

## HISTORIANS MEET THANKSGIVING: WHAT WOULD GEORGE DO?

Sam Wineburg and Eli Gottlieb

“George Washington’s Thanksgiving Declaration,” October 3, 1789; as printed in *The Providence Gazette and Country Journal*, on October 17, 1789.

*By the President of the United States of America. A Proclamation.*

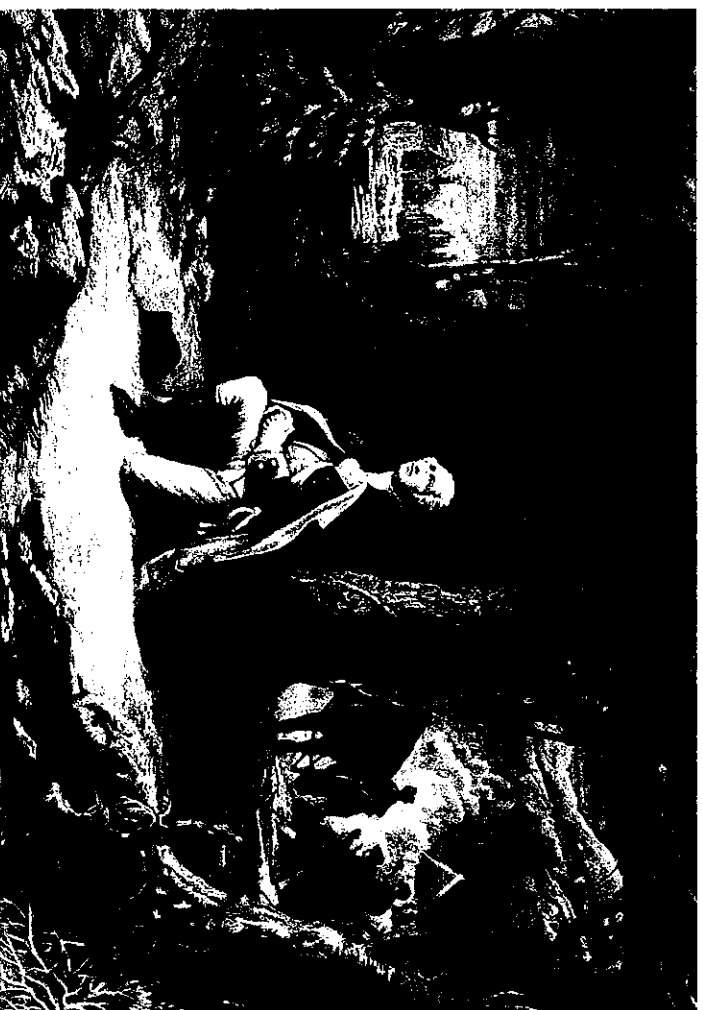
WHEREAS it is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey His will, to be grateful for His benefits, and humbly to implore His protection and favor; and whereas both Houses of Congress have, by their joint committee, requested me “to recommend to the people of the United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer, to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many and signal favors of Almighty God, especially by affording them an opportunity peaceably to establish a form of government for their safety and happiness.”

Now, therefore, 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 who is the beneficent author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be; that we may then all unite in rendering unto Him our sincere and humble thanks for His kind care and protection of the people of this country previous to their becoming a nation; for the signal and manifold mercies and the favorable interpositions of His providence in the course and conclusion of the late war; for the great degree of tranquility, union, and plenty which we have since enjoyed; 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 lately instituted; for the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed, and the means we have of acquiring and diffusing useful

knowledge; and, in general, for all the great and various favors which He has been pleased to confer upon us.

And also that we may then unite in most

of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and eighty-nine.



Henry Brueckner’s 1866 painting *The Prayer at Valley Forge*, engraved by John C. McRae. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-DIG-pga-03965].

humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations, and beseech Him to pardon our national and other transgressions; to enable us all, whether in public or private stations, to perform our several and relative duties properly and punctually; to render our National Government a blessing to all the people by constantly being a Government of wise, just, and constitutional laws, discreetly and faithfully executed and obeyed; to protect and guide all sovereigns and nations (especially such as have shown kindness to us), and to bless them with good governments, peace, and concord; to promote the knowledge and practice of true religion and virtue, and the increase of science among them and us; and, generally, to grant unto all mankind such a degree of temporal prosperity as He alone knows to be best.

