

The Real Thanksgiving Day

From the Archive: On Thanksgiving Day, the United States celebrates the tradition of Pilgrims and Native Americans sitting down together in Plymouth, Massachusetts, in 1621 to celebrate each other as friendly neighbors. But the reality was not so pleasant, as historian William Loren Katz recalled.

By William Loren Katz (Originally published on Nov. 12, 2009)

Thanksgiving Day remains a most treasured holiday in the United States. Work comes to a halt, families gather, eat turkey, and count their blessings. A presidential proclamation blesses the day. But we must never forget that the holiday pre-eminently serves political ends.

Remember in 2003 when President George W. Bush flew into Bagdad on Thanksgiving Day to visit and celebrate with U.S. troops. He stayed a few hours and brought in a host of media photographers to snap his picture bearing a glazed turkey. No one ate the turkey, of course. It was cardboard, a stage prop.

However, this exploitation of joyous thanksgiving began almost four centuries ago, with a mythology that dates back to the first Thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving Day memorializes the Pilgrims' survival of their first winter in New England. One hundred and forty-nine people had arrived in November 1620 aboard the *Mayflower* and were saved from starvation and disaster because the Wampanoug nation brought them corn and meat and taught them wilderness survival skills.

This truly was an effort worthy of gratitude. And in 1621, Governor William Bradford of Plymouth proclaimed a day of Thanksgiving not to the Wampanougs but to his fellow Pilgrims and their omnipotent God. In Bradford's view, the Christians had staved off hunger through their devotion, courage and resourcefulness. And to this day American politicians, ministers and most educators would have the people see it this way.

Bradford's fable is an early example of "Eurothink" a grotesque lie encased in arrogance. To Europeans, native people and other humans who were neither Christian nor white no matter how much they helped were considered undeserving of recognition. The heroic scenario of determined and righteous European settlers overcoming hardships and travails had no room for the others.

Bradford's tale has his Pilgrims inviting the Native Americans as guests to celebrate the Europeans' victory over famine, an act of Pilgrim generosity as the settlers and their Wampanoug friends sat down to dine on bread, turkey and

other treats. Since the colonists classified their dark-skinned, "infidel" neighbors as inferiors, they were asked to bring and serve not share the food.

As the English pursued their economic goals in the 1620s, they increasingly turned to outright aggression against their Native American neighbors and hosts. Matters came to a head one night in 1637 when Governor Bradford, without provocation, dispatched his militia against his Pequot neighbors. With the Pilgrims seeing themselves as devout Christians locked in mortal combat with infidels, the officers and soldiers made a systematic assault on a sleeping Pequot Indian village.

Bradford described the night of fire, pain and death: "It was a fearful sight to see them frying in the fire and the streams of blood quenching the same and horrible was the stink and stench thereof. But the victory seemed a sweet sacrifice and they [the militiamen] gave praise thereof to God."

The colony's famous minister, Reverend Increase Mather, rejoiced and called on his congregation to give thanks to God "that on this day we have sent six hundred heathen souls to hell." Mather and Bradford are still celebrated in school texts as colonial heroes.

The 1993 edition of the authoritative *Columbia Encyclopedia* states of Bradford, "He maintained friendly relations with the Native Americans." [p. 351] The authoritative *Dictionary of American History* states of his rule: "He was a firm, determined man and an excellent leader; kept relations with the Indians on friendly terms; tolerant toward newcomers and new religions." [p. 77]

The views of Native Americans were not recorded, but can be imagined.

The *Mayflower*, renamed the *Meijbloom* (Dutch for *Mayflower*), continued to make notable voyages. In May 1657, it carried a crucial message to Amsterdam that the new Dutch colony of South Africa needed supplies as Europeans sought to gain control of another piece of the world. Along coastal Africa, the renamed *Mayflower* also became one of the first ships to carry enslaved Africans to the West Indies.

For these and other reasons, those opposed to oppression and favoring democratic values in the Americas have little to celebrate on Thanksgiving Day. It stands as an affirmation of barbaric racial beliefs and actions that soon shaped the world's most unrelenting genocide. What is worth giving thanks to is the alliance between Native Americans and Africans that sprang forth to resist the English, Spanish and other foreign invaders.

In 1619, a year before the Pilgrims' arrival in Massachusetts, 20 Africans were unloaded in Jamestown, Virginia, and traded for food and water. They were sent

out to work in the colony's tobacco fields as unpaid laborers.

Enslaved and persecuted together, people of color fought back together, and often united in armed maroon colonies beyond the white settlements that dotted the coastline. But above all, this alliance initiated an American tradition of resistance to tyranny, a demand for self-rule and equality. Those ideas would appear centuries later written on a parchment celebrated on July 4, 1776.

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