

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Thanksgiving Proclamation

GEORGE WASHINGTON

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The present selection, the Thanksgiving Proclamation of 1789, was Washington's (and the nation's) first presidential proclamation. Issued in the first year of his first term as president, in response to Congress' request that he recommend a day of public thanksgiving and prayer, Washington used the occasion also to express, in yet another way, his views on the relation between piety and politics, as well as to promote practices that would stand the nation in good stead long after he was gone.

In colonial times, Thanksgiving had been a harvest festival, in which the colonists offered thanks to God Almighty for a good harvest, sometimes by feasting, sometimes by fasting.¹ Thanksgiving would become a regularly celebrated national holiday only during the Civil War, when Abraham Lincoln in 1863 proclaimed a day of national Thanksgiving; each president since has annually issued Thanksgiving Day proclamations. But the first day of national Thanksgiving was proclaimed by George Washington in the first year of the new American republic, whose appearance on the world stage—after the perilous Revolutionary War, the failure of the Articles of Confederation, and the contentious Constitutional Convention—seemed little short of miraculous. Washington spoke not of harvests but (mainly) of matters political.

What reasons does Washington give for issuing this proclamation, and how are they related? Why does Washington emphasize that he is only doing his duty and acceding to Congress's request? What, according to the Proclamation, are the blessings for which the earliest citizens of the United States should have been grateful? For what things should they humbly offer God their prayers and supplications? What do you make of the double prayer "to promote the knowledge and practice of true religion and virtue and the encrease of science among them and Us" (emphasis added)? How does Washington see the relation between religion and science? What do you make of the qualification in the final prayer for temporal prosperity: that it be (only) of "such a degree . . . as he alone knows to be best"? What does Washington hope to accomplish with this Proclamation?

¹ *Such a holiday was celebrated already in the Spanish colony of Florida in the sixteenth century, and in the British colonies of Virginia and Massachusetts in the seventeenth century, most famously in 1621, when the Pilgrims at Plymouth Plantation celebrated their first successful harvest in the company of some of the Native American tribesmen.*

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What kind of unity is he proposing for his fellow citizens, and why does he think it important? Does Washington's Proclamation violate the principle of the separation of church and state? Conversely, can the United States—or any nation—survive and flourish without a connection to something higher than itself or without acknowledging its dependence on a higher power?

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By the President of the United States of America. A Proclamation.

Whereas 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, and Whereas both Houses of Congress have by their joint Committee requested me “to recommend to the People of the United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many signal favors of Almighty God, especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness.”

Now therefore I do recommend and assign Thursday the 26th. day of November next to be devoted by the People of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be. That we may then all unite in rendering unto him our sincere and humble thanks, for his kind care and protection of the People of this country previous to their becoming a Nation, for the signal and manifold mercies, and the favorable interpositions of his providence, which we experienced in the course and conclusion of the late war, for the great degree of tranquillity, union, and plenty, which we have since enjoyed, for the peaceable and rational manner in which we have been enabled to establish constitutions of government for our safety and happiness, and particularly the national One now lately instituted, for the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed, and the means we have of acquiring and diffusing useful knowledge and in general for all the great and various favors which he hath been pleased to confer upon us.

And also that we may then unite in most humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations and beseech him to pardon our national and other transgressions, to enable us all, whether in public or private stations, to perform our several and relative duties properly and punctually, to render our national government a blessing to all the People, by constantly being a government of wise, just and constitutional laws, discreetly and faithfully executed and obeyed, to protect and guide all Sovereigns and Nations (especially such as have shown kindness unto us) and to

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bless them with good government, peace, and concord. To promote the knowledge and practice of true religion and virtue, and the encrease of science among them and Us, and generally to grant unto all Mankind such a degree of temporal prosperity as he alone knows to be best.

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