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"The Duty of All Nations": The American Tradition of Presidential Thanksgiving Proclamations

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For more than two centuries, presidential Thanksgiving proclamations have called Americans to give thanks to God as a nation. From Washington and Lincoln through Franklin Roosevelt, Presidents credited the nation's blessings—harvests, victories, prosperity, and liberty—ultimately to divine Providence, even when those blessings came through human effort. That consensus began to fray after World War II and has since hardened into a partisan divide: Recent progressive Presidents have recast Thanksgiving as gratitude to one another, sometimes omitting God entirely, while Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump reasserted its traditional focus. Restoring that focus would preserve both the distinctive character of America's most beloved national holiday and the President's role in leading the nation in gratitude to God.

Introduction

Thanksgiving is such a beloved American holiday that it is rarely examined as a possible source of self-knowledge. As a broadly popular holiday, it is honored and enjoyed by Americans of diverse backgrounds, religions, and political views.[1] The intrinsic meaning and long-standing tradition of Thanksgiving convey a particular vision of politics, religion, and the American nation. The following examination of annual presidential Thanksgiving

proclamations reveals the survival of deeply classical and Christian strains in our national tradition. These strains previously ran strongly through various political movements and political parties, but in recent generations, progressive Presidents have increasingly repudiated them.

Thanksgiving proclamations have been presidential calls to religious activity on a coordinated national scale. They have thus helped to fulfill the obligation George Washington identified in 1789: "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."[2] In 1909, William Howard Taft summed up the role of the President and the relation between political authority and religious practice embedded in the traditional Thanksgiving proclamation:

> The season of the year has returned when, in accordance with the reverent custom established by our forefathers, the people of the United States are wont to meet in their usual places of worship on a day of thanksgiving appointed by the Civil Magistrate to return thanks to God for the great mercies and benefits which they have enjoyed.[3]

Taft captured the interplay between popular custom, religious liberty, and the President's role in coordinating the free choice of the people so that the nation itself, rather than a collection of individuals, is united in giving thanks to God.

The long-standing tradition of the Thanksgiving proclamation, in which the President uses his rhetorical powers to encourage religious thanksgiving on a national scale, "is a standing rebuke to the modern Supreme Court's interpretation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment."[4] It is certainly in tension with and may even contradict the post-*Everson* theory of strict separation of church and state.[5] It preserves the original American understanding of public Christianity and the Chief Executive's leading role in nurturing the religious life of the nation. "Strict separationism, consistently applied," as Carson Holloway reminds us, "would require us to throw out Thanksgiving as a religious holiday proclaimed by the president."[6] So much the worse for the doctrine of strict separation![7] Our unbroken annual tradition by which the President of the United States calls the entire nation to gather and give thanks to God—a tradition that has existed since 1863 and has roots in the colonial and Revolutionary periods—is a powerful and enduring example of America's distinctive way of promoting religious practice while respecting religious freedom without falling into indifferentist or antireligious secularism.

Recent progressive Presidents who downplay the theological core of the Thanksgiving proclamation distort the nature of the holiday itself, twisting it from an occasion for the nation as a whole to recognize God as the ultimate source of all blessings to an occasion for Americans to acknowledge the efforts and accomplishments of their fellow Americans. It is entirely appropriate, for example, to direct attention to the human efforts of members of the armed forces on Veterans Day or of workers on Labor Day. Thanksgiving is the one day on which all Americans are called as a nation to honor God as the ultimate source of all the earthly blessings the nation enjoys. In this respect, it is also distinct from federally recognized Christian holidays such as Christmas Day, which commemorates the birth of Jesus Christ. The progressive drift from the traditionally "vertical" character of Thanksgiving proclamations—even to the point that several proclamations by Presidents Barack Obama and Joseph Biden never mention God at all—threatens to obscure the unique nature of Thanksgiving and unmoor the nation from its most distinctive national holiday.

What Is a Presidential Thanksgiving Proclamation?

Presidential holiday proclamations, such as those issued for Thanksgiving, Columbus Day, and the Fourth of July, are features of what has been called the "rhetorical presidency."[8] Such proclamations are examples of what Aristotle called "ceremonial rhetoric." Whereas *advisory rhetoric* aims to persuade a political assembly that it would be advantageous or disadvantageous to take some future action and *judicial rhetoric* argues the legality or illegality of a deed from the past, *ceremonial rhetoric* praises or blames someone or something for being "noble" or "base"—that is, morally or aesthetically attractive or repulsive. Ceremonial speeches are concerned with the present, aiming to instill in the audience the proper esteem for the subject under discussion, although, as Aristotle writes, speakers "often make additional use also of recollections of past events and of conjectures in anticipation of future ones."[9]

Eulogies are familiar examples of ceremonial rhetoric; the goal is not to exonerate (or convict) the dead or to persuade the audience to vote one way or another, but to memorialize the deceased. Similarly, many presidential holiday proclamations describe the life and contributions of some hero about whom the nation ought to know and who should be revered. Consider President Donald Trump's emphasis on heroic excellence in his 2026 Columbus Day Proclamation:

> Today, as we celebrate the anniversary of Christopher Columbus' arrival in the New World, we honor his unrivaled greatness. We embrace our duty to prove worthy of the inheritance he left us, to match his courage with our own, and to never abandon, forsake, or forget the beauty of our faith, the glories of our culture, and the stories of our heroes.[10]

The purpose here is to move the affections of the audience, to instill admiration for the virtues of the person under discussion. The proclamation succeeds as ceremonial rhetoric when it persuades audiences to admire Christopher Columbus as a hero.

Thanksgiving proclamations have a concrete, practical goal: They conclude with a formal exhortation to the American people to gather and give thanks to God. Like other instances of ceremonial rhetoric, they are concerned primarily with instilling admiration, gratitude, and reverence in the audience. Thanksgiving proclamations praise no less a figure than God Himself. In the traditional Thanksgiving proclamation, all human accomplishments of the year, all blessings currently enjoyed by the nation, are attributed primarily to God. Many proclamations have incorporated biblical exhortations to prayer (often from the "psalms of praise"), such as the opening words of Psalm 92 ("It is a good thing to give thanks unto the Lord") or Psalm 136 ("O give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good: for His mercy endureth forever").[11] Some have even assumed the role of praying on behalf of the American people.[12] But the character of Thanksgiving as a distinct holiday and the consequent structure of the traditional Thanksgiving Proclamation are more profoundly theological than a tally of references to God or quotes from Scripture can convey.[13] By its nature, Thanksgiving is an occasion to reflect upon all of the blessings enjoyed in the past year and to respond correctly to them by confessing that their ultimate source is "Almighty God."

Thanksgiving Theology and Early Practice

The most striking feature of traditional presidential Thanksgiving proclamations is easily overlooked: They are strictly focused on exhorting the nation to give thanks to God for a whole series of blessings, most of which are in some obvious sense the work of human hands. Traditional Thanksgiving proclamations do not limit their thanks to God for so-called acts of God such as good weather. They include thanks for crops harvested, industries expanded, peace maintained, treaties signed, victories won, discoveries made, liberties enjoyed, and trials endured. These all result in some sense

from human effort, but in Thanksgiving proclamations, they are typically attributed ultimately to God's beneficence.

This apparent paradox need not arise in the observance of other, more "horizontal" national holidays (for example, Memorial Day), which are explicitly dedicated to honoring some set of American citizens. But this feature of attributing all "blessings" enjoyed in the past year to God is strikingly consistent in Thanksgiving proclamations through the late 20th century, and has deep roots in Christian theology.

The relevant theological principle is sometimes called secondary causality: God is the *ultimate cause* of all that is good; humans operate freely as *secondary causes* accomplishing His providential will. This teaching was formulated by patristic and medieval theologians including Augustine (4th–5th c.); Boethius (5th–6th c.); and Thomas Aquinas (13th c.).[14] It was broadly accepted by the dominant American Christian traditions from the colonial era to today (Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Anglicans/Episcopalians, Baptists, and Catholics), including those churches whose members composed the earliest congressional and presidential Thanksgiving proclamations. John Calvin also affirmed secondary causality.[15] It was incorporated into the Westminster and Savoy Declarations of Faith, which the Congregationalist churches of New England adopted.[16] Prominent Anglican divines such as Richard Hooker also preserved the principle.[17] It is maintained in the London Baptist Confession (1689) and carried over into the Philadelphia Baptist Association's Confession of Faith (1742).[18] Secondary causality—the idea that God works providentially through human agents without violating their free will and that the most complete accounting of the good in the world must identify God as its ultimate source—was an important point of doctrinal unity for American Christians worshipping in many different churches. It could be taken for granted by the statesmen who established the nation's political traditions and allowed to inform their practice of issuing national proclamations of religious thanksgiving.

The practice of prayers of "general thanksgiving" featured prominently in Congregationalist New England, the matrix out of which so many of our Thanksgiving traditions emerged and which directly formed Samuel Adams, the lead author of the first Congressional Thanksgiving Prayer (1777).[19] Such prayers were also central to the liturgical life of such observant Anglicans as George Washington, whose 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* featured a "General Thanksgiving" prayer to God "for all thy goodness and loving-kindness to us, and to all men," in addition to particular prayers of thanksgiving "For Rain," "For Fair Weather," "For Plenty," "For Peace, and Deliverance from

our Enemies," etc.[20] Such prayers were to be employed "upon several occasions"—that is, when deemed appropriate—rather than on a regular basis throughout the week or year.