Given under my hand, at the city of New York, the third day of October, in the year

In a few weeks Americans of all stripes will lay aside their differences and con-

vene over a Butterball turkey. Our modern holiday can be traced to the earliest days of the republic, even though its best-known symbols—turkeys, Pilgrims, and Indians—didn’t make their appearance until late in the 19th century. On September 25, 1789, the day after the House of Representatives agreed on the wording to the Establishment Clause, New Jersey’s Elias Boudinot presented a resolution that would ask the president “to recommend to the people of the United States a day of public thanksgiving and prayer.” Boudinot, along with Roger Sherman and Peter Silvester, presented their resolution to the president on September 28. Five days later Washington read a proclamation setting aside Thursday, November 26 as a

national day of thanksgiving? More than two centuries later, our fall holiday still offers many Americans a moment to take stock and offer gratitude. The direction of their gratitude, as it was for many in 1789, remains skyward.

On its face, the 1789 Proclamation overflows with piety. The first sentence invokes the “providence of Almighty God,” acknowledging “gratitude for His benefits” and “humbly imploring His protection and favor.” Such language leads today’s religious leaders to count Washington as one of their own. Tim LaHaye, whose *Left Behind* series has sold over 11 million copies, casts Washington as a “devout believer in Jesus Christ” who “accepted Him as His Lord and Savior.” LaHaye does not stop there. Were Washington alive today, LaHaye asserts in his book *Faith of Our Founding Fathers*, the first president would “freely identify with the Bible-believing branch of evangelical Christianity.” David Barton, the tireless founder of WallBuilders, likewise recruited a picture of Washington kneeling in prayer at Valley Forge to grace the cover of his *America’s Godly Heritage*. And politicians like Sarah Palin see proof

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in documents like Washington's Thanksgiving Proclamation that America was established as a Christian nation. All that doubters need to do is "go back to what our founders and our founding documents meant. They're quite clear that we would create a law based on the God of the Bible and the Ten Commandments."

The religious imagery of Washington's Proclamation is impossible to dispute. Beyond the first sentence, subsequent paragraphs offer thanks to the "Lord of all Nations," the "Great and Glorious Being," and the "beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, and that will be." But what, exactly, do these words mean?

In a recent study, we listened carefully as people from different backgrounds sought to make sense of Washington's Proclamation. Our goal was to examine how people's religious commitments and historical expertise influence their readings of historical documents. The Thanksgiving Proclamation was one of fifteen documents we asked our participants to read—seven of them about the origins of the American Thanksgiving and eight of them about the biblical Exodus.<sup>6</sup>

We interviewed sixteen degreed adults, aged 34-65, with varying levels of religious commitment and historical training. For readers high in religious commitment and low in historical training, we turned to clergy and religious teachers. For readers low in both religious commitment and historical training, we turned to Ph.D. bench scientists who defined themselves as agnostics or atheists. To round out our sample, we selected eight university-based historians, half of whom defined themselves as religious believers while the other half called themselves agnostics or atheists. None of our historians is a specialist in the early national period. Each participant was interviewed individually and asked to read aloud Washington's Proclamation, along with the other documents, and to articulate their thoughts as they did so.

What then did we find? Examining Washington's Proclamation, the two ministers in our sample came to the same conclusion about Washington's religious sentiments. One, the leader of an evangelical church, noted that such explicitly religious language would not be tolerated in today's hypersensitive environment, suspicious as it is of any public expression of devotion. The second, the leader of a Methodist church, found support for the claim that the United States was founded on a "general Christian faith" and that "religion and spirituality played a significant role," more so than people are willing to acknowledge today. At the phrase "Glorious Being . . . the beneficent Author of all good that was, that is, or that will be," an Orthodox rabbi nodded approvingly: "I like that. That's true," adding that the young United States was "a nation that believed in God," unlike today, when it has become "godless." Similarly, the principal of a Jewish school used the Hebrew word *berakhab*, or blessing, to characterize the Proclamation as a prayer of

thanks to God.

The four scientists interpreted Washington's words as a ringing endorsement of a religious worldview. However, instead of viewing these words with a wistful nostalgia, they bristled at Washington's transgression of the principle of separation of church and state. Dr. P became annoyed "with all the God talk." Dr. O fumed that the document was "heavy on the God stuff?" Dr. D took umbrage at Washington's presumptuousness, comparing him to a preacher who "assumed that everybody believed the same thing." Overall, the clergy and the scientists were largely in agreement: Washington's Procla-

## Less subject to debate is the virtual absence in Washington's public and private communication of words like "Jesus," "Christ," "Christianity," "Redeemer," or "Savior," or phrases like "shedding of blood" of "redemption of sins."

mation embodies a deeply Christian sensibility. They differed only in whether this sentiment should be applauded or censured.

For their part, historians (with one exception, addressed below) came to the opposite conclusion. Irrespective of their own religious beliefs, historians did not view Washington's words as an unqualified endorsement of a Christian state or evidence of the first president's piety. Rather, they spotlighted the document's civic and secular elements and focused on words conspicuous more for what they don't say than for what they do. As Professor C observed, the document would "depress Pat Robertson," for nowhere do the words "Christian" or "Christianity" appear.

Prominent, instead, are terms recognizable to English-speaking intellectuals of the 18th century, who would detect in phrases like the "beneficent Author of the good" and "Great and Glorious Being" the unmistakable signs that marked one as a deist, or at least someone who drew on common deist conventions. An Enlightenment philosophy, deism acknowledged a supreme creator but eschewed belief in miracles and heavenly intercessions, reserving a particular animus for notions that contravened a rational spirit, like the Eucharist or a trine God. Unalloyed deists used the metaphor of a master watchmaker to describe the Deity, who on winding the springs of this worldly clock, stepped back from its creation, allowing it to tick unaided, in perpetuity. "Cool deists" were a little less hands-off: God was still distant, but directed human affairs through Providence. Nonetheless, the Deity remained as inscrutable as He was all-powerful.

Four of eight historians, religious and non-religious, explicitly evoked deism as they worked

through Washington's Proclamation. Zeroing in on the document's first line, Professor G alighted on Providence, which allowed 18th-century thinkers to avoid a personalization of God "as a being or agent." From the Latin *pro*, advanced, and *videre*, to see, providence conveyed the notion of foresight, or as he put it, "the ordering of human affairs in order to accomplish His purposes."

Historians' sensitivity to linguistic codes helped them discern a narrative arc in the document. It begins by offering obligatory thanks to a nonsectarian deity and reaches its terminus by affirming the new republic's civic and secular aims. Professor B, an evangelical Christian, saw the document as interweaving disparate threads; on one hand, the document reflects the "intense spirituality that characterized the Eastern seaboard during the previous fifty years," and, on the other, it is shaped by the "more secularizing self-confident notion that human beings through their empirical observations and the application of reason can themselves in effect do the work of God and control the natural order." He detected a connection between Washington's phrase "the means we have of acquiring and diffusing useful knowledge" and Benjamin Franklin's American Philosophical Society, whose full title was the American Philosophical Society for Acquiring and Diffusing Useful Knowledge. These additional words symbolize a secularizing impulse that replaced an image of fallen humanity with the Enlightenment hope that mankind can "actually learn the secrets of nature." This revolution in worldview, Professor B explained, was part of Washington's message: "What was once construed to be mystery was now understood to be the possibility of mastery."

Historians were not deaf to the religious references in the document, but stressed Washington's precision in crafting language that would unite the dizzying array of Protestant denominations in post-Revolutionary America without alienating the small but important groups of Catholics, Jews, and freethinkers dotting the American landscape. Only one historian, a specialist in Islamic history, focused on Washington's religious language without noting its secular and civic elements. The other historians agreed that Washington used traditional religious language and symbols for national purposes, marshaling them for civic and secular aims.

None of the historians we interviewed is a specialist on the Washington presidency. But even for those who are, fixing Washington's beliefs is a beguiling process. The first president's religious beliefs were so vague that John Adams once claimed that Washington possessed the "gift of silence."<sup>7</sup> Whether the first president should be considered a deist, as half of the historians labeled him, is itself subject to debate. Paul F. Boller, author of *George Washington and Religion*, stands at one end of the spectrum by casting Washington as a "typical" 18th-century deist who lacked "creedal commitment of any kind."<sup>8</sup> Writing in these pages in June 2009, Chris

Beneke pointed to Washington's endorsement of religion in the Continental Army (arguing that it would "improve discipline, raise morale, check vice") and characterized the president as a "Christian deist."<sup>2</sup> David Holmes distinguishes Washington's strand of deism from that of purists like Tom Paine and Benjamin Franklin, noting that the term Washington favored was Providence, by which he seemed to have meant a "benevolent, present, all-powerful God . . . who remained . . . partially distant and impersonal."<sup>3</sup>

Less subject to debate is the virtual absence in Washington's public and private communication of words like "Jesus," "Christ," "Christianity," "Redeemer," and "Savior," as well as phrases like "shedding of blood" or "redemption of sins." This reticence incurred the wrath of Christian denominations on more than one occasion.<sup>4</sup> What emerges from Washington's writings is a persistent fear of sectarianism and a weighty awareness of how questions of religion tear at civic union. Washington was perhaps most candid in a letter to Sir Edward Newenham during the height of the bloodletting between Ireland's Catholics and Protestants. "Of all the animosities which have existed among mankind," Washington wrote his British correspondent, "those which are caused by a difference of sentiments in religion appear to be the most inveterate and distressing, and ought most to be deprecated."<sup>5</sup>

As cognitive psychologists, two things strike us about our participants' readings of Washington's Proclamation. First, the historians read the Proclamation with exquisite attention to *context*—picking up on subtle linguistic cues, connecting phrases to background knowledge about the period, and employing various tricks of the trade to tease out additional clues about authorial intent and designated audience. Second, although clergy and non-believing scientists diverged predictably in liking or disliking the religious language they encountered, both groups considered the Proclamation to be an unequivocally pro-religious document. It is almost as if historians and non-historians were puzzling over two, quite distinct Thanksgiving Proclamations—one by a deist, wary of stirring up religious conflict, the other by a proselytizer, intent on infusing the fledgling nation with Christian values.

These findings are important not because they are flattering to historians, but because they highlight one of the greatest challenges that teachers of history face in the classroom. Making sense of the past is not simply a question of replacing ignorance with knowledge. It involves becoming sensitive to differences between our own unspoken assumptions and those that operated in different times and places. Such sensitivity is not easily acquired. It requires imagination, intellectual humility, and a great deal of practice. Moreover, as we found elsewhere in our study, the more emotionally charged and personally

significant the material is to the reader (as the biblical narrative of the Exodus was for our committed Christian and Jewish readers), the harder it is to bracket one's immediate identification with the text and allow critical historical consciousness to take hold.

Professional historians, whether conscious of it or not, have developed habits of mind that sensitize them to context and linguistic nuance and enable



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is deified, while our fraternal and domestic ties are strengthened. The seat of my birth, from my eyes, my all I have treasured with exultation, when I beheld you Gov, in obeying his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and thankfulness to improve his protection and favour:

them, with effort, to escape the cages of presentism and personal identification. Precisely because these habits have become second nature for so many teachers of history, they are all too often invisible to students. Failure to make these habits visible leaves students easy prey for reductionist comparisons that paper over the cracks between how people did things then and how we do things now. History education that focuses solely on adding to their stock of historical knowledge can serve, ironically, to reinforce historical naïveté. History educators would do well to remember that becoming a historical thinker is at least as much about learning *how* as it is about learning *that*.

