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Sam Wineburg and Eli Gottlieb: What would George do?

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George Washington issued his Thanksgiving Proclamation in 1789 invoking the "providence of Almighty God," acknowledging "gratitude for His benefits," and "humbly imploring His protection and favor" -- all in the first sentence.

Such phrases lead many religious leaders to claim Washington as a co-religionist. Tim LaHaye, of "Left Behind" fame, asserts that the first president was a "devout believer in Jesus Christ." The American Family Association, the group that sponsored Rick Perry's National Day of Prayer, waved Washington's Proclamation in front of those who claimed the service was unconstitutional.

Over 200 years separate us from Washington's words. Can we be sure that we know what he meant?

We explored this question by giving Washington's text and other documents to a group of well-educated adults. We selected participants who varied in religious beliefs and training in history. We interviewed clergy, atheist scientists and a mix of atheist and believing professors of history.

Clergy viewed Washington as an unabashedly religious leader. A Methodist pastor saw the Proclamation as evidence that the nation was founded on a "general Christian faith" and that "religion and spirituality played a significant role" in the early republic. An evangelical minister ruefully observed that Washington's language would not be tolerated in today's zealously secular political culture.

Scientists also heard echoes of Christian sensibility.

But while clergy applauded Washington's religiosity, scientists bristled at his transgression of the

boundary separating church from state. One scoffed at "all the God talk." Another fumed that Washington blithely assumed that "everybody believed the same thing."

Historians saw something quite different. Regardless of their religious beliefs, they viewed Washington's words as neither an endorsement of a Christian state nor as evidence of the president's piety. Rather, they alighted on the document's civic and secularizing elements, observing not only what Washington said, but also what he didn't.

As one historian pointed out, the Proclamation would "depress Pat Robertson," for nowhere do terms dear to evangelicals -- "Jesus," "Christ," "Christian," "salvation" -- appear. Prominent, instead, are 18th-century phrases like "beneficent Author of the good" and "Great and Glorious Being" that point to the document's author as a deist. Deism, an Enlightenment philosophy, acknowledged a supreme creator but doubted miracles and heavenly intercessions.

Historians were not deaf to the religious references. But they stressed Washington's precision in crafting language that would unite the dizzying array of Protestants in post-Revolutionary America without alienating small but important groups of Catholics, Jews and freethinkers.

Washington's beliefs are notoriously hard to pin down. David Holmes, author of "Faiths of the Founding Fathers," says that it's wrong to equate Washington with avowed deists like Thomas Paine or Benjamin Franklin. Unlike them, Washington's



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preferred term for God was Providence, by which he seemed to have meant a "benevolent, prescient, all-powerful God" but one "who remained at last partially distant and impersonal."

Less debatable is the virtual absence of Christian terminology from the first president's writings, a matter duly noted by contemporaries. The same year Washington issued his proclamation, Presbyterians urged him to make "some explicit acknowledgment of the only true God and Jesus Christ." Washington tactfully rejected their advice: "You will permit me to observe that the path of true piety is so plain as to require but little political direction."

What did George Washington believe? This eludes us.

Today, when claims about Thanksgiving's origins are used to support this or that view, let us remember that history's greatest promise lies in its power to make the strange familiar and the familiar strange. It is precisely because we differ from our predecessors that we have so much to learn from them.

Sam Wineburg is the Margaret Jacks Professor of Education and, by courtesy, of History at Stanford University. Eli Gottlieb is vice president of the Mandel Foundation in Jerusalem. They wrote this for this newspaper.

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