After independence, general prayers of thanksgiving became more prominent. When the formerly Anglican churches in the newly independent United States issued their 1789 *Book of Common Prayer of the Protestant Episcopal Church*, the "General Thanksgiving" prayer disappeared from the list of "Prayers and Thanksgivings on Several Occasions" but was inserted into the regular Morning and Evening Offices.[21] Unlike many other changes between the 1662 Anglican *Book of Common Prayer* and the 1789 Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*, this alteration had no clear political motive, unlike the alterations of prayers for Parliament and King to prayers for Congress. As a result, prayers of general Thanksgiving became a twice-daily feature for observant American Episcopalians.[22]

Small wonder, then, that a national holiday of Thanksgiving—when our attention is directed to the whole course of blessings for which we are grateful and to God as their ultimate source—would become in time a nationally beloved and nationally characteristic holiday of the newly independent United States of America.

The Traditional Thanksgiving Proclamation (1789–1944)

George Washington's 1789 proclamation begins by calling attention to "the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God." But how can a *nation* acknowledge God's Providence? Such acknowledgment might seem possible for an individual or for a family or church that prays together, but not for a nation as such. America publicly acknowledges God by designating religious holidays (such as Christmas) as federal holidays, incorporating into our civic calendar days whose significance is due entirely to their religious nature. America *as a nation* has also sought to acknowledge God's providence by empowering the President to designate a specific day on which all Americans are encouraged to give thanks to God. This solves a coordination problem: perhaps "the nation" may be said to have fulfilled its "duty" to "acknowledge" God if the highest officer of government has exhorted all citizens to retire to their churches and homes to do precisely that.

Presidential Thanksgiving proclamations simultaneously recognize the national (not merely individual or even ecclesial) duty to give thanks to God, the cooperation of civil and ecclesial authorities in properly discharging that duty, and the rightful freedom of churches from state control and of

individuals to choose to participate. All in all, they represent an older but thoroughly American tradition of public Christianity, which all Americans (regardless of particular church membership or faith background) are invited to join. The particular attention that American Christians and American Presidents have given to the Psalms and other Old Testament texts when formulating proclamations of Thanksgiving is particularly inviting to Jewish Americans, as distinct from those of no religion at all, or those of religions (Islam, Hinduism, etc.) that do not recognize the Bible as Holy Scripture.

Early Thanksgiving proclamations perfectly embody the classical Christian theological principle of secondary causality. They are emphatically vertical, focused on thanking God, whom Washington (1789) confessed as "the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be."[23] Their only horizontal features—noting the good effects of human action—are intrinsically directed upward: These earthly blessings, directly accomplished by men, are, as Washington writes, "indications of the Divine Beneficence towards us."[24]

On November 1, 1777, following British General John Burgoyne's October 1777 surrender at Saratoga, the Second Continental Congress issued a national proclamation of Thanksgiving. Its opening sentence includes an admonition—"[I]t is the indispensable Duty of all Men to adore the superintending Providence of Almighty God"—that would be nearly reproduced in President Washington's 1789 proclamation.[25] The Continental Congress later designated another half-dozen days of "general thanksgiving," and many others dedicated to fasting and prayer, under the Articles of Confederation.[26]

Under the new Constitution, Congress requested that President Washington issue proclamations of thanksgiving in 1789 and 1795—although, as George H. W. Bush pointed out, Washington himself seems to have helped to orchestrate Congress's request.[27] John Adams issued national proclamations of "humiliation, fasting, and prayer" that also included recommendations of "fervent Thanksgiving" in the springs of 1798 and 1799—spring being the traditional season of penance and autumn having become the season for thanksgiving. Thomas Jefferson judged it inappropriate for the President to issue proclamations of national Thanksgiving, although in response to the 1779 request of the Continental Congress, he issued one for the Commonwealth of Virginia while serving as its governor.[28] James Madison's 1813 proclamation of public humiliation and prayer included thanksgiving, and at the request of Congress, he issued a formal proclamation of public thanksgiving for peace in 1815. The next 11

Presidents, from James Monroe to James Buchanan, did not issue national proclamations of thanksgiving, but these decades (1810s–1850s) were a period of rich growth in the holiday's practice and customs, and many mayors and governors issued municipal and statewide proclamations of Thanksgiving.[29]

When Abraham Lincoln, responding to the 17-year and five-Presidents-long campaign of Sarah Josepha Hale, finally revived the annual, late-November presidential Thanksgiving proclamation, he preserved its original vertical focus.[30] He also initiated what is still an unbroken tradition of annual Thanksgiving proclamations, now in its 164th year. Every year between 1863 and 1939 (except 1865, when Andrew Johnson chose December 7), the sitting President of the United States designated a Thursday in late November as a day of national Thanksgiving.[31] Since then, Congress has fixed the fourth Thursday in November as "Thanksgiving Day," a "legal public holiday" joining the ranks of New Year's Day, Washington's Birthday, Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, Labor Day, Veterans Day, and Christmas Day.[32] The force of custom in maintaining the annual Thanksgiving proclamation for nearly 80 years before Congress acted to fix the date and designate Thanksgiving as a public holiday is itself worthy of awe and lends credence to the claim that Thanksgiving is "the holiday at the heart of the American experience."[33]

Lincoln issued two proclamations of Thanksgiving in 1863: one on July 15, designating August 6 as "a day for National Thanksgiving, Praise and Prayer" in response to the Union victories at Gettysburg (July 3) and Vicksburg (July 4), and a second, more general proclamation on October 3 announcing "the last Thursday of November next as a day of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the heavens" with language that echoes Christ's prayer to "Our Father" (Matthew 6:9, Luke 11:2) as well as Psalm 123:1 ("O thou that dwellest in the heavens," King James Version). The July 1863 proclamation acknowledged the "sacrifices of life, limb, health and liberty incurred by brave, loyal and patriotic citizens" but kept the focus on divine agency acting through men and on the need to pray thankfully to God.[34] Lincoln opened by noting that "it has pleased Almighty God to hearken to the supplications and prayers of an afflicted people" and concluded by inviting Americans to "render the homage due to the Divine Majesty, for the wonderful things he has done in the Nation's behalf," and to "invoke the influence of His Holy Spirit" on all Americans with a plea to God "finally to lead the whole nation, through the paths of repentance and submission to the Divine Will, back to the perfect enjoyment of Union and fraternal peace."

A few months later, in October 1863, Lincoln again insisted on the primacy of divine agency.[35] He began by noting the blessings of the year, which he claimed "are of so extraordinary a nature that they can not fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually sensible to the ever-watchful providence of Almighty God." Having recounted the mercies and abundance that had accompanied the suffering of the Civil War, Lincoln stated that "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 mercies." These "great things" ought to be "solemnly, reverently, and gratefully acknowledged, as with one heart and one voice, by the whole American people." Hence, Lincoln declared "a day of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the heavens." Consistent with earlier proclamations' attention to confession, petition, and pleading, Lincoln recommended "humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience," intercession for widows, orphans, and others suffering from the war, and fervent imploring for "the interposition of the Almighty hand to heal the wounds of the nation and restore it, as soon as may be consistent with the divine purposes, to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquillity, and union."

The following year, Lincoln issued a proclamation designating "the last Thursday in November" as "a day of thanksgiving and praise to Almighty God, the beneficent Creator and Ruler of the Universe."[36] This October 1864 proclamation repeatedly noted divine agency: God has "prolong[ed] our national life," "defending us," "favor[ing] as well our citizens," "augmented our free population," "opened to us new sources of wealth," "crowned the labor of our workingmen," and "afford[ed] to us reasonable hopes for an ultimate and happy deliverance from all our dangers and afflictions." In a passage that captures the interplay between God's primary agency and "man's free cooperate in divine will," Lincoln praised God for having "animate[d] and inspire[d] our hearts and minds with fortitude, courage, and resolution sufficient for the great trial of civil war which we have been brought by our adherence as a nation to the cause of freedom and humanity."

This vertical focus remained a prominent and consistent feature for the 80 years between the Civil War and the end of World War Two. Blessings are always affirmed as having their ultimate source in God even when it is acknowledged that they have been manifest through human agency. Let a few examples suffice.

- Andrew Johnson proclaimed in 1867 that "He has covered our land through all its extent with greatly needed and very abundant harvests; that He has caused industry to prosper.... He has permitted us to multiply ships upon our lakes.... He has inclined our hearts to turn away from domestic contentions...."[37]

- Chester A. Arthur introduced his litany of material, intellectual, moral, and political "blessings" in 1883 by noting that "the year which is drawing to an end has been replete with evidence of divine goodness."[38]

- Grover Cleveland declared in 1893 that "the American people should every day remember with praise and thanksgiving the divine goodness and mercy which have followed them since their beginning as a nation," but that "it is fitting that one day in each year should be especially devoted to the contemplation of the blessings we have received from the hand of God and to the grateful acknowledgment of His loving kindness."[39]

- Theodore Roosevelt spoke in 1904 of the "full and reverent realization that our strength is as nothing unless we are helped from above. Hitherto we have been given the heart and the strength to do the tasks allotted to us."[40]

- In 1917, Woodrow Wilson even interpreted American entry into a world war as an "opportunity to serve mankind as we once served ourselves in the great day of our Declaration of Independence," a "revelation of our duty...to defend also the rights of free men throughout the world"; this, in Wilson's reckoning, should be counted among "the great blessings God has bestowed upon us, blessings that are better than mere peace of mind and prosperity of enterprise."[41]

- Herbert Hoover introduced such blessings as harvest, health, education, and peace in 1931 as "cause for gratitude to the Almighty" even as the Great Depression began.[42]

Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Thanksgiving proclamations are strikingly traditional. They consistently acknowledged that worldly achievement was the product of human and divine cooperation: for example, in 1933 when he expressed gratitude for "the brighter day to which we can win through by seeking the help of God," or in 1936 when he declared that "it is our right

to express our gratitude that Divine Providence has vouchsafed us wisdom and courage to overcome adversity."[43] Tracing Thanksgiving back to its origins, when "our fathers set aside such a day as they hewed a nation from the primeval forest," Roosevelt declared that "from our earliest recorded history, Americans have thanked God for their blessings. In our deepest natures, in our very souls, we, like all mankind since the earliest origin of mankind, turn to God in time of trouble and in time of happiness. 'In God We Trust.'"[44] For Roosevelt, it is perfectly consistent to note that "God's help to us has been great" and to exhort his countrymen, "May each of us dedicate his utmost efforts to speeding the victory which will bring new opportunities for peace and brotherhood among men."[45] Roosevelt's final proclamation is notable for suggesting "a nationwide reading of the Holy Scriptures during the period from Thanksgiving Day to Christmas" and for attributing American achievements to "contact" with divine revelation: "Let every man of every creed go to his own version of the Scriptures for a renewed and strengthening contact with those eternal truths and majestic principles which have inspired such measure of true greatness as this nation has achieved."[46]

Postwar Inconsistency (1945–1973)

Harry S. Truman's first proclamation, issued in 1945, marks the beginning of a shift in emphasis from a *strictly vertical* to an *increasingly horizontal* expression of thanks. Truman begins with a stark declaration of "our victory, absolute and final, over German fascism and Japanese militarism" before exhorting Americans to "give thanks to Almighty Providence for these exceeding blessings." Truman then drives home the *human* role in winning "these exceeding blessings":

> We have won them with the courage and the blood of our soldiers, sailors, and airmen. We have won them by the sweat and ingenuity of our workers, farmers, engineers, and industrialists. We have won them with the devotion of our women and children. We have bought them with the treasure of our rich land. But above all we have won them because we cherish freedom beyond riches and even more than life itself.[47]

Truman then praises the "unity" in which "we found our first weapon," the strength "of all together by which we were saved." "None have known this better than our very gallant dead, none better than their comrade, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Our thanksgiving has the humility of our deep

mourning for them, our vast gratitude to them." This final phrase is the first instance, in any presidential Thanksgiving proclamation, in which gratitude is directed at humans rather than God.

Yet this is an exception. Truman's subsequent proclamations focus on rendering thanks to God and frame human achievements as instruments of divine Providence. Truman's 1949 proclamation seems almost penitential in contrast to 1945: "The times demand more than the wisdom of man can provide. There should be in the hearts of all good men and true a realization that as the Psalmist said: 'There is no king saved by the multitude of an host: a mighty man is not delivered by much strength' [Psalm 33:16]."[48] When he speaks of "the cooperation of our allies" in "striving to attain a permanent peace" in 1951, he is quick to add that "to assure success in achieving that coveted goal we reverently place our faith in the Almighty" (1951).[49]

The horizontal aspect of Thanksgiving reappears in the late 20th century.

In his 1955 proclamation, Dwight D. Eisenhower calls upon Americans "to express our deep appreciation of those forebears who, more than three centuries ago, celebrated the first Thanksgiving Day. Through their industry and courage, our Nation was hewn from the virgin forest, and through their steadfastness and faith, the ideals of liberty and justice have become our cherished inheritance."[50] This statement is bookended by acknowledgments of God's "manifold blessings" and by an exhortation to "lift up our hearts in special prayers of gratitude," but on its own, it seems to attribute human achievement strictly to human agency and to call upon Americans to direct their gratitude toward their ancestors.

By contrast, in 1956, 1957, and 1958, respectively, he frames the achievements of "the Pilgrim Fathers" as an example of "God's providence to us throughout our entire history," calls on Americans to "recall that our leaders throughout the succeeding generations have relied upon Almighty God for vision and strength purpose," and lists "the many spiritual and temporal benefactions betokening God's goodness."[51] Eisenhower's final proclamation, issued in 1960, begins and ends with acknowledgments of God's Providence, but is largely concerned with exhorting Americans to contribute to "the solution of the world-food problem" and ends in a petitionary prayer "that some day, under a benevolent Providence and through the best use of the world's God-given resources, each nation will have reason to celebrate its own thanksgiving day."[52]

John F. Kennedy's first proclamation, issued in October 1961, begins with a fitting passage from the Psalms: "[I]t is a good thing to give thanks unto the Lord" (Psalm 92:1).[53] Kennedy asks "the head of each family to recount to his children the story of the first New England Thanksgiving, thus to impress

upon future generations the heritage of this nation born in toil, in danger, in purpose, and in the conviction that right and justice and freedom can through man's efforts persevere and come to fruition with the blessing of God." This is an orthodox statement of the principle of secondary causality, combined with an exhortation to recall and perpetuate the virtues of the Pilgrims. Less orthodox is the following passage from his final declaration, mere weeks before his assassination:

> [W]e give our thanks, most of all, for the ideals of honor and faith we inherit from our forefathers—for the decency of purpose, steadfastness of resolve and strength of will, for the courage and the humility, which they possessed and which we must seek every day to emulate. As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words but to live by them.[54]

This is followed by an ambiguous comment that *might* be interpreted as bringing this gratitude to "our forefathers" in line with the orthodox view of the primary agency of God: "Let us therefore proclaim our gratitude to Providence for manifold blessings—let us be humbly thankful for inherited ideals—and let us resolve to share those blessings and those ideals with our fellow human beings throughout the world."[55] By speaking of gratitude *for* the nation's forefathers, Kennedy is still able to express gratitude *to* God.

Lyndon B. Johnson's proclamations were largely traditional. Thanksgiving is "a special day dedicated to giving thanks to God" (1964); "let us, therefore, in this splendid American tradition, thank Him who created us and all that we have" (1966); "thanking Him for His goodness, we thank Him as well for the promise and the achievement of America" (1967).[56] Although "Americans, looking back on the tumultuous events of 1968, may be more inclined to ask God's mercy and guidance than to offer Him thanks for His blessings," he wrote in 1968, that would be a mistake; many events "deserve our remembrance, and give us cause for thanksgiving."[57]

Also traditional were the proclamations of Richard Nixon: "Lincoln... knew that it is precisely at those times of hardship when men most need to recognize that the Source of all good constantly bestows His blessings of on mankind," and "we know we can rely on a strength greater than ourselves" (1969).[58] According to Nixon, "Lincoln wisely knew that a man's declaration of his gratitude to God is, in itself, an act which strengthens the thanksgiver because it renews his own realization of his relationship to his God," and "we give thanks for God's strength and guidance upon which we confidently rely today and every day" (1970).[59] "Our country can look back

with special gratitude…and we can look forward with trust in Divine Providence" (1972); "in the first Thanksgiving, man affirmed his determination to live in God's grace and to act in God's will.... Time has not dimmed, nor circumstance diminished the need for God's hand in all that America may justly endeavor" (1973).[60]

A Widening Chasm (1974–Present)

The principle of secondary causality was a strikingly consistent feature of Thanksgiving proclamations through Franklin Delano Roosevelt's presidency, bridging partisan divides between Republicans and Democrats and philosophical divides between small-government conservatives and the early architects of the administrative state. The past half-century has seen a widening chasm between progressive, secular, and horizontal proclamations that depart from the traditional purpose of the holiday and reassertions of the traditional, religious, and vertical orientation of Thanksgiving. Secondary causality, and with it the distinctive nature of Thanksgiving, is increasingly a partisan belief. During this period, every Democratic Administration (Carter, Clinton, Obama, and Biden) has slid further from the Thanksgiving tradition, while Republican Presidents have either conformed to the postwar inconsistency discussed in the previous section (Ford, George H. W. Bush, and George W. Bush) or, in the case of Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump, vigorously reasserted the traditional theology of Thanksgiving.

