

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Modern Thanksgiving Proclamations

RONALD REAGAN AND BARACK OBAMA

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A president's speech or declaration reflects and reveals the mind and heart of the president who makes it. It also tells us something about the spirit of the times and the beliefs of the nation to which it is addressed. In fact, one could learn a lot about the changing opinions and sentiments of our nation by reading, in order, all the presidential Thanksgiving proclamations from Washington (and especially Lincoln) to the present day. To enable readers to experience some of these changes, we present here two recent proclamations, one from 1988 by President Ronald Reagan (1911–2004) and one from 2011 by President Barack Obama (b. 1961). Compare these two proclamations, both with each other and with those of Presidents Washington and Lincoln, above. What is the tone, mood, and spirit of each proclamation? To whom, and for what, is thanksgiving being recommended? Which one comes closer to your own understanding of the meaning of the National Day of Thanksgiving?

I.

The celebration of Thanksgiving Day is one of our Nation's most venerable and cherished traditions. Almost 200 years ago, the first President of these United States, George Washington, issued the first national Thanksgiving Day Proclamation under the Constitution and recommended to the American people that they "be devoted 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." He called upon them to raise "prayers and supplications to the Great Lord and Ruler of Nations," not merely for continued blessings on our own land but on all rulers and nations that they might know "good government, peace, and concord."

A century ago, President Grover Cleveland called for "prayers and song of praise" that would render to God the appreciation of the American people for His mercy and for the abundant harvests and rich rewards He had bestowed upon our Nation through the labor of its farmers, shopkeepers, and tradesmen. Both of these Proclamations included something else as well: a recognition of our shortcomings and transgressions and our dependence, in total and in every particular, on the forgiveness and forbearance of the Almighty.

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Today, cognizant of our American heritage of freedom and opportunity, we are again called to gratitude, thanksgiving, and contrition. Thanksgiving Day summons every American to pause in the midst of activity, however necessary and valuable, to give simple and humble thanks to God. This gracious gratitude is the service of which Washington spoke. It is a service that opens our hearts to one another as members of a single family gathered around the bounteous table of God's Creation. The images of the Thanksgiving celebrations at America's earliest settlement—of Pilgrim and Iroquois Confederacy assembled in festive friendship—resonate with even greater power in our own day. People from every race, culture, and creed on the face of the Earth now inhabit this land. Their presence illuminates the basic yearning for freedom, peace, and prosperity that has always been the spirit of the New World.

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In this year when we as a people enjoy the fruits of economic growth and international cooperation, let us take time both to remember the sacrifices that have made this harvest possible and the needs of those who do not fully partake of its benefits. The wonder of our agricultural abundance must be recalled as the work of farmers who, under the best and worst of conditions, give their all to raise food upon the land. The gratitude that fills our being must be tempered with compassion for the needy. The blessings that are ours must be understood as the gift of a loving God Whose greatest gift is healing. Let us join then, with the psalmist of old:

O give thanks to the Lord, call on His name, Make known His deeds among the peoples!

Sing to Him, sing praises to Him, Tell of all His wonderful works!

Glory in His holy name; Let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice!

Now, Therefore, I, Ronald Reagan, President of the United States of America, do hereby proclaim Thursday, November 24, 1988, as a National Day of thanksgiving, and I call upon the citizens of this great Nation to gather together in homes and places of worship on that day of thanks to affirm by their prayers and their gratitude the many blessings God has bestowed upon us.

In Witness Whereof, I have hereunto set my hand this fourth day of August, in the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and eighty-eight, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and thirteenth.

RONALD REAGAN



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II.

One of our Nation's oldest and most cherished traditions, Thanksgiving Day brings us closer to our loved ones and invites us to reflect on the blessings that enrich our lives. The observance recalls the celebration of an autumn harvest centuries ago, when the Wampanoag tribe joined the Pilgrims at Plymouth Colony to share in the fruits of a bountiful season. The feast honored the Wampanoag for generously extending their knowledge of local game and agriculture to the Pilgrims, and today we renew our gratitude to all American Indians and Alaska Natives. We take this time to remember the ways that the First Americans have enriched our Nation's heritage, from their generosity centuries ago to the everyday contributions they make to all facets of American life. As we come together with friends, family, and neighbors to celebrate, let us set aside our daily concerns and give thanks for the providence bestowed upon us.

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Though our traditions have evolved, the spirit of grace and humility at the heart of Thanksgiving has persisted through every chapter of our story. When President George Washington proclaimed our country's first Thanksgiving, he praised a generous and knowing God for shepherding our young Republic through its uncertain beginnings. Decades later, President Abraham Lincoln looked to the divine to protect those who had known the worst of civil war, and to restore the Nation "to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility, and union."

In times of adversity and times of plenty, we have lifted our hearts by giving humble thanks for the blessings we have received and for those who bring meaning to our lives. Today, let us offer gratitude to our men and women in uniform for their many sacrifices, and keep in our thoughts the families who save an empty seat at the table for a loved one stationed in harm's way. And as members of our American family make do with less, let us rededicate ourselves to our friends and fellow citizens in need of a helping hand.

As we gather in our communities and in our homes, around the table or near the hearth, we give thanks to each other and to God for the many kindnesses and comforts that grace our lives. Let us pause to recount the simple gifts that sustain us, and resolve to pay them forward in the year to come.

Now, Therefore, I, Barack Obama, President of the United States of America, by virtue of the authority vested in me by the Constitution and the laws of the United States, do hereby proclaim Thursday, November 24, 2011, as a National Day of Thanksgiving. I

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encourage the people of the United States to come together—whether in our homes, places of worship, community centers, or any place of fellowship for friends and neighbors—to give thanks for all we have received in the past year, to express appreciation to those whose lives enrich our own, and to share our bounty with others.

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In Witness Whereof, I have hereunto set my hand this sixteenth day of November, in the year of our Lord two thousand eleven, and of the Independence of the United States of America the two hundred and thirty-sixth.

BARACK OBAMA



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