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### Why Is This Thanksgiving Different From All Others?

**By Daniel S. Brenner**

For many in my generation, Thanksgiving has been an historically fabricated, overly commercialized excuse to eat turkey and watch the Detroit Lions. Growing up post-Vietnam, we Generation Xers inherited a cynical approach to American patriotism. The one war we did experience, Desert Storm, seemed like the Atari video game Missile Command. We have been described as a generation that shunned civic life for a fascination with celebrity, technology and wealth, and it is no surprise that less than twenty percent of us bothered to vote in the last presidential election.

I contrast this with my father's generation. For my father, celebrating Thanksgiving was a statement that he was a proud American. His Polish born father served in the U.S. Army during World War I and felt tremendous civic pride as he took his traditional Jewish family to the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. The family's Thanksgiving feasts were even more lavish than their sumptuous Sabbath meals. After college, my father served in the Army, just as his father had before him.

I never considered joining the Army. My perception was that the Army was for

guys who shot deer and for inner-city kids looking for a way out of the ghetto, and besides, I was having too much fun between college and travelling. I was also critical of America -- for the legacy of damage done to the American Indians, and for the brutalities of slavery, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Mai Lai. After reading the story of the S.S. St. Louis, the ship of Jews fleeing the Holocaust, which was turned away by U.S. authorities in 1939, I developed a deep Oliver Stone-like mistrust of the U.S.A.

Today I am displaying an American flag next to my front door. During the World Series, I sang "God Bless America" during each seventh inning stretch. The events of September 11th have changed me. I watched with my own eyes the Towers burn. In the days following the attack, I served as a chaplain in what had become a war zone, and was one of the many who offered help where needed. The spirit of unity and support gave new meaning to my relationship to America.

As Thanksgiving approaches, I want to honor that spirit, and do it in a way that isn't trite or symbolic. After seeing a sign in a convenience store which read "USA rules, Yankees rule" I want to ensure that any patriotic cheering I do is in the context of a thoughtful discussion on national ideals. In other words, I'd like to go a step beyond sticking a toothpicked Old Glory into my pumpkin pie.

For each Jewish holiday, there is a central text which is read, interpreted, and debated. This year, I wonder: If Thanksgiving were a Jewish holiday, what text would we read?

One suggestion might be the letters written by the Pilgrims marking the first Thanksgiving. But I know that a generation after that feast, most of the Indians who participated were either exterminated or sold into slavery during the King Phillip's War. In 1970, when one of the descendants of the Wampanoag tribe was asked to speak at Plymouth Rock, he said: "Today is a time of celebrating for you -- a time of looking back to the first days of white people in America. But it is not a time of celebrating for me. It is with a heavy heart that I look back upon what happened to my people."

I sympathize with those words, and cringe when I see a group of second graders in 17<sup>th</sup> century Thanksgiving costumes. But if we don't start with the first Thanksgiving, where do we begin?

Perhaps, instead, we could recall President Lincoln's proclamation of the national holiday in 1863. During a time of bloodshed, he commended Americans:

While offering up the ascriptions justly due to Him...with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to his tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers....

Lincoln's words speak to our time. After September 11th, we are a nation in mourning, and concerned with orphans and widows. But while recalling that "our perverseness and disobedience" may have been important to rally the nation during the Civil War, to actively lay blame on ourselves for the recent attacks may launch us into a more heated debate than I would like to have at the dinner table.

But if we do not read Lincoln, then what historical texts do we use? After some searching, I found the following excerpt from a speech by George Washington in 1789 in his rather unsuccessful attempt to mark Thanksgiving Day:

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...that we may then all unite in rendering unto Him our sincere and humble thanks...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...instituted for the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed...and, in general, for all the great and various favors which He has been pleased to confer upon us.

This year, at my family's Thanksgiving dinner, I'll read this document. In particular, I love Washington's insistence that "civil and religious liberty" is a blessing, and his focus on rational constitutional democracy. I also will note the place where he delivered the speech, New York City, our first capitol.

On holidays, we search out wisdom from the past to help get our bearings for the future. Right now, with new threats of terror, that future seems more uncertain than ever before. Our flags, and the bowls of cranberries and blueberries with whipped cream might help, but it is the American ideal that I, and I hope the rest of my cynical generation, will be thankful for as we watch that huge turkey roll out onto the fifty yard line.

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