Gerald Ford's 1975 proclamation is striking because it is the first to make no clear reference to God. Instead, Ford calls on Americans to "reaffirm our belief in a dynamic spirit that will continue to nurture and guide us as we prepare to meet the challenge of our third century." Unsurprisingly, then, Ford also fails in his 1975 proclamation to affirm the traditional teaching of secondary causality. Instead, direct and unqualified gratitude to our fellow men and to other strictly human aspects of national life takes its place:

> Our nation draws its strength from people of every creed, of every color, of every race—native Americans and people from every nation in the world who for two centuries have come to share in the rewards and responsibilities of our American Republic. On the eve of our 200th year, Thanksgiving Day should be a day of special reflection upon the qualities of heart, mind and character of the men and women who founded and built our great Nation. Let us join in giving thanks for our cultural pluralism. Let us celebrate our diversity and the great strengths that have come from sharing our traditions, our ideas, our

> resources, our hopes and our dreams. Let us be grateful that for 200 years our people have been dedicated to fulfilling the democratic ideal—dedicated to securing "liberty and justice for all."[61]

It is no mere coincidence that in the same statement, Ford fails to affirm God's ultimate Providence—or even to refer to God by a recognizable name or description—and recasts American history in progressive terms. The progressive vision is one of men "fulfilling the democratic ideal" through their own efforts—or, if they are aided by something beyond themselves, it is by "belief in a dynamic spirit" rather than the real Divine Person encountered, prayed to, and discussed in the biblical tradition. It would be unfair to reduce Ford himself to this single statement; his other Thanksgiving proclamations refer to God, the Almighty, or Divine Providence and attribute to God the "blessings" of this life.[62] The fact that his 1975 proclamation, anticipating the bicentennial of the Declaration of Independence, veered so far from the tradition anticipates the increasingly progressive, atheistic, and horizontal character of later presidential statements.

Jimmy Carter initially attempts in 1977 to hold the traditional, vertical dimension of Thanksgiving together with the progressive, horizontal dimension. He claims that "our forebears never lost faith in the Creator, in their cause, or in themselves," and "we have never lost sight of the principles upon which our Nation was founded. For that reason we can look to the future with hope and confidence." *Our* "hope and confidence" come not from faith in God, or even from the strength of our principles, but from *our dedication* to our "principles," which Carter does not explicitly connect to God. Yet Carter reaffirms the purpose of Thanksgiving when he asks Americans to gather "to give thanks for the blessings Almighty God has bestowed upon us"[63]

In 1978, Carter continues to blend the traditional with the progressive: On the one hand, "Providence has provided Americans with fertile land and bountiful harvests." On the other, "On this Thanksgiving Day, we affirm our faith in our heritage of freedom, and our spirit of sharing," so "let us observe Thanksgiving in the spirit of peace and sharing, by declaring it a day of Thankful Giving, a day upon which the American people share their plenty with the hungry of other lands."[64] God is still present, still acknowledged, but thanking Him for His blessings and Providence has become secondary to faith in American qualities and to American efforts to alleviate human suffering.

By the end of his presidency, Carter has almost entirely abandoned the traditional religious focus of Thanksgiving; he speaks of gratitude to men

instead of gratitude to God and diminishes the originally religious character of Thanksgiving by recasting it as an exercise in human solidarity: "The greatest bounty of our Nation is the bounty of our heritage—our diversity as immigrants and descendants of immigrants, our common identity as Americans." It is not to God, but to national diversity that Americans are most indebted. Carter's brief allusion to the first Thanksgiving makes the natives, not the Pilgrims, the protagonists:

> Thanksgiving...is a commemoration—of the day America's earliest inhabitants sat down to table with European colonists. That occasion was historic not only because it established a national holiday, but because it marked the start of a national tradition of cooperation, unity and tolerance.[65]

For Carter, the most notable feature of the first Thanksgiving is a strictly horizontal phenomenon of some men's relationships with other men. When Carter does note the importance of the divine, he immediately adds the equal, if not greater, importance of the human: "As we pause on Thanksgiving to offer thanks to God, we should not forget that we also owe thanks to this country's forefathers who had the vision to join together in Thanksgiving, and who gave us so much of the vision of brotherhood that is ours today."[66] Americans are indebted to their "forefathers" for a vision of "brotherhood"; for what, exactly, Americans are indebted to God is apparently not worth mentioning.

Ronald Reagan's proclamations reassert the traditional, vertical understanding of Thanksgiving:

- "In keeping with America's heritage, one day each year is set aside for giving thanks to God for all His blessings."[67]

- Noting the bicentennial of Congress's 1782 Proclamation, Reagan also noted the continuation of the Founding generation's piety through American history: "Our pioneers asked that He would work His will in our daily lives so America would be a land of morality, fairness, and freedom."[68]

- Thanksgiving is "an occasion for Americans to express gratitude to their God and their country," an acknowledgment of the cooperation of divine and human agency: Ultimately, "God has blessed America and her people, and it is appropriate we recognize this bounty."[69]

- "From the first Pilgrim observance in 1621, to the nine years before and during the American Revolution when the Continental Congress declared days of Fast and Prayer and days of Thanksgiving, we have turned to Almighty God to express our gratitude for the bounty and good fortune we enjoy as individuals and as a nation." The purpose of this holiday, celebrated in both "homes and place of worship," is to "celebrate, in the words of 1784, 'with grateful hearts...the mercies and praises of their all Bountiful Creator.'"[70]

In 1985, like Nixon in 1972, Reagan traced the American Thanksgiving tradition to "our Judeo-Christian heritage," a phrase he repeated in 1986 and that George H. W. Bush echoed in 1992. Having recounted the history of the Thanksgiving tradition in greater detail than most other Presidents, Reagan attributes a host of human accomplishments to God by framing his litany of "honest toil" by human hands in calls to give thanks to God:

> We manifest our gratitude to God for the many blessings he has showered upon our land and upon its people. In this season of Thanksgiving we are grateful for our abundant harvests and the productivity of our industries; for the discoveries of our laboratories; for the researches of our scientists and scholars; for the achievements of our artists, musicians, writers, clergy, teachers, physicians, businessmen, engineers, public servants, farmers, mechanics, artisans, and workers of every sort whose honest toil of mind and body in a free land rewards them and their families and enriches our entire Nation. Let us thank God for our families, friends, and neighbors, and for the joy of this very festival we celebrate in His name. Let every house of worship in the land and every home and every heart be filled with the spirit of gratitude and praise and love of this Thanksgiving Day.[71]

Reagan suggests that Thanksgiving "reveals our character as Nation" more clearly than any other custom: "[R]ooted deeply in our Judeo-Christian heritage, the practice of offering thanksgiving underscores our unshakeable belief in God as the foundation of our Nation and our firm reliance upon Him from Whom all blessings flow."[72] For the Bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution, Reagan noted that all that is good in the law of the land itself ought to be attributed to God rather than to its human Framers—not a boastful claim of the Constitution's infallibility, but an acknowledgement of God as the ultimate source of all blessings:

> In 1789 the government established by that great charter of freedom, and 'the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed,' were cited by George Washington in the first Presidential Thanksgiving Proclamation as among 'the great and various favors' conferred upon us by the Lord and Ruler of Nations. [...] Let us, in this unbroken chain of observance, dedicate ourselves to honor anew the Author of Liberty and to publicly acknowledge our debt to all those who have sacrificed so much in our behalf. May our gratitude always be coupled with petitions for divine guidance and protection for our Nation and with ready help for our neighbors in times of need.[73]

Reagan calls upon Americans to thank God *and* their fellow men, but always to acknowledge the priority of God. In his final proclamation, Reagan restates the traditional position: "Thanksgiving Day summons every American to pause in the midst of activity, however necessary and valuable, to give simple and humble thanks to God.... The blessings that are ours must be understood as the gift of a loving God Whose greatest gift is healing."[74] He concludes by quoting the opening verses of Psalm 105: "O give thanks to the Lord, call on His name, / Make known his deeds among the people!" Thanksgiving directs us to proclaim God's deeds, manifest through the secondary causality of genuinely free human agents who nevertheless work His providential purpose.

George H. W. Bush mostly reaffirms the traditional purpose of the Thanksgiving proclamation—to be "reminded of our dependence upon our Heavenly Father and of the debt of gratitude we owe to Him"—and declares that "we continue to offer thanks and praise to our Creator."[75] Bush's subsequent proclamations quote from William Bradford's account of "a day of thanksgiving at Plymouth in 1621" and John Winthrop's 1630 interpretation of the Puritan "quest for freedom as an enterprise no less historic than the ancient Israelite's exodus from Egypt."[76] Though he generally affirms the priority of expressing "our gratitude for the goodness and generosity of our Creator," there are some passages in which Bush's focus is strictly horizontal, as when he asks Americans "to be thankful for" the Peace Corps volunteers, diplomats, and members of the military serving overseas (1990).[77]

William J. Clinton's proclamations reflect a more horizontal conception of Thanksgiving. He opens in 1993 with traditional statements of the American custom of "recogniz[ing] the providence and mercy of God" and identifying "the true spirit of Thanksgiving: acknowledging God's graciousness, and in response, reaching out in service to others." But his emphasis then shifts: The "spirit of Thanksgiving" "inspires" our actions; our gratitude extends even to "the relief efforts that our Nation and others

have undertaken where natural disasters have struck unmercifully"—in other words, being "thankful" for our *own* efforts. Clinton's proclamation becomes more and more progressive: "As we gather together during this sacred and cherished time, let us pledge to build a new America," "to place the strength and benevolence of this great Nation at the service of all its people, indeed of all the peoples of the earth. Then, in these richer years, we will reap a true and fruitful harvest." Clinton's first proclamation concludes with another innovation: the places where Americans ought to "gather" has been expanded from "homes" and "places of worship" to include "wherever they may choose."[78] Clinton's proclamations contain traditional statements of gratitude to God followed by an increasingly progressive focus on human efforts without reference to God's ultimate agency.

