

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Thanksgiving Day Proclamation

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Abraham Lincoln (1809–65) issued this proclamation for a day of national thanksgiving on October 3, 1863, in the midst of the Civil War, not long after the battle of Gettysburg and several other Union successes seemed to have turned the tide toward a Union victory. Like so many of his famous speeches, this modest presidential proclamation displays the extraordinary understanding, statesmanship, and generosity of soul that distinguished the 16th President of the United States.

Page | 1

How does Lincoln’s beginning capture the audience’s sympathy? What, exactly, are the blessings for which he believes that thanksgiving is in order, even “in the midst of a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity”? Why does he believe that, despite the human “waste” of the war, the country may be permitted to “expect continuance of years with large increase of freedom”? What is his understanding of “the Most High God,” His relation to the United States, and “our sins”? What do you think Lincoln is hoping to teach the nation here? Imagining yourself as a Confederate auditor of this proclamation; would you be inclined to accept the invitation and recommendation Lincoln offers in the long fifth paragraph to “my fellow-citizens in every part of the United States”? Is Lincoln’s case for “a day of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father” still persuasive today?

The year that is drawing toward its close has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added which are of so extraordinary a nature that they can not fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever-watchful providence of Almighty God.

In the midst of a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity, which has sometimes seemed to foreign states to invite and to provoke their aggression, peace has been preserved with all nations, order has been maintained, the laws have been respected and obeyed, and harmony has prevailed everywhere, except in the theater of military conflict, while that theater has been greatly contracted by the advancing armies and navies of the Union.

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Needful diversions of wealth and of strength from the fields of peaceful industry to the national defense have not arrested the plow, the shuttle, or the ship; the ax has enlarged the borders of our settlements, and the mines, as well of iron and coal as of the precious metals, have yielded even more abundantly than heretofore. Population has steadily increased notwithstanding the waste that has been made in the camp, the siege, and the battlefield, and the country, rejoicing in the consciousness of augmented strength and vigor, is permitted to expect continuance of years with large increase of freedom.

Page | 2

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 mercy.

It has seemed to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently, and gratefully acknowledged, as with one heart and one voice, by the whole American people. I do therefore invite my fellow-citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next as a day of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the heavens. And I recommend to them that while offering up the ascriptions justly due to Him for such singular deliverances and blessings they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to His tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners, or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and 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 the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquility, and union.

In testimony whereof I have hereunto set my hand and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed.

Done at the city of Washington, this 3d day of October, A. D. 1863, and of the Independence of the United States the eighty-eighth.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN.