

## George Washington Thanksgiving Proclamation

- I. About the Author
- II. Summary
- III. Thinking about the Text
- IV. Thinking with the Text

### I. About the Author

For any American, George Washington (1732–99) is—or ought to be—a man who needs no introduction. Commander-in-chief of the Continental Army in the War of American Independence (1775–83), president of the Constitutional Convention of 1787, and unanimously chosen to be the first president of the United States (1789–97), Washington has long enjoyed the deserved reputation as the Father of his Country. Universally admired for his courage, integrity, and judgment, Washington had great influence and power as the nation’s first president. But ever mindful of the precedents that he would be setting for future leadership, he took pains to cultivate practices and manners that would stand the nation in good stead long after he was gone from the scene. Such considerations appear evident in his Thanksgiving Proclamation of 1789, Washington’s (and the nation’s) first presidential proclamation, issued in the first year of his first term as President of the United States.

### II. Summary

In colonial times, Thanksgiving was a harvest festival, in which the colonists offered thanks to God Almighty for a good harvest, sometimes by feasting, sometimes by fasting. 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. Thanksgiving became a regularly celebrated national holiday only during the Civil War, when Abraham Lincoln proclaimed a day of national Thanksgiving in 1863, and each president since has annually issued Thanksgiving Day proclamations. The date for the

# WHAT SO PROUDLY WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

# STUDY GUIDE

holiday was set as the fourth Thursday in November by an act of Congress only in 1941.

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.

The structure of his proclamation is straightforward. After the formal introductory opening—“By the President of the United States of America. A Proclamation.”—the three paragraphs deal in turn with the reasons President Washington is issuing the proclamation, the things for which he recommends we give thanks to God, and the things for which we should humbly offer God our prayers and supplications.

## III. Thinking about the Text

### A. The Reasons for the Proclamation

1. What are the two reasons Washington gives for issuing the proclamation?
2. How are they related to each other? Which do you think is more important?
3. Why does Washington emphasize that he is only doing his duty and acceding to Congress’s request?
4. Why does Congress ask him merely to “*recommend*” a day of public thanksgiving and prayer?
5. To whom is the proclamation addressed? What does it recommend that they do?

### IN CONVERSATION

*In this conversation, Amy A. Kass and Leon R. Kass discuss Washington’s Proclamation with Diana Schaub, coeditor of What So Proudly We Hail, and Christopher DeMuth, distinguished senior fellow at the Hudson Institute.*

**Diana Schaub:** Washington first says that giving thanks is the duty of all nations, so his proclamation is not exclusively American. Second, he says that he is

# WHAT SO PROUDLY WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

# STUDY GUIDE

responding to the will of Congress: it is Congress who has made this request of him. It is not an executive decree that Washington himself has come up with.

**Christopher DeMuth:** Washington was very conscious of the precedential value of everything that he did. The important thing about these two reasons he gives is this: he is being dutiful. He is not stepping out as the chief executive; he is not bossing anyone around. In fact, he is pursuing this matter of great importance as a duty as president, both because nations have a duty to give thanks and because Congress has asked that he make this recommendation.

**Diana Schaub:** There is one new element, which is that Washington's proclamation is addressed directly to the people of the states, whereas the previous proclamations of the Continental Congress were addressed simply to the states themselves. In this proclamation, you can see a movement in the direction of a more consolidated nation—a true union.

**Leon Kass:** Exactly. This is the first presidential proclamation to an entire nation, recommending some activity on their part—but Washington only does this because the representatives of those people have requested that he do so. To this he adds that the duty is a universal one. So it is a combination of the universal and the particular, the national, just in the point of departure.

*For more discussion on this question,  
[watch the video online.](#)*

## B. The Things for Which Thanks Should Be Given

1. Make a list of the several items in the proclamation (second paragraph) for which thanks should be given. Do you see any order in the list?
2. Which items do you think are most important? To Washington? To us today?
3. To whom are thanks to be given? What view of the divine is operative here?
4. Are the “great and various favors which He hath been pleased to bestow on us” personal and private or communal and public? What is the relation between the private and public blessings?
5. What do you think of Washington's language? Can you find in it echoes of the Bible or of the Constitution? (Compare, for instance, the language of the final

# WHAT SO PROUDLY WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

# STUDY GUIDE

paragraph to [St. Paul's First Epistle to Timothy, Chapter 2](#), or to Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution.)

## IN CONVERSATION

**Amy Kass:** Washington turns this celebration, which was a harvest festival to begin with, into what is clearly a political holiday. And so our thanks are, first and foremost, to God Almighty for blessing the nation and for the nation's establishment and perpetuation. And secondly, he turns the citizenry toward thanking God for the blessings He has provided and will continue to provide. The structure is past, present, and future.

**Christopher DeMuth:** This proclamation was issued after thirteen years of intense activity: a war which looked like it was going to be lost from month to month, the dissolution of the original constitution and the construction of the new Constitution, and the creation of an entirely new political order. This was an extraordinarily intense period, and to some extent everything was political. But, at the end of it, with the new Constitution and the new president, everything had fallen into place, and it seemed miraculous. When Washington says that we should take this occasion of the harvest thanksgiving to give thanks for what is more important to all of us, he is really speaking for the entire nation.

I find the language very interesting. He has some Biblical cadences, and he has some constitutional cadences. His emphasis is very much on the great blessings of this new constitutional order. He has very few references to things that are purely private and personal, but every one of them is derivative of the Constitution: civil and political liberties, for example, or the progress of science. So the proclamation is strongly political, but it came at a time that is probably the most intensely political time of our whole history.

**Amy Kass:** And the very fact that Washington turns our attention to God and to Providence makes this proclamation utterly enduring. In fact, it reflects the insight of a wise man who once said: "No gods, no city."

*For more discussion on this question,  
[watch the video online.](#)*

## C. The Things for Which We Should Pray

1. Make a list of the several items for which prayer should be made (third paragraph). Do you see any order in the list?
2. Which items do you think are most important? To Washington? To us today?
3. Why does Washington begin with the prayer “to pardon our national and other transgressions”? Which national transgressions might he have in mind?
4. 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?
5. 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”? Were you to pray for prosperity today, would you include such a qualifying clause?

### IN CONVERSATION

**Diana Schaub:** Most striking is the first thing Washington encourages us to pray for. He says that our prayers should be “supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations and beseech him to pardon our national and other transgressions.” This is an element that tends to drop out of presidential proclamations, though it is, of course, present in Lincoln’s and in Adams’s. Indeed, John Adams actually called for a day of humiliation, fasting, and prayer—and he did this on two occasions, which may have led Thomas Jefferson to abandon the tradition altogether when he was president.

**Leon Kass:** The motion of the prayers begins with our transgressions, moves to our duties, then asks that our government be, in fact, a blessing to all people. Then it moves out to the sovereigns of other nations, and then to humankind altogether to “promote the knowledge and practice of true religion and virtue, and the encrease of science . . . and generally to grant unto all Mankind such a degree of temporal prosperity as he alone knows to be best.” I like this last touch very much. It’s not a prayer for the maximum amount of increase of this or that, but the recognition that even in our prayers we should understand the limitations of

# WHAT SO PROUDLY WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

## STUDY GUIDE

what might be good for us, as opposed to what we might wish for.

**Amy Kass:** The suggestion is that God alone knows measure.

*For more discussion on this question,  
[watch the video online.](#)*

### D. Washington's Purposes

1. What does Washington hope the Proclamation will accomplish?
2. In both the paragraph about thanksgiving and the paragraph about prayers, Washington speaks about the people uniting: "That we may then all unite in rendering him our sincere and humble thanks"; "that we may then unite in humbly offering our prayers and supplications." What kind of unity is he proposing for his fellow citizens? Why does Washington think it important?

## IV. Thinking with the Text

Washington's Thanksgiving Proclamation raises questions about the role of government in our private and religious lives, about the place of religion and piety in the American political order, about the connection between our public and our private—and between our natural and our political—blessings. It also invites questions about the meaning of the holiday of Thanksgiving and the role it should play in American life today.

### A. Government, Private Life, and Religion

1. Should government in a free society be in the position of recommending a day of service to God? Is Washington's Proclamation a violation of the First Amendment to the Constitution?
2. Can a governmental—or any other—proclamation such as this induce the gratitude that it recommends? Or is genuine gratitude something that cannot be willed? If so, can setting aside time for gratitude make room for its expression?

# WHAT SO PROUDLY WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

# STUDY GUIDE

## IN CONVERSATION

**Christopher DeMuth:** I don't think that it is too much of a stretch to see this proclamation as an aspect of American exceptionalism. There are many great and worthy nations, and Washington begins by saying that they all have the duty to give thanks, but *this* is the nation where the president is recognizing this duty and recommending it to the people of his nation. And though many of the blessings for which we are to give thanks were like manna from heaven—gifts directly from God—many came in the form of God working through the agency of the agents of the American Revolution for the past thirteen years.

Ours is a nation that created itself, more so than many other great nations. And in that sense we as a nation have more to unite us and more to give thanks for. It is not just that we are all on this same piece of geography or that we share common blood or traditions, but that this nation is one that *we* created. We are not the only nation that has a Thanksgiving, but I think it has an importance to Americans in that it melds our personal lives and our national lives in a way that is fitting for a nation with our peculiar history.

**Amy Kass:** It never would have occurred to me to think of this as an aspect of American exceptionalism, but I think that makes sense. But, on the really basic question of whether a government can exhort somebody to give thanks: you can tell somebody to give thanks, just as we try to teach our children always to say thank you, but genuine gratefulness is not something you can insist upon. It is something that has to come from the heart. And for that reason, I think Washington is very smart to say that he *recommends* this. The emphasis is on recommendation, not on insistence.

**Diana Schaub:** It is not a command, it is a recommendation—or, as Lincoln says, an “invitation.” But it is very important to extend that invitation and to provide the occasion. When you provide the occasion in a public way like this, in a communal way, it does help to draw that feeling forth.

*For more discussion on this question,  
[watch the video online.](#)*

# WHAT SO PROUDLY WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

# STUDY GUIDE

## B. Religion, Piety, and the American Political Order

1. What is the relation between the strength of the American nation and the spirit of religion?
2. Can the United States of America do without a connection to something higher than itself?

## C. Public and Private Blessings

1. Thanksgiving was, to begin with, a holiday of the harvest, expressing thanks to God for the bounty of nature. Washington's Proclamation emphasizes mainly the blessings of our political—constitutional—order. Is one more important than the other? For which should we Americans today be most grateful?
2. On what do our greatest blessings depend? God and nature? Human enhancement of the gifts of nature and/or nature's God? Fortune? Something else?
3. To what extent are our private and personal blessings dependent on public and political ones?
4. When we gather around our own Thanksgiving tables, for what are we inclined to be most grateful? For private and personal goods and joys? For communal and political benefits? For divine gifts?
5. For what should we give thanks this year, as American citizens? For what should we be praying, as American citizens?

### IN CONVERSATION

**Christopher DeMuth:** Thanksgiving is a time for pause. It is a sort of national Sabbath. We gather in a home as a family, and we have a set meal—a meal that is a kind of set menu that many people follow, and we give thanks.

When we look at Washington's Proclamation, the emphasis is on giving thanks to and for the nation, and there is very much a public character to that. But my own Thanksgivings when I was a boy had no political or national components to them. But even when it is focused on the personal, on the family, where we share our family trials and tribulations and triumphs and talk about the day, Thanksgiving is

# WHAT SO PROUDLY WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

# STUDY GUIDE

different from other such family meals because millions and millions of other people are doing it at the same time. It does have this sacramental character in that we are talking about the personal, but we are one of millions of small platoons who are doing the same thing.

*For more discussion on this question,  
[watch the video online.](#)*

## D. Thanksgiving and the National Calendar

1. What is special about Thanksgiving as a national holiday today? Is it a public or a private and familial holiday?
2. What is the place of Thanksgiving on our national calendar? How does it compare—in substance, tone, and manner of celebration—to the Fourth of July?
3. How does Thanksgiving express American identity and American character?
4. What does Thanksgiving contribute to American identity and American character?
5. Does our current mode of celebrating Thanksgiving—centered around huge family feasts—fit the deeper meaning of the holiday? What could be added to your own family celebration that might make the day more meaningful?
6. John Adams, who succeeded George Washington as president, recommended a [National Day of Humiliation, Fasting, and Prayer](#) rather than a Thanksgiving Proclamation. What do you think of this idea? Would a more somber fast add something that is currently missing in our Thanksgiving rituals?
7. Can there be genuine thanksgiving on a purely secular foundation?
8. Can there be a solid and enduring political order on a purely secular foundation?

## IN CONVERSATION

**Christopher DeMuth:** I think Thanksgiving has gained importance because it is more and more difficult to observe in the traditional manner. We live in an age of bounty. We live in a world where there are football games and the Macy's

# WHAT SO PROUDLY WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

# STUDY GUIDE

Thanksgiving Day Parade, and some department stores now want to start Black Friday on Thursday evening . . .

**Diana Schaub:** I think it is good to place the holiday in juxtaposition with the Fourth of July. On the Fourth, we take credit for ourselves. We celebrate what *we* did. On Thanksgiving, we place the credit elsewhere. We look higher.

**Amy Kass:** The [Declaration of Independence](#) ends with “and for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence”—we firmly rely on it!—“we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.” Thanksgiving really turns this inside out. Thanksgiving is very close to the Fourth of July, but in a certain way, it’s absolutely the opposite. If the Fourth is about *independence*, Thanksgiving is really about *dependence*.

*For more discussion on this question,  
[watch the video online.](#)*