celebrate freedom-fighters in what the Europeans called the New World would be to start with the stories of Anacoana and Hatuey resisting the depredations of Columbus and his men and then move to the “maroon” resistance at Palmares.

Looking at the injustice that the victors often meted out to indigenous people and imported slaves, there is little reason to feel grateful for the later arrival of — and encroachments by — the ungrateful Pilgrims.

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