

HOW WE CELEBRATE DEFINES US AS A COUNTRY

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Thanksgiving Day reflects what we share in common, believe in common and are committed to in common. And in this case, it's the recognition that American freedom has wrought benefits to its people like no other nation in the history of the world.

Across our land people of varied faiths, politics, races and ethnicities join together to build better communities. No nation does this better than Americans.

Look around. There is hardly anything in your community that wasn't the product of local citizens making it happen: a recreational center, a park, a waterfront development, a United Way and its 45 member agencies, a Race for the Cure, and hundreds of groups and associations dedicated to improving the quality of life for their neighbors.

Thanksgiving Day reminds us of all these blessings and more. It's the longest-living tradition in American life.

It started with the Pilgrims in 1621. George Washington was the first president to declare it a holiday in 1789. Abraham Lincoln set the last Thursday of November in 1863 as a national Thanksgiving Day. Every president followed the precedent until Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

As a Depression-era economic stimulus - a longer Christmas shopping season - Roosevelt moved it back to the fourth Thursday in 1939 and to the third Thursday in 1940. But only half the nation followed him. Congress settled the matter in 1941 and made Thanksgiving Day a federal holiday to be celebrated on the fourth Thursday of November.

That's the quick history. Yet a tradition is far more than a simple recording of events.

A tradition is something that has been handed down to us. But it's not like the passing of a drumstick from one generation to another.

A tradition - in the original sense of the word - refers to a cultural inheritance derived from the beliefs, experiences, practices and wisdom of our ancestors. It's something that has been incorporated into our very being as a people.

The essence of a national tradition is that it unifies a nation and fosters goodwill among its citizens. It forms part of our national identity and is an expression of who we are as Americans. In other words, it has become a habit of mind, a habit of heart and a habit of action.

First, the enduring belief underlying the Thanksgiving Day tradition is contained in Lincoln's proclamation that the nation should set aside "a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to Almighty God the beneficent Creator and Ruler of the Universe." Our ancestors believed that was a good, right and wise thing to do. And even today, more than 90 percent of Americans proclaim a belief in God or a higher power to whom we are ultimately accountable for our actions as individuals and as a nation.

It's a belief that continues to correct and transform America's moral identity. George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Teddy Roosevelt and Martin Luther King are just a few of the great leaders of our nation that called upon that belief to move American beyond the lesser angels of our nature.

Second, the habits of the heart involved in Thanksgiving Day are not just love, generosity and gratitude, but also duties and responsibilities. It's the glue that keeps a family intact. In this sense, Thanksgiving Day is also a national exemplar - a model to be regularly imitated.

For these are the very habits that keep a community and nation intact. Whatever is practiced in the home will be practiced in the community. It's why since the dawn of humankind the family has been viewed as the fundamental building block of society - the neighborhood, the town, the city, the state, and the nation.

Learning how to share, cooperate, compromise, tolerate differences, express gratitude, and respect others contributes to the formation of our national character. And it all begins around the dinner table. Families that have dinner together have more harmony, less

conflict and stay together. And so does the nation.

Third, traditions can only be kept alive by rituals - that is, by common habitual actions. In America, Thanksgiving has been institutionalized as a national holiday. And according to tradition Americans set aside personal pursuits and interests to spend time with family and friends and to reconnect with the more fundamental values in life.

Part of the tradition around that dinner table is a prayer and acknowledgement of the blessings we and the nation have received. Our ancestors thought that it was a good, right and wise thing to do. And they handed it down to us. It's our tradition.

Happy Thanksgiving, America.

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