

Washington's Thanksgiving Proclamation

October 3, 1789

INTRODUCTION

Following a resolution of Congress, President George Washington proclaimed Thursday the 26th of November 1789 a day of “public thanksgiving and prayer” devoted 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.” Reflecting American religious practice, Presidents and Congresses from the beginning of the republic have from time to time designated days of fasting and thanksgiving (the Thanksgiving holiday we continue to celebrate on the third Thursday of November was established by Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War).

In setting aside a day for Thanksgiving, Washington established a non-sectarian tone for these devotions and stressed political, moral, and intel-

lectual blessings that make self-government possible, in addition to personal and national repentance. Although the First Amendment prevents Congress from establishing a religion or prohibiting its free exercise, Presidents, as well as Congress, have always recognized the American regard for sacred practices and beliefs. Thus, throughout American history, Presidents have offered non-sectarian prayers for the victory of the military and in the wake of catastrophes. Transcending passionate quarrels over the proper role of religion in politics, the Thanksgiving Proclamation reminds us how natural their relationship has been. While church and state are separate, religion and politics, in their American refinement, prop each other up.

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Thanksgiving Proclamation

Issued by President George Washington, at the request of Congress, on October 3, 1789

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 and 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 favor, able interpositions of His providence 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 has 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 to us), and to bless them with good governments, peace, and concord; to promote the knowledge and practice of true religion and virtue, and the increase 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.

Given under my hand at the City of New York the third day of October in the year of our Lord 1789.

Go. Washington