Clinton makes reference to the Pilgrims' First Thanksgiving in six of eight proclamations, but frequently in a distorted way. For example, in 1995, Clinton describes the 1621 gathering of Pilgrims and Wampanoags as a "3 day festival" that "brought people together to delight in the richness of the earth and to give praise for their new friendships and progress." The Pilgrims praise "new friendships and progress," not Providence. Later, Clinton notes that this gathering inspired a "holiday" that "unites citizens from every culture, race, and background in common thanks for the gifts we receive from God."[79]

Clinton's proclamations blend the merely descriptive with the traditionally hortatory. On the one hand, "millions of us *will gather* with family and friends to give thanks to God for the many blessings that He has bestowed upon us,"[80] and "Americans join with family and friends *to give thanks* to a provident God."[81] On the other, "I *encourage*"[82] or "*urge* the citizens"[83] or "*encourage* all the people"[84] or "all Americans"[85] "to assemble in their homes, places of worship, or community center to share the spirit of goodwill and prayer; to express heartfelt thanks to God for the many blessings He has bestowed upon us...."[86]

George W. Bush's first Thanksgiving proclamation, issued mere months after the September 11 attacks, noted that "we find particular assurance from our Thanksgiving tradition, which reminds us that we, as a people and individually, always have reason to hope and trust in God, despite great adversity." "In thankfulness and humility, we acknowledge, especially now, our dependence on One greater than ourselves." Bush maintained the traditional principle of secondary causality and the correspondingly "vertical" emphasis of the proclamation: "Americans of every belief and heritage give thanks to God for the many blessings we enjoy.... Let us particularly give thanks for the selfless sacrifices of those who responded in service to others after the terrorist attacks...."[87]

Bush maintained this vertical emphasis when he gave thanks "*for* the resolve and generosity of so many of our people who are touching countless hearts and souls through thoughtful acts of kindness," "*for* the Americans in our Armed Forces," "*for* the men and women who work to keep America safe and secure," and "*for* the freedoms guaranteed by our Constitution."[88] Yet his proclamations sometimes took on a more horizontal tone. In 2002, Bush declared that "we also honor and salute the selfless sacrifice of the brave men and women of our Armed Forces," a statement more appropriate to Veterans Day or Memorial Day than to Thanksgiving. The same proclamation attributed American greatness to human virtues and effort without reference to God: "This Thanksgiving, we recognize the ties of friendship and respect that bind us together. And we renew our pledge to uphold the timeless principles of freedom, equality, and opportunity that have made our country into a great Nation."[89]

In 2003, Bush began by noting that "on Thanksgiving, we gather with family and friends to thank God" and concluded by exhorting Americans to "live by that same trust" in God that animated the Founders, but in the center of his proclamation, he attributed Americans' "abundance, prosperity, and hope" to strictly human causes: "a firm foundation of freedom, justice, and equality; a belief in democracy and the rule of law; and our fundamental rights to gather, speak, and worship freely."[90] However, Bush's final proclamation reasserted the traditional principle of secondary causality: "We recognize that all of these blessings, and life itself, come not from the hand of man but from Almighty God" (2008).

Strikingly for a President whose fervent evangelical faith formed such a prominent part of his public image and whose father incorporated extensive and explicit quotations from the Bible (Psalm 100:2–5 in 1989; Luke 12:48 in 1990 and 1991; Psalm 107:40–41 in 1991; Proverbs 19:17 in 1992), Bush never once quoted from Scripture in his eight proclamations. Nor does he make any specific claim of the Christian or Judeo–Christian character of America in general or Thanksgiving in particular as did Reagan, the elder Bush, and numerous preceding Presidents. That said, his first proclamation's invocation of "Almighty God, who is our refuge and our strength in this time of trouble" borrows language from Psalm 46, and two of his later proclamations refer to "the universal call to love a neighbor,"[91] an allusion to the commandment found in Leviticus 19:18 and identified by Christ as the second great commandment of the Law (Matthew 22:39; Mark 12:31).

Barack Obama's proclamations contain significantly fewer references to God than is typical.[92] Two of Obama's proclamations refer to God only by quoting previous proclamations: 2009's "Almighty God" (quoting

Washington, 1789) and 2015's "the providence of Almighty God" and "commend to [God's] tender care" (quoting Washington, 1789, and Lincoln, 1863).[93] Obama studiously avoids using masculine pronouns for God or speaking of God as "Father," even modifying a quote from Lincoln's 1863 proclamation ("commend to His tender care") to "[God's] tender care."[94] Obama directly refers to God in his 2010–2014 proclamations[95] but never once refers to God in the concluding formal exhortation, preferring to "encourage" Americans to "give thanks for all we have received in the past year, express appreciation to those whose lives enrich our own, and share our bounty with others."[96] To whom Americans ought to give thanks is left ambiguous.

Obama's final proclamation is only the second in history, after Ford's 1975 proclamation, to make no reference to God at all. Ford referred vaguely to "a dynamic spirit." As one scholar has noted, "Obama's Thanksgiving proclamations may have been the most 'God'-less in U.S. history, but they were the most 'spirit'-filled"[97]—except for the 2016 proclamation, which is transparently written as a rebuke to the incoming President Trump for running on a platform of immigration restrictionism. Obama's 2016 proclamation describes the Pilgrims as "refugees" who were met by "the friendly embrace of an indigenous people, the Wampanoag; the Pilgrims were "grateful they could rely on the generosity of the Wampanoag people," and thus began "the tradition of an annual day of giving thanks."[98] Obama recast the first Thanksgiving as a festival of Pilgrim refugees giving thanks to the Wampanoags—not to God. Accordingly, the entire proclamation has a horizontal emphasis on the "American instinct…to find strength in our common creed and forge unity from our great diversity."

- The first Thanksgiving embodied "ideals" that "brought together people of different backgrounds and faiths."

- "[E]nduring confidence in the power of faith, love, gratitude, and optimism" is a "force of unity" that "has sustained us as a people."

- "[O]ur Nation's progress has been carried forward by those who act on the obligations we have to one another."

- "As we gather in the company of our friends, families, and communities—just as the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag did centuries ago—let us strive to lift up others, promote tolerance and inclusiveness, and give thanks for the joy and love that surround all of us."

Concomitant with a more secular and anthropocentric conception of Thanksgiving is a posture toward future progress rather than gratitude for what we have inherited and currently enjoy.

Joseph R. Biden's proclamations are significantly more horizontal, secular, and progressive than those of any preceding President. Each of Biden's four proclamations concludes by encouraging Americans, in identical language, to "join together and give thanks for the friends, neighbors, family members, and strangers who have supported each other over the past year in a reflection of goodwill and unity."[99] This language is horizontal rather than vertical in the sense that Americans are to be grateful to *one another*—to other persons—rather than to God. When he "encourages" Americans to join together, Biden—unlike previous Presidents, who spoke of particular places (churches and other places of worship)—is completely silent on *where* Americans ought to gather. Biden's 2021 proclamation is structured as a litany of thanks to different kinds of Americans working to benefit the nation: "farm workers and frontline workers, many of whom are immigrants," "educators," "parents," "health care professionals," "researchers and scientists."[100] These are expressions of gratitude, to be sure, but more appropriate for Labor Day than for Thanksgiving.

God is mentioned in only two of Biden's four proclamations, making his proclamations even more "God"-less than Obama's. The 2021 opening sentence, "Thanksgiving provides us with a time to reflect on our many blessings—from God, this Nation, and each other," describes an opportunity to reflect on God as one of several sources of our blessings rather than exhorting Americans not merely to reflect, but actually to give thanks to God. This is a sharp break from the Thanksgiving tradition. In his 2022 proclamation, Biden refers to God only by paraphrasing Lincoln's proclamation of a national Thanksgiving, which "ask[ed] God to bring us together to care for one another and heal our Nation." He also quotes Scripture—"Let us rejoice always, pray continually, and give thanks in all circumstances"—but does not complete the quotation: "for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18, NIV). Biden's comment on this passage is emphatically horizontal and future-oriented: "This is a special time in the greatest country on Earth, so let us be grateful. America is a great Nation because we are a good people. This holiday, we celebrate all that brings us together, grounded in history and our shared hopes for the future."[101]

As with Obama's proclamation in 2016, there are no references to God in Biden's 2023 and 2024 proclamations. Instead, Biden refers to the nation's "limitless possibilities,"[102] claiming that "there is nothing beyond our capacity if we do it together."[103] In all four proclamations, Biden (again like Obama

in 2016) recasts the Pilgrim Thanksgiving as a celebration of gratitude "to the generosity and support of the Wampanoag"[104] "who made [the harvest] possible"[105] through their "generosity and kindness."[106] Biden's progressive reformulation of Thanksgiving almost entirely sidelines God and tradition, substituting human communities and human solidarity for dependence upon the Almighty: "[W]e are grateful for our Nation and the incredible soul of America,"[107] and Americans should "celebrate all that unites us," finding hope "in our Nation's families, who sacrifice so much to achieve the American Dream and build a future worthy of our highest aspirations."[108]

Amid these progressive reformulations, it is refreshing to turn to Donald Trump's proclamations, which, like Reagan's, reassert the traditional and religious character of the holiday and in particular reestablish the recognition that all thanks are ultimately due to God even as they manifest through human efforts.

Trump's first proclamation declares unequivocally that "[o]n Thanksgiving Day, as we have for nearly four centuries, Americans give thanks to Almighty God for our abundant blessings." Most of this proclamation is dedicated to describing the endurance of the Pilgrims and of Americans during the Civil War and their insistence on giving thanks to God amidst their trials. Trump's purpose is to highlight "in the courageous Pilgrims who stood on Plymouth Rock in new land, the intrepidness that lies at the core of the American spirit." Trump acknowledges human efforts ("with the help of the Wampanoag tribe, and a bountiful harvest, they were regaining their health and strength") but treats them as secondary causes: "In thanks to God for these blessings, the new governor of the Plymouth Colony, William Bradford, proclaimed a day of thanksgiving...." Trump concludes by "encourag[ing] all Americans to gather, in homes and places of worship, to offer a prayer of thanks to God for our many blessings."[109]

Trump's other first-term proclamations begin in similar fashion by "recall[ing] the courageous and inspiring journey of the Pilgrims,"[110] by "remember[ing] with reverence and gratitude the bountiful blessings afforded to us by our Creator,"[111] and reminding us succinctly that "[o]n Thanksgiving Day, we thank God for the abundant blessings in our lives."[112]

Trump's 2020 proclamation doubled as an official commemoration of the quadricentennial of the *Mayflower*'s journey, an anniversary that was largely forgotten amid the panicked reaction to the coronavirus that began in the spring, the wave of riots throughout the summer, and the unprecedented post-election disputes and delays in resolving the election results in the fall.[113] In all that they did, "these first Americans... trusted in God to provide for them." It also anticipates the 400th anniversary of 1621: "[T]he following

year, they celebrated a successful harvest alongside their Native American neighbors—the first Thanksgiving. This seminal event in the history of our Nation is a continual reminder of the power of faith, love, perseverance, prayer, and fellowship."[114] By contrast, Biden confined his commemoration of 1621 to a subordinate adverbial clause of a single sentence: "Just as 400 years ago when the Pilgrims were able to celebrate a successful first harvest thanks to the generosity and support of the Wampanoag, today we too express our gratitude for those who have helped us get through this difficult past year."[115]

In 2025, Trump began by recalling Washington's 1789 proclamation and quoting its opening sentence that asserts "the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God." Trump quotes from Lincoln's 1863 proclamation with its acknowledgment of "our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens" and adds that "[i]n every generation since, this spirit of reverence, trust, and gratitude has preserved our way of life and made America the strongest, greatest, and most resilient Nation the world has ever known." He goes on to attribute to the Pilgrims, patriots, pioneers, and warriors of American history "a spirit of gratitude and grit embodied by those who celebrated the first Thanksgiving more than 400 years ago," a spirit that stands "at the very heart of what it means to be an American." And because "this year, God has bestowed abundant blessings all across our land and indeed the entire world," the President "encourage[s] all Americans to gather in homes and places of worship, to offer a prayer of thanks to God for our many blessings."[116]

"Gratitude and grit" sums up how President Trump has combined his distinctive rhetorical emphasis on American daring, exploration, and endurance with Thanksgiving's traditional acknowledgment of God's primacy. It stands in sharp contrast to President Biden's language of "limitless possibilities" and abandonment of any reference to God. Both seek to emphasize the nation's ability to overcome obstacles, but in Biden's case, such emphasis comes at the price of piety.

Conclusion: Make Thanksgiving *Thanksgiving* Again

Ceremonial rhetoric is significant because it shapes citizens' moral evaluations: their sense of what is noble and thus worthy of admiration; their code of justice; and the proper objects of their affection or love. Unlike the rhetoric used in a deliberative body or courtroom, ceremonial rhetoric does not produce an immediate decision. Its power is more fundamental and long-lasting, shaping the moral imagination of the citizens who vote in

elections, serve on juries, and actually compose "We the People." Thanksgiving, because it directs the nation to honor God properly, is the most transcendent annual occasion for presidential ceremonial rhetoric. As the historical record has shown, for the American President to exhort all Americans to give thanks to God is as American as apple pie.

Thanksgiving is widely recognized as a distinctly American holiday. Forty years ago, President Reagan asserted that "no custom reveals our character as a Nation so clearly as our celebration of Thanksgiving Day."[117] Thirty years ago, President Clinton proclaimed that "America's oldest tradition, Thanksgiving is also a reaffirmation of our most deeply held values: a public recognition that, in the words of Thomas Jefferson, 'God who gave us life gave us liberty.'"[118] "That first Thanksgiving," declared President Trump, "provided an enduring symbol of gratitude that is uniquely sewn into the fabric of our American spirit."[119] (2019). As many, including President Eisenhower, have observed, it is older than the Constitution, the Declaration, and the Union itself: "The custom...is a wise and an ancient one, hallowed by observance in the days before we became a Nation, and sanctioned throughout the succeeding generations" (1955). President Nixon went further, arguing that Thanksgiving binds us to the most ancient and sacred roots of our civilization:

> When the first settlers gathered to offer their thanks to the God who had protected them on the edge of a wilderness, they established anew on American shores a thanksgiving tradition as old as Western man himself.
>
> From Moses at the Red Sea to Jesus preparing to feed the multitudes, the Scriptures summon people to words and deeds of gratitude, even before divine blessings are fully perceived. From Washington kneeling at Valley Forge to the prayer of an astronaut circling the moon, our own history repeats that summons and proves its practicality.[120]

Americans are rightly proud of Thanksgiving, and presidential proclamations have played a crucial role in nurturing the holiday's character. Americans have a right to expect their Presidents to continue to maintain the distinctive character of Thanksgiving. The recent trend among progressives—and even some conservative Presidents—to flatten the traditionally religious character of Thanksgiving proclamations is a distortion of the nation's most cherished national holiday. It also replaces Thanksgiving's religious character with a hubristically secular vision in which all national blessings are self-wrought and all national gratitude is

ultimately self-congratulatory. In such a vision, God may appear only as a subjective "belief" held by some, or else as a vaguely Hegelian "dynamic spirit" pushing History ever leftward. This vision is utterly alien to a nation originally settled, in the words of the Mayflower Compact, "for the Glory of God, and Advancement of the Christian Faith," that later declared its separation from the British Empire in conformity with what our Declaration of Independence recognized as "the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God," and whose most distinctive and popular national holiday is an act of pious gratitude to Almighty God. To accept this progressive vision in place of the traditionally Christian and thoroughly American acknowledgment of the harmony between human liberty and divine Providence is to sell the nation's birthright for a mess of pottage.

This trend must be reversed. Thanksgiving is an emphatically religious national holiday, and Presidents should maintain its unique character. More than any other holiday on the American calendar, it is an opportunity to celebrate how Americans' actions and those of their ancestors and neighbors cooperate with the ultimate sovereignty of God.

As Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump have done, future conservative Presidents should recover the spirit of Washington and Lincoln: Preserve Thanksgiving's traditional vertical emphasis by attributing all the blessings the nation has enjoyed to God as their ultimate source and directly exhort the American people to give thanks to God. In so doing, they would faithfully guard a custom that has been handed down to them by generations of Americans and fulfill their traditional role as Chief Executives in observing the "duty of all Nations, to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God."[121]

