

Lincoln Lore

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LINCOLN'S THANKSGIVING PROCLAMATIONS

While we usually associate Thanksgiving Day, observed as early as 1621, with the family festivals of the Pilgrim Fathers, the origin of this national holiday is traced to the administration of Abraham Lincoln.

It would appear, from a study of the many proclamations of thanksgiving, fasting, and prayer issued by President Lincoln during the period of the Civil War, that no certain date could be established when the idea of an annual thanksgiving service first took form. On August 12, 1861, but five months after his inauguration, Lincoln issued a proclamation recommending "the last Thursday in September next as a day of humiliation, prayer and fasting for all the people of the Nation." On April 10, 1862, the people of the United States were invited to gather in their accustomed places of public worship at the next assembly to "render thanks" for victories won, "implore spiritual consolation" for the afflicted, and "invoke Divine guidance" for the National counsellors.

The year 1863 seems to have been accepted generally as the time when the idea of Thanksgiving took a more definite form. As early as the month of March the Senate of the United States requested the President "to designate and set apart a day for national prayer and humiliation." Lincoln "fully concurred in the views of the Senate" and issued a proclamation setting aside "April 30, 1863, as a day of national humiliation, fasting, and prayer."

On July 4, in announcing to the country the progress of the military activities, he requested that "on this day He whose will, not ours, should ever be done be everywhere remembered and revered with profoundest gratitude."

Eleven days after this announcement Lincoln issued another proclamation of thanksgiving for the victories of the Union forces, and set apart "Thursday, the sixth day of August next, to be observed as a day of national thanksgiving, praise, and prayer."

It was on October 3, 1863, that the proclamation influenced by the harvest season was issued, which may be considered more in harmony with the atmosphere surrounding the present observance of the day. This proclamation is printed here in full.

Proclamation for Thanksgiving October 3, 1863

The year that is drawing toward 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 the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever-watchful providence of almighty God.

In the midst of a civil war of unequaled magnitude and severity, which has sometimes seemed to foreign states to invite and provoke their aggressions, 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 theater of military conflict; while that theater 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 defense have not arrested the plow, the shuttle, or the ship; the ax 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 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, tranquility, and union.

In testimony, etc.

A. Lincoln.

By the President:
William H. Seward,
Secretary of State.

On three occasions, at least, in 1864, May 9, July 7, and September 3, the President issued proclamations in honor of victories achieved by the army.

The opening sentence of the proclamation of October 20, 1864, implies that Lincoln was thinking in the terms of an annual Thanksgiving Day.

Proclamation for Thanksgiving October 20, 1864

It has pleased almighty God to prolong our national life another year, defending us with his guardian care against unfriendly designs from abroad, and vouchsafing to us in his mercy many and signal victories over the enemy, who is of our own household. It has also pleased our heavenly Father to favor as well our citizens in their homes, our soldiers in their camps, and our sailors on the rivers and seas, with unusual health. He has largely augmented our free population by emancipation and by immigration, while he has opened to us new sources of wealth, and has crowned the labor of our working-men in every department of industry with abundant rewards. Moreover, he has been pleased to animate and inspire our minds and hearts with fortitude, courage, and resolution sufficient for the great trial of civil war into which we have been brought by our adherence as a nation to the cause of freedom and humanity, and to afford to us reasonable hopes of an ultimate and happy deliverance from all our dangers and afflictions.

Now, therefore, I, Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States, do hereby appoint and set apart the last Thursday of November next as a day which I desire to be observed by all my fellow-citizens, wherever they may then be, as a day of thanksgiving and praise to Almighty God, the beneficent Creator and Ruler of the universe. And I do further recommend to my fellow-citizens aforesaid, that on that occasion they do reverently humble themselves in the dust, and from thence offer up penitent and fervent prayers and supplications to the great Disposer of events for a return of the inestimable blessings of peace, union, and harmony throughout the land which it has pleased him to assign as a dwelling-place for ourselves and for our posterity throughout all generations.

In testimony, etc.

Abraham Lincoln.

By the President:
William H. Seward,
Secretary of State.