

Primary Source

Presidential Proclamations and Gratitude

George Washington's Thanksgiving Proclamation

On October 3, 1789, President George Washington issued a proclamation declaring November 26 of that year to be a national day of thanks. He cited the success of the Revolutionary War and the creation of the new Constitution as reasons for the necessity of the day to give thanks to God.

Text:

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 shewn kindness unto us) and to 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.

Abraham Lincoln's Thanksgiving Proclamation

In 1863, Union forces won major victories that began to shift the balance of the Civil War in their favor. In September of that year, a 74-year-old newspaper editor named Sarah Hale wrote to President Abraham Lincoln suggesting that he establish an annual day of Thanksgiving. Lincoln agreed and issued the following exactly 74 years after George Washington's Thanksgiving Proclamation.

Text:

By the President of the United States of America.

A Proclamation.

The year that is drawing towards 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 cannot 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 theatre of military conflict; while that theatre has been greatly contracted by the advancing armies and navies of the Union. Needful diversions of wealth and of strength from the fields of peaceful industry to the national defence, have not arrested the plough, the shuttle or the ship; the axe 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 battle-field; and the country, rejoicing in the consciousness of augmented strength and vigor, is permitted to expect continuance of years with large increase of freedom.

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, tranquillity and Union.

Franklin D. Roosevelt's Thanksgiving Proclamation

In 1944, the United States was advancing toward victory in the war against Axis forces in World War II. By this time, Thanksgiving proclamations were an annual occurrence in the United States, and President Roosevelt used it to reflect on the conflict and Americans' role in it.

Text:

In this year of liberation, which has seen so many millions freed from tyrannical rule, it is fitting that we give thanks with special fervor to our Heavenly Father for the mercies we have received individually and as a nation and for the blessings He has restored, through the victories of our arms and those of our allies, to His children in other lands.

For the preservation of our way of life from the threat of destruction; for the unity of spirit which has kept our Nation strong; for our abiding faith in freedom; and for the promise of an enduring peace, we should lift up our hearts in thanksgiving.

For the harvest that has sustained us and, in its fullness, brought succor to other peoples; for the bounty of our soil, which has produced the sinews of war for the protection of our liberties; and for a multitude of private blessings, known only in our hearts, we should give united thanks to God.

To the end that we may bear more earnest witness to our gratitude to Almighty God, I suggest a nationwide reading of the Holy Scriptures during the period from Thanksgiving Day to Christmas. Let every man of every creed go to his own version of the Scriptures for a renewed and strengthening contact with those eternal truths and majestic principles which have inspired such measure of true greatness as this nation has achieved.

Now, Therefore, I, Franklin D. Roosevelt, President of the United States of America, in consonance with the joint resolution of the Congress approved December 26, 1941, do hereby proclaim Thursday the twenty-third day of November 1944 a day of national thanksgiving; and I call upon the people of

the United States to observe it by bending every effort to hasten the day of final victory and by offering to God our devout gratitude for His goodness to us and to our fellow men.