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Endnotes

1. John Gramlich, Chip Rotolo, and Laura Silver, "The Vast Majority of Americans Celebrate Thanksgiving, but Their Traditions and Activities Vary Widely," Pew Research Center, November 21, 2024, https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/11/21/the-vast-majority-of-americans-celebrate-thanksgiving-but-their-traditions-and-activities-vary-widely/ (accessed November 10, 2026); Oana Dumitru, "Which Holidays Do Americans Enjoy Most—and Least?" YouGov, February 9, 2024, https://yougov.com/en-us/articles/48626-which-holidays-do-americans-enjoy-most-and-least (accessed November 10, 2026); Justin McCarthy, "Holidays, Weekends Still Americans' Happiest Days of the Year," Gallup *Wellbeing*, January 13, 2015, https://news.gallup.com/poll/180911/holidays-weekends-americans-happiest-days-year.aspx (accessed November 10, 2026).
2. George Washington, "Proclamation—Day of National Thanksgiving," October 3, 1789, The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/proclamation-day-national-thanksgiving (accessed November 10, 2026). See also "Thanksgiving Proclamation 1777 by the Continental Congress, The First National Thanksgiving Proclamation," November 1, 1777, Pilgrim Hall Museum, https://www.pilgrimhall.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/TG_First_National_Thanksgiving_Proclamation_1777.pdf (accessed November 10, 2026) ("[I]t is the indispensable Duty of all Men to adore the superintending Providence of Almighty God…"), and "October 11, 1782: Fourteenth Congressional Fasting Proclamation," Christian Heritage Fellowship, posted October 10, 2026, https://chrihstianheritagefellowship.com/fourteenth-congressional-fasting-proclamation/ (accessed November 10, 2026) ("It being the indispensable duty of all Nations, not only to offer up their supplications to Almighty God, the giver of all good, for his gracious assistance…").
3. William Howard Taft, "Proclamation 883—Thanksgiving Day, 1909," November 15, 1909, The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/proclamation-883-thanksgiving-day-1909 (accessed November 10, 2026).
4. Carson Holloway, "Thanksgiving and the Constitution," *Public Discourse*, November 26, 2013, https://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2013/11/11618/ (accessed November 10, 2026).
5. See *Everson v. Board of Education*, 330 U.S. 1 (1947), https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/ll/usrep/usrep330/usrep330001/usrep330001.pdf (accessed November 10, 2026).
6. Holloway, "Thanksgiving and the Constitution."
7. See Paul Baumgardner, "Constraining Moses: Rethinking Thanksgiving Day Proclamations," *Chapman Law Review*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2018), pp. 19–40, https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1409&context=chapman-law-review (accessed November 10, 2026), which "unpack[s] the political, legal, and historical arguments against presidential Thanksgiving Proclamations" (ibid., p. 20) from the perspective of the post-*Everson* doctrine of strict separation, and Timon Cline, Josh Hammer, and Yoram Hazony, "*Everson* Must Fall," *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy*, Vol. 48, Issue 2 (Winter 2026), pp. 719–775, https://journals.law.harvard.edu/jlpp/wp-content/uploads/sites/90/2026/03/Hammer-FINAL.pdf (accessed November 11, 2026), which utilizes early congressional and presidential Thanksgiving Proclamations as evidence for the original purpose and meaning of the First Amendment's Establishment Clause while advocating for the overturning of *Everson*.
8. Baumgardner, "Constraining Moses: Rethinking Thanksgiving Day Proclamations," pp. 23–24.
9. Aristotle, *Aristotle's Art of Rhetoric*, trans. and interpretive essay by Robert C. Bartlett (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 1.3, 1358b10–20.
10. Donald J. Trump, "Proclamation 11073 of October 7, 2026: Columbus Day, 2026," *Federal Register*, Vol. 91, No. 196 (October 13, 2026), pp. 65075–65076, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2026-10-13/pdf/2026-20972.pdf (accessed November 10, 2026).
11. Psalm 92:1 (King James Version), quoted by Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1942) and John F. Kennedy (1961), and Psalm 136:1 (King James Version), quoted by Harry S. Truman (1951), Ronald Reagan (1986), and George H. W. Bush (1990).
12. See, for example, Theodore Roosevelt, "Proclamation 508—Thanksgiving Day, 1903," October 13, 1903, The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/206206 (accessed November 10, 2026) ("Therefore, in thanking God for the mercies extended to us in the past, we beseech Him that He may not withhold them in the future…. We pray for strength….").
13. Such tallies are, however, revealing. I have relied on the data tabulated by John T. Woolley in "Evolution of the Thanksgiving Proclamation: From Washington to Trump (Revised and Updated 10/24/2022)," The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/analyses/evolution-the-thanksgiving-proclamation (accessed November 10, 2026). I depart from Woolley's tabulation in one respect: Richard Nixon's 1969 reference to "the Source of all good [who] constantly bestows His blessings on mankind" ought to be counted as a reference to a "Supreme Being." As discussed below, this leaves Gerald Ford in 1975, Barack Obama in 2016, and (postdating Woolley's article) Joseph Biden in 2023 and 2024 as the only "God"-less Thanksgiving Proclamations in American history. See Richard Nixon, Proclamation 3944, "Thanksgiving Day, 1969," November 12, 1969, 83 Stat. 971, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-83/pdf/STATUTE-83-Pg971.pdf (accessed November 13, 2026); Gerald R. Ford, Proclamation 4405, "Thanksgiving Day, 1975," November 4, 1975, 89 Stat. 1310, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-89/pdf/STATUTE-89-Pg1310.pdf (accessed November 10, 2026); Barack Obama, "Proclamation 9546 of November 23, 2016: Thanksgiving Day, 2016," *Federal Register*, Vol. 81, No. 230 (November 30, 2016), pp. 86553–86554, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2016-11-30/pdf/2016-28941.pdf (accessed November 10, 202e6); Joseph R. Biden, Jr., "Proclamation 10678 of November 22, 2023: Thanksgiving Day, 2023," *Federal Register*, Vol. 88, No. 229 (November 30, 2023), pp. 83465–83466, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2023-11-30/pdf/2023-26505.pdf (accessed November 10, 2026); and Joseph R. Biden, Jr., "Proclamation 10865 of November 27, 2024: Thanksgiving Day, 2024," *Federal Register*, Vol. 89, No. 232 (December 3, 2024), pp. 96087–96088, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2024-12-03/pdf/2024-28461.pdf (accessed November 10, 2026).

