

Column from Sen. Matt Bartle for

Week of Nov. 14, 2005

Although We All Face Difficulties, Think of Your Blessings on Our Day of Giving Thanks

“Radical historians now tell the story of Thanksgiving from the point of view of the turkey” someone once quipped. Perhaps that is an exaggeration, but we must admit we all share the tendency to focus on the negatives and forget to be thankful for the blessings another year has brought.

As 2005 enters its waning days we reflect back on the events of this year. It opened with a stunned world reeling from the untold death and destruction brought by a cataclysmic tsunami. This summer and fall have witnessed intense and lethal hurricanes with names such as Katrina and Rita, which have brought once proud American cities to their knees. Add to that the headlines about various earthquakes and other natural and man-made disasters, and there are plenty of negatives to draw our attention.

Yet a look at our own history reveals that our tradition of Thanksgiving Day, a holiday that reflects something of the core of who we are as Americans, was not born in peaceful times. To the contrary, it has always been a reflection of the good that we find during troubled times – a day to express our gratitude to God for His continuing goodness through difficulty, not for the absence of difficulty.

What we celebrate as Thanksgiving is traditionally tied to a three-day feast hosted by the Pilgrims after their first harvest in 1621. After a long winter that claimed many lives in the Pilgrims’ first year at Plymouth Colony, they nevertheless held a celebration to give thanks for God’s blessings. The colonists invited Native Americans from the surrounding areas and enjoyed a menu of wild fowl, venison, seafood, squash and corn, among other dishes.

The Pilgrims held a day of thanksgiving again in 1623. After that, a tradition began in Plymouth and other New England colonies of setting aside a day to give thanks for the autumn harvest. Although this tradition was not held every year, it persisted throughout the rest of the 17th century and became a foundation of a maturing colonial landscape.

During the difficult days of the Revolutionary War, the Continental Congress appointed one or more Thanksgiving days each year except for 1777. In that year, revolutionary commander George Washington declared the holiday in December as a victory celebration for the defeat of the British at Saratoga. Washington again issued proclamations of the Thanksgiving holiday in 1789 and 1795, this time as the president of a young nation.

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However, it was not until another war, one with an equally important effect on the development of our nation, that Thanksgