

Learning about Legislation #13 -The Controversial History of Thanksgiving

When most of us think of the history of Thanksgiving, we think of Plymouth Rock, pilgrims, and the Native Americans who brought gifts of food that created the feast shared by those two peoples (and also enabled the settlers to survive their first winter in this new land). Not a great deal is said about the history of the holiday from a legislative perspective. As this holiday was an early battleground between presidents in regards to the separation of church and state, it merits our attention.

On October 3, 1789, George Washington issued what is referred to as the [Thanksgiving Proclamation](#). It is, in essence, an early executive order. He states, in part:

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 which we experienced 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 hath been pleased to confer upon us.

For those of you keeping track, yes that was indeed one long sentence! Despite this heartfelt order, Thanksgiving fell into relative obscurity in the decades after Washington's presidency. [History.com](#) reports, "Thomas Jefferson, the third president, felt that public demonstrations of piety to a higher power, like that celebrated at Thanksgiving, were inappropriate in a nation based in part on the separation of church and state. Subsequent presidents agreed with him. In fact, no official Thanksgiving proclamation was issued by any president between 1815 and 1863." That Jefferson would feel this way about mingling religion and his official government duties is not surprising - this is a man who [edited the New Testament](#) to keep all the moral lessons but to exclude all miracles. Included in his papers in an 1801 letter explaining why Jefferson would not participate in speeches related to Thanksgiving in his own words. He wrote:

I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; thus building a wall of separation between church and state. Congress thus inhibited from acts respecting religion and the Executive authorised only to execute their acts, I have refrained from prescribing even occasional performances of devotion prescribed indeed legally where an Executive is the legal head of a national church, but subject here, as religious exercises only to the voluntary regulations and discipline of each respective sect.

In the midst of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln revisited the idea of a national holiday of Thanksgiving. [AbrahamLincolnOnline.org](#), a repository of Lincoln's papers and history, recounts that a woman named Sarah Josepha Hale had been urging presidents for the previous 15 years to reinstate the holiday via a letter campaign. Lincoln was the first of those presidential letter recipients to respond. On October 3, 1863, exactly 74 years to the day after George Washington's original proclamation, President Lincoln issued his own (composed by his Secretary of State, William Seward). It read, in part:

The year that is drawing towards 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 cannot 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 unequalled 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 theatre of military conflict... 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 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.”

The holiday has been celebrated, with some more modern ceremonies like the presidential pardoning of the Thanksgiving turkey, in that manner almost ever since. There was a three year period towards the end of the Depression when Franklin Delano Roosevelt attempted to change the holiday from the last Thursday to the third Thursday of November. [History.com](https://www.history.com) posits that this was to “boost the economy by providing shoppers and merchants a few extra days to conduct business between the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays.” This was, however, deeply unpopular, and the holiday returned to its final Thursday position by 1942.

With the end-of-year holiday season here, it is inevitable that we will soon be faced with Facebook posts and FoxNews rants about the “war on Christmas.” When those show up, you may wish to remember that several of our own nation’s presidents had a much more erudite and long-spanning debate on the same topic. And while the issue of separation of church and state is still one that our Supreme Court must revisit from time to time (most recently in this year’s decision on [Trinity Lutheran Church v. Comer](https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/19-123)), one rarely remembers that it was an integral component of the Thanksgiving holiday.