14. Boethius, *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, IV.6; Augustine, *De Civitate Dei Contra Paganos* V.9; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III.67 and 90, and *Summa Theologiae*, I.103.7–8. I am indebted to Michael Bolin and secondarily to Jeremy Holmes for the references to Aquinas.
15. "The Christian, then, being most fully persuaded, that all things come to pass by the dispensation of God, and that nothing happens fortuitously, will always direct his eye to him as the principal cause of events, at the same time paying due regard to inferior causes in their own place." John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.17.6, https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes/institutes.iii.xviii.html (accessed November 10, 2026). "This knowledge is necessarily followed by gratitude in prosperity, patience in adversity, and incredible security for the time to come. Every thing, therefore, which turns out prosperous and according to his wish, the Christian will ascribe entirely to God, whether he has experienced his beneficence through the instrumentality of men, or been aided by inanimate creatures. For he will thus consider with himself: Certainly it was the Lord that disposed the minds of these people in my favour, attaching them to me so as to make them the instruments of his kindness. In an abundant harvest he will think that it is the Lord who listens to the heaven, that the heaven may listen to the earth, and the earth herself to her own offspring; in other cases, he will have no doubt that he owes all his prosperity to the divine blessing, and, admonished by so many circumstances, will feel it impossible to be ungrateful." Ibid., I.17.7. "At the same time, the Christian will not overlook inferior causes. For, while he regards those by whom he is benefited as ministers of the divine goodness, he will not, therefore, pass them by, as if their kindness deserved no gratitude, but feeling sincerely obliged to them, will willingly confess the obligation, and endeavour, according to his ability, to return it. In fine, in the blessings which he receives, he will revere and extol God as the principal author, but will also honour men as his ministers, and perceive, as is the truth, that by the will of God he is under obligation to those, by whose hand God has been pleased to show him kindness." Ibid., I.17.8.
16. "God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures, nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established." *Westminster Confession of Faith*, III.1, https://thewestminsterstandard.org/the-westminster-confession/#Chapter%20III (accessed November 7, 2026); "Although in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly, yet by the same providence he ordereth them to fall out, according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently. God, in his ordinary providence, maketh use of means, yet is free to work without, above, and against them, at his pleasure." Ibid., V.2–3, https://thewestminsterstandard.org/the-westminster-confession/#Chapter%20V (accessed November 10, 2026). These passages are unaltered by the Savoy Declaration of 1658, which in turn was adopted by the Congregational churches of New England in 1680 (Massachusetts) and 1708 (Connecticut). "Savoy Declaration of Faith," 1658, Reformed Standards, https://reformedstandards.com/british/savoy (accessed November 10, 2026); Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1877), I.7, §98, https://dn710107.ca.archive.org/0/items/TheCreedsOfChristendomV1/TheCreedsOfChristendomV1.pdf (accessed November 10, 2026).
17. "[God's] Spirit…uses every particular nature, every mere natural agent, only as an instrument created at the beginning, and ever since the beginning used, to work his own will and pleasure withal. Nature therefore is nothing else but God's instrument." Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* [1594], 1.3.4, in *The Works of That Learned and Judicious Divine Mr. Richard Hooker*, 7th ed., Vol. I (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888), https://oll-resources.s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/oll3/store/titles/921/0172-01_Bk.pdf (accessed November 11, 2026). The Church of England's doctrinally austere *Thirty-Nine Articles* (1571) do not explicitly address the principle of secondary causality, though they are entirely compatible with it; consider the First Article, which affirms that "[t]here is but one living and true God…the Maker, and Preserver of all things." Church of England, *Book of Common Prayer: Articles of Religion*, Article 1, "Faith in the Holy Trinity," https://www.churchofengland.org/liturgy/book-of-common-prayer/articles-religion (accessed November 11, 2026).
18. "God hath decreed in Himself, from all eternity, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely and unchangeably, all things whatsoever come to pass; yet so as thereby is God neither the author of sin, nor hath fellowship with any therein, nor is violence offered to the will of the creature, nor yet is the liberty, or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established, in which appears His wisdom in disposing all things, and power and faithfulness in accomplishing His decree." Reformed Reader, "The Philadelphia Confession, 1742," 3.1, https://www.reformedreader.org/ccc/pc03.htm (accessed November 11, 2026). "Although in relation to the foreknowledge and decree of God, the first cause, all things come to pass immutably and infallibly; so that there is not anything befalls any by chance, or without His Providence; yet by the same Providence He ordereth them to fall out according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently." Ibid., 5.2, https://reformedreader.org/ccc/pc05.htm (accessed November 11, 2026).
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90. George W. Bush, "Proclamation 7738 of November 21, 2003: Thanksgiving Day, 2003," *Federal Register*, Vol. 68, No. 227 (November 25, 2003), pp. 66315–66316, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2003-11-25/pdf/03-29643.pdf (accessed November 12, 2026).
91. George W. Bush, "Proclamation 7963 of November 18, 2005: Thanksgiving Day, 2005;" George W. Bush, "Proclamation 8204 of November 15, 2007: Thanksgiving Day, 2007," *Federal Register*, Vol. 72, No. 222 (November 19, 2007), pp. 65213–65214, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2007-11-19/pdf/07-5769.pdf (accessed November 12, 2026).
92. According to the calculations of John T. Woolley, Obama averaged 2.75 references to a Supreme Being (under various appellations) per proclamation. This ties with Chester A. Arthur's 2.75 average (1881–1884). Only Gerald Ford's 1.67 average, based on three proclamations (1974–1976), is lower. John T. Woolley, "Evolution of the Thanksgiving Proclamation," The American Presidency Project, last edited October 24, 2024," https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/analyses/evolution-the-thanksgiving-proclamation (accessed November 15, 2026). "References to God occur nearly five times on average in every proclamation throughout the study period except two: Ford 1975, and Obama 2016. Both have none. In 90 proclamations from 1933–2022 there have been 6.2 supreme being references per proclamation. In the 75 pre-1933 proclamations, there were 7.3 references per proclamation." John T. Woolley, "Interpreting the Thanksgiving Proclamation (2023)," The American Presidency Project, last edited November 20, 2025, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/analyses/interpreting-the-thanksgiving-proclamation-2023 (accessed November 12, 2026),
93. Barack Obama, "Proclamation 8458 of November 20, 2009: Thanksgiving Day, 2009," *Federal Register*, Vol. 74, No. 226 (November 25, 2009), pp. 62199–62200, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2009-11-25/pdf/E9-28485.pdf (accessed November 12, 2026); Barack Obama, "Proclamation 9372 of November 20, 2015: Thanksgiving Day, 2015," *Federal Register*, Vol. 80, No. 227 (November 25, 2015), pp. 73941–73942, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2015-11-25/pdf/2015-30252.pdf (accessed November 12, 2026).
94. Barack Obama, "Proclamation 9372 of November 20, 2015: Thanksgiving Day, 2015." This might reflect Obama's longtime membership in Rev. Jeremiah Wright's Trinity United Church of Chicago, a member of the United Churches of Christ denomination, which adopted an "Inclusive Language Covenant" in 1993. See United Church of Christ, "Inclusive Language Covenant," https://www.ucc.org/worship_inclusive-language_inclusive-language-covenant/ (accessed November 12, 2026).
95. Barack Obama, "Proclamation 8606 of November 23, 2010: Thanksgiving Day, 2010," *Federal Register*, Vol. 75, No. 230 (December 1, 2010), pp. 74605–74606, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2010-12-01/pdf/2010-30299.pdf (accessed November 14, 2026); Barack Obama, "Proclamation 8755 of November 16, 2011: Thanksgiving Day, 2011," *Federal Register*, Vol. 76, No. 224 (November 21, 2011), pp. 72079–72080, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2011-11-21/pdf/2011-30203.pdf (accessed November 14, 2026); Barack Obama, "Proclamation, 8908 of November 20, 2012: Thanksgiving Day, 2012," *Federal Register*, Vol. 77, No. 228 (November 27, 2012), pp. 70679–70680, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2012-11-27/pdf/2012-28808.pdf (accessed November 14, 2026); Barack Obama, "Proclamation 9063 of November 26, 2013: Thanksgiving Day, 2013," *Federal Register*, Vol. 78, No. 231 (December 2, 2013), pp. 72531–72532, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2013-12-02/pdf/2013-28993.pdf (accessed November 14, 2016); Barack Obama, "Proclamation 9214 of November 26, 2014: Thanksgiving Day, 2014," *Federal Register*, Vol. 79, No. 232 (December 3, 2014), pp. 71621–71622, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2014-12-03/pdf/2014-28494.pdf (accessed November 14, 2026).
96. Barack Obama, Proclamation 9546 of November 23, 2016: Thanksgiving Day, 2016," *Federal Register*, Vol. 81, No. 230 (November 30, 2016), pp. 86553–86554, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2016-11-30/pdf/2016-28941.pdf (accessed November 14, 2026). Also verbatim every year from 2010–2016 and almost verbatim in 2009.
97. Judd Birdsall, "The 'First Thanksgiving' in the 21st Century—as Retold in Presidential Proclamations," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (2021), pp. 55–64.
98. Barack Obama, "Proclamation 9546 of November 23, 2016: Thanksgiving Day, 2016."
99. Like Obama's 2010–2016 proclamations, Biden's conclusions seem to have been copied and pasted rather than written afresh each year.
100. Joseph R. Biden, Jr., "Proclamation 10314 of November 24, 2021: Thanksgiving Day, 2021," *Federal Register*, Vol. 86, No. 228 (December 1, 2021), pp. 68103–68104, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2021-12-01/pdf/2021-26219.pdf (accessed November 12, 2026).
101. Joseph R. Biden, Jr., "Proclamation 10500 of November 23, 2022: Thanksgiving Day, 2022," *Federal Register*, Vol. 87, No. 229 (November 30, 2022), pp. 73431–73432, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2022-11-30/pdf/2022-26158.pdf (accessed November 12, 2026). This appears to be a reference to Lincoln's 1863 proclamation, in which the President "recommend[ed]" that all his fellow citizens "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 full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquillity, and union." Lincoln, "Proclamation 106—Thanksgiving Day, 1863," October 3, 1863.
102. Joseph R. Biden, Jr., "Proclamation 10678 of November 22, 2023: Thanksgiving Day, 2023."
103. Ibid. and Joseph R. Biden, Jr., "Proclamation 10865 of November 27, 2024: Thanksgiving Day, 2024."
104. Joseph R. Biden, Jr., "Proclamation 10314 of November 24, 2021: Thanksgiving Day, 2021;" Joseph R. Biden, Jr., "Proclamation 10500 of November 23, 2022: Thanksgiving Day, 2022."
105. Joseph R. Biden, Jr., "Proclamation 10678 of November 22, 2023: Thanksgiving Day, 2023."
106. Joseph R. Biden, Jr., "Proclamation 10865 of November 27, 2024: Thanksgiving Day, 2024."
107. Joseph R. Biden, Jr., "Proclamation 10678 of November 22, 2023: Thanksgiving Day, 2023."

108. Joseph R. Biden, Jr., "Proclamation 10865 of November 27, 2024: Thanksgiving Day, 2024."
109. Donald J. Trump, "Proclamation 9678 of November 17, 2017: Thanksgiving Day, 2017," *Federal Register*, Vol. 82, No. 244 (November 22, 2017), pp. 55721–55722, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2017-11-22/pdf/2017-25497.pdf (accessed November 11, 2026).
110. Donald J. Trump, "Proclamation 9827 of November 20, 2018: Thanksgiving Day, 2018," *Federal Register*, Vol. 83, No. 229 (November 28, 2018), pp. 61109–61110, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2018-11-28/pdf/2018-25982.pdf (accessed November 11, 2026).
111. Donald J. Trump, "Proclamation 9968 of November 27, 2019: Thanksgiving Day, 2019," *Federal Register*, Vol. 84, No. 233 (December 4, 2019), pp. 66281–66282, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2019-12-04/pdf/2019-26283.pdf (accessed November 11, 2026).
112. Donald J. Trump, "Proclamation 10121 of November 25, 2020: Thanksgiving Day, 2020," *Federal Register*, Vol. 85, No. 232 (December 2, 2020), pp. 77343–77344, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2020-12-02/pdf/2020-26629.pdf (accessed November 11, 2026).
113. The *Mayflower* sailed from Plymouth, England, on September 16 (O.S., September 6), 1620, and first sighted Massachusetts on November 19 (O.S., November 9). The *Mayflower Compact*, which would serve the Plymouth Colony as a foundational agreement for self-government, was signed before the ship was anchored in Provincetown Harbor on November 21 (O.S., November 11). See William Bradford, *Of Plimoth Plantation*, in *Plymouth Colony: Narratives of English Settlement and Native Resistance from the* Mayflower *to King Philip's War*, ed. Lisa Brooks and Kelly Wisecup (New York: Library of America, 2022), pp. 312–322. President Trump's 2020 Thanksgiving Proclamation was issued on November 25.
114. Donald J. Trump, "Proclamation 10121 of November 25, 2020: Thanksgiving Day, 2020."
115. Joseph R. Biden, Jr., "Proclamation 10314 of November 24, 2021: Thanksgiving Day, 2021."
116. Donald J. Trump, "Proclamation 10994 of November 25, 2025: Thanksgiving Day, 2025," *Federal Register*, Vol. 90, No. 230 (December 3, 2025), pp. 55787–55788, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/FR-2025-12-03/pdf/2025-21910.pdf (accessed November 11, 2026).
117. Ronald Reagan, "Proclamation 5551 of October 13, 1986: Thanksgiving Day, 1986."
118. William J. Clinton, "Proclamation 6594 of November 11, 1996: Thanksgiving Day, 1996."
119. Donald J. Trump, "Proclamation 9968 of November 27, 2019: Thanksgiving Day, 2019."
120. Richard Nixon, Proclamation 4170, "Thanksgiving Day, 1972."
121. George Washington, "Proclamation—Day of National Thanksgiving," October 3, 1789.