

## American Club Thanksgiving Dinner, 2005

### Address by Ted Blamey

#### The Toast

Americans ... and those who have had the privilege and pleasure of being connected in some way to that great nation ... and everyone else  
Please stand, glasses at the ready, for the toast.....

The President of the United States of America  
May he lead with wisdom and wit and the will of the people.....  
The President

#### The Address

It is now my role to speak to you about Thanksgiving, what it stands for and why it is so significant a festival in America.

After some introspection, I do feel qualified to do this  
... not because I am one-half American (my mother met & married my father in in Washington DC)  
... and not because I have been fortunate to have advanced my education and career in four great (and one not-so-great) American cities  
... nor because I have enjoyed wonderful Thanksgiving celebrations with family and friends in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Virginia, Arizona and California  
... nor certainly because I have any reputation as an after-turkey speaker

BUT because Last month I stood on the site where the Mayflower's pilgrims landed in the New World 385 years ago  
and because Carole, one of my guests tonight, (joining us from San Francisco) was born ten miles from Plymouth Rock, site of the First Thanksgiving – in 1621.

Though neither of us was there at the time, I learned that the pilgrims invited their two key Indian helpers, Squanto and Samoset, plus Chief Massasoit, to share in their Thanksgiving since they had been so instrumental in the pilgrims' successes that summer. The Indians brought their families, numbering over 90 people. The pilgrims were overwhelmed, and didn't have enough food, so the Wampanoags brought along their own supplies for the feast: turkey, deer, berries, squash, cornbread, and beans - things that they'd farmed and that they'd shown the Pilgrims how to care for. Things we have just enjoyed from the expert hand of Chef Marcus and his team.

But there are many myths and misconceptions surrounding the American Thanksgiving tradition. For example, I have also been told the Pilgrims didn't wear buckles on their hats (or even their shoes), that they weren't teetotalers (they smoked tobacco and drank beer). And, most importantly, their first harvest festival and subsequent "thanksgivings" weren't held to thank the local natives for saving their lives.

Yet, there is no way to divorce the spiritual from the celebration of Thanksgiving – at least not the way the Pilgrims envisioned it, a tradition dating back to the ancient Hebrews and their feasts of Succoth and Passover.

The Pilgrims came to America for one reason – to form a separate community in which they could worship God as they saw fit. They had fled England (and the Netherlands) because King James I was persecuting those who did not recognize the Church of England's absolute civil and spiritual authority.

The official story has the pilgrims boarding the Mayflower, sailing to America and establishing the Plymouth colony in the winter of 1620-21. This first winter is hard, and half the colonists die. But the survivors are hard working and tenacious, and they learn new farming techniques from the Indians. The harvest of 1621 is bountiful. The Pilgrims hold a celebration, and give thanks to God. They are grateful for the wonderful new abundant land He has given them.

The official story then has the Pilgrims living more or less happily ever after, each year repeating the first Thanksgiving. Other early colonies also have hard times at first, but they soon prosper and adopt the annual tradition of giving thanks for this prosperous new land called America.

But the real story is this. When the Pilgrims landed in the Plymouth Harbour they found a cold, rocky, barren, desolate wilderness. There was no shelter, no food. The harvest of 1621 was not bountiful, nor were the colonists hardworking or tenacious. 1621 was a famine year and many of the colonists were lazy thieves. Although they had help from Massasoit and the Wampanoags, during the first winter, half the Pilgrims indeed died of sickness or exposure – including wife of the governor of the colony, William Bradford.

In his 'History of Plymouth Plantation,' Bradford, reported that the colonists went hungry for years, because they refused to work in the fields. They preferred instead to steal food. He says the colony was riddled with *"corruption, confusion and discontent."* The crops were small because *"much was stolen both by night and day, before it became scarce eatable."*

Though life improved for the Pilgrims when spring came, they did not really prosper.

Why was it like this?

On the two-month journey of 1620, William Bradford and the other elders wrote an extraordinary charter – the Mayflower Compact. Extraordinary because it established just and equal laws for all members of their new community – believers and non-believers alike. Where did they get such revolutionary ideas? From a book they had been studying – you may also have read it - it's called The Bible.

The original contract the Pilgrims had with their merchant-sponsors in London required that *"all profits & benefits that are got by trade, working, fishing, or any other means"* were to be placed in the common stock of the colony, and that, *"all such persons as are of this colony, are to have their meat, drink, apparel, and all provisions out of the common stock."* A

person was to put into the common stock all he could, and take out only what he needed.

This "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need" was an early form of socialism, and it is apparently why the Pilgrims were starving. Bradford, as governor, recognized the inherent problem with this collectivist system:

*"The experience that was had in this common course and condition, tried sundry years ... that by taking away property, and bringing community into common wealth, would make them happy and flourishing – as if they were wiser than God,"* Bradford wrote. *"For this community [so far as it was] was found to breed much confusion and discontent, and retard much employment that would have been to their benefit and comfort. For young men that were most able and fit for labor and service did repine that they should spend their time and strength to work for other men's wives and children without any recompense ... that was thought injustice."*

But in subsequent years something changed. The harvest of 1623 was different. Suddenly, *"instead of famine now God gave them plenty,"* Bradford wrote, *"and the face of things was changed, to the rejoicing of the hearts of many, for which they blessed God."* Thereafter, he wrote, *"any general want or famine hath not been amongst them since to this day."*

What happened?

After the poor harvest of 1622, writes Bradford, *"they began to think how they might raise as much corn as they could, and obtain a better crop."* They began to question their form of economic organization.

In 1623 Bradford abolished socialism. He gave each household a parcel of land and told them they could keep what they produced, or trade it away as they saw fit. In other words, he replaced socialism with a free market, and that was the end of famines.

*"This had very good success,"* wrote Bradford, *"for it made all hands industrious, so as much more corn was planted than otherwise would have been."*

In fact, in 1624, so much food was produced that the colonists were able to begin exporting corn. They set up trading posts and exchanged goods with the Indians. The profits allowed them to pay off their debts to the merchants in London much faster than expected. The success of the Plymouth colony thus attracted more Europeans and set off what is called the "Great Puritan Migration."

Before establishing free markets, the colonists had nothing for which to be thankful. They were in the same situation as Ethiopians are today, and for the same reasons.

But it wasn't just an economic system that brought the Pilgrims together. It was their devotion to God and His laws. And that's what Thanksgiving is supposed to be about – a recognition that everything we have is a gift from God – even our sorrows.

George Washington issued the first national Thanksgiving proclamation in 1789, the year of his inauguration as President. He called for another Thanksgiving Day in 1795. With other presidents and state governors proclaiming days of thanksgiving at various times, there was no effort to organize a yearly Thanksgiving Day until Mrs. Sarah Joseph Hale started her crusade in 1827. It took thirty-six years until, in 1863, President Abraham Lincoln made his Thanksgiving Day Proclamation. The nation has celebrated the special day ever since.

God bless us, God bless America, and Happy Thanksgiving.

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In recognition of and with thanks to sources used in this address:

- Joseph Farah, WorldNet Daily
- Richard J. Marbury, The Great Thanksgiving Hoax
- David Hill, Thanksgiving – The History and Meaning
- The First Thanksgiving