Introduction

In 1621, settlers in Massachusetts celebrated what has come to be regarded as the first thanksgiving in the New World. On October 3, 1789, George Washington issued a proclamation creating the first Thanksgiving Day designated by the national government of the United States of America, to be celebrated on Thursday, November 26, 1789. John Adams and James Madison similarly declared Thanksgiving a holiday. However, it wasn't until October 3, 1863, at the height of the Civil War, that President Abraham Lincoln issued a Thanksgiving Day proclamation encouraging Americans "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 Prayer to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the heavens." Thanksgiving has been celebrated in the United States ever since.

The copy of Lincoln's Proclamation featured here was printed in *Harper's Weekly* on October 17, 1863, to help spread the word about the day of observance. On December 5, *Harper's* published a two-page engraving by renowned artist Thomas Nast illustrating scenes of a grateful nation.

Excerpt

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 Prayer 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 such 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, tranquillity, and union.

Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction and excerpt, and examine the entire text and the engraving. Then apply your knowledge of American history to answer the following questions:

- 1. What reason did President Lincoln provide to explain his decision to formalize the observance of a day of Thanksgiving?
- 2. Who and why did President Lincoln suggest should be remembered during the

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- observance of Thanksgiving?
- 3. Provide specific evidence from the excerpt and the image from *Harper's Weekly* that links Thanksgiving to the Civil War. (Hint: There are many clues, especially in the image).

A Proclamation by the President of the United States of America.

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 can not fail to penetrate and soften even 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 invite and provoke the aggressions of foreign states, peace has been preserved with all nations, order has been maintained, the laws have been respected and obeyed, and harmony has prevailed every where, except in the theatre of military conflict, while that theatre has been greatly contracted by the advancing armies and navies of the Union.

The needful diversions of wealth and strength from the fields of peaceful industry to the national defense have not arrested the plow, the shuttle, or the ship. The axe 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 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 Prayer 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 such 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, tranquillity, and union.

In testimony whereof I have hereunto set my hand, and caused the seal of the United States to be affixed.

Done the city of Washington this third day of October, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, and of the independence of the United States the eighty-eighth.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

By the President:

WILLIAM H. SEWARD, Secretary of State.

Harper's Weekly, October 17, 1863, p. 658. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC01733.05)

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Harper's Weekly, December 5, 1863, pp. 776–777. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC01733.05)