As another Thanksgiving approaches, and the history of the holiday's origins is invoked to support this or that view of how we ought to live, let us remember that history's great 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, wineburg@stanford.edu, is the Margaret Jackes Professor of Education and of History (by courtesy) at Stanford University. Eli Gottlieb, eligo@mandelinststitute.org, is the vice president of the Mandel Foundation-Israel and director of the Mandel Leadership Institute.

<sup>2</sup> Today we remember Thanksgiving by its month and day, the last Thursday in November, and forget its original date. But it would have been different for New Yorkers in 1789, who recognized November 26 as the day after "Evacuation Day," when in 1783 the last British troops quit New York. For citizens of the early republic, November 26 was the anniversary of the first fall day of nationhood freed of British troops on American soil. By the time that President Lincoln issued his Thanksgiving Proclamation in 1863, and certainly by the time President Roosevelt made it legal in 1942, the association with Evacuation Day had faded from memory. But the association with late November, and particularly with Thursday, remained. Clifton Hood, "An Unusable Past: Urban Elites, New York City's Evacuation Day, and the Transformation of Memory Culture," *Journal of Social History* 37 (2004): 883-913.

<sup>3</sup> Lathay cited in Peter R. Henriques, *Realistic Visions: A Portrait of George Washington* (University of Virginia, 2006), 168.

<sup>4</sup> Barton uses Henry Bruckner's 1866 painting, *The Prayer at Valley Forge*, which also appeared on a 1928 United States postage stamp. However, as John Fee notes, the account on which this painting is based "probably did not happen." John Fee, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 174.

<sup>5</sup> Sarah Palin to Bill O'Reilly, *The O'Reilly Factor*, Fox News, New York, May 7, 2010, cited in Jill Lepore, *The Whites of Their Eyes: The Tea Party's Revolution and the Battle over American History* (Princeton University Press, 2010), 157.

<sup>6</sup> For a description of the study as well as the documents, see Eli Gottlieb and Sam Wineburg, "Between *Virtar* and *Communitas*: Epistemic Switching in the Reading of Academic and Sacred History," *Journal of the Learning Sciences* 20 (2011): 1-46. For more on this research method, see Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unimodal Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Temple University Press, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> The term is from Edwin Gaustad, *Faith of Our Fathers: Religion and the New Nation* (Harper & Row, 1987).

<sup>8</sup> Cited in Vincent Phillip Munoz, "George Washington on Religious Liberty," *The Review of Politics* 65 (2003): 15.

<sup>9</sup> Paul F. Boller, *George Washington and Religion* (Southern Methodist University Press, 1963), 448.

<sup>10</sup> Chris Beneke, "America's Whiggish Religious Revolution: An Instance in the Progress of History," *Historically Speaking: The Bulletin of the Historical Society* (June 2009): 31-35.

<sup>11</sup> David L. Holmes, *The Fathers of the Founding Fathers* (Oxford University Press, 2006), 66.

<sup>12</sup> For example, members of the Presbyterian church wrote to Washington in 1789 praising the president for his religious tolerance while criticizing him for his lack of explicitness about Christian belief: "We should not have been alone in rejoicing to have seen some explicit acknowledgement of the *only true God and Jesus Christ, whom he hath sent* inserted somewhere in the Magna Charta of our country." In reply, Washington thanked the Presbyterians for their letter and addressed their concern head-on: "You will permit me to observe that the path of true piety is so plain as to require but little political direction.—To this consideration we ought to ascribe the absence of any regulation, respecting religion, from the Magna-Charta of our Country." Cited in Paul F. Boller, "Washington and Religious Liberty," *William and Mary Quarterly* 17 (1960): 500-501.

<sup>13</sup> October 20, 1792, George Washington Papers, Library of Congress, [http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/P?pgwv:1::temp/~annam\\_oXfmm](http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/P?pgwv:1::temp/~annam_oXfmm); downloaded September 20, 2011.

<sup>1</sup> On the changing symbolism of Thanksgiving see Janet Siskind, "The Invention of Thanksgiving: A Ritual of American Nationality," *Critique of Anthropology* 12 (1992): 167-191.

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