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Which Thanksgiving?

By Karl Jacoby
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When Americans sit down to our annual Thanksgiving meal with family and friends, we like to imagine that we are reenacting a scene that first took place in 1621. That year, having made a successful harvest after a brutal winter that killed half their number, the 50 or so surviving Colonists in Plymouth "entertained and feasted," in the words of one, a visiting delegation of nearby Wampanoag Indians, led by "their greatest king," Massasoit.

American holidays, however, sometimes reveal more about what we have forgotten about the past than what we remember. Historical records indicate that the parties dined on venison and corn rather than on the stuffing, cranberry sauce and pumpkin pie Americans have come to associate with Thanksgiving, and that the feast probably took place in the early autumn rather than November. Moreover, it is not even clear that the Pilgrims referred to their 1621 celebration as a thanksgiving. To devout Pilgrims, a day of thanksgiving was usually a solemn religious undertaking, marked by worship and, often, fasting. It was not a day spent gorging on wild deer and engaging in "recreations" with one's Indian neighbors.

Although there were sporadic local Thanksgiving days in Colonial and early America, it was not until the middle of the Civil War -- 1863 -- that President Lincoln issued a proclamation making the last Thursday in November a national holiday of Thanksgiving. Lincoln's statement suggested that thanks were being given as much for "the advancing armies and navies of the Union" as for a bountiful harvest, and the president urged special prayers for "all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged."

Not surprisingly, few at the time viewed Thanksgiving as a private, family occasion. Instead, Northern civilians donated turkey and cranberries to feed Union troops, while Jefferson Davis declared separate Thanksgiving holidays for the Confederacy.

During Reconstruction, many Southerners initially expressed reluctance at celebrating what they saw to be a Yankee holiday. And yet it was at this moment, as the recently rejoined United States struggled to reconcile its populace after a divisive Civil War, that it became useful to reinvent the history of Thanksgiving. Most Americans found it far more pleasant to imagine this American holiday as originating not during the traumas of the 1860s but rather during the more distant past of the early 1600s. To partisans of the Union and the Confederacy alike, the image of Pilgrims and Indians sitting down together to a shared meal offered a comforting vision of peace between potential rivals.

Yet this new image of Thanksgiving not only allowed Americans to gloss over the deep divisions that had led to the Civil War, it also overlooked much of the subsequent history of the Pilgrims' relations with their Indian neighbors. About 50 years after Massasoit and his fellow Wampanoags enjoyed their harvest meal at Plymouth, the Colonists' seizures of Wampanoag land would precipitate a vicious war between Plymouth Colony and the Wampanoags, now led by Massasoit's son, Metacom.

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Most of the other peoples in New England at first tried to avoid the conflict between the onetime participants in the "first Thanksgiving." But the confrontation soon engulfed the entire region, pitting the New England Colonies against a fragile alliance of Wampanoags, Narragansetts, Nipmucs and other Native American groups. Although these allies succeeded in killing hundreds of Colonists and burning British settlements up to the very fringes of Boston itself, the losses suffered by New England's indigenous peoples were even more devastating. Thousands died over the two years of the war, and many of those captured were sold into slavery in the British West Indies, including Metacom's wife and 9-year-old son.

Metacom met his end at the hands of a Colonial scouting party in August of 1676. His killers quartered and decapitated his body and sent Metacom's head to Plymouth, where for two decades it would be prominently displayed on a pike outside the colony's entrance. That same year, as the violence drew to a close, the colony of Connecticut declared a "day of Publique Thanksgiving" to celebrate "the subdueing of our enemies."

Perhaps it is not surprising that we choose to remember the Thanksgiving of 1621 and to forget the Thanksgiving of 1676. Who, after all, would not prefer to celebrate a moment of peaceful unity rather than one of bloody conflict? But if our public holidays are meant to be moments for self-reflection as well as self-congratulation, we should think of Thanksgiving not as a perpetual reenactment of the "first Thanksgiving" of 1621 but instead as a dynamic event whose meaning has shifted over time.

We need not forget Massasoit's pleasant experiences dining with the Pilgrims in order to remember the more troubling fate of his son at the hands of the Pilgrims' descendants. Indeed, commemorating all the many reasons Americans have expressed thanks over the centuries allows us to come to a more complete and more honest understanding of our history. For while we cannot change events in the past, we do have the power to decide what we wish to be thankful for now and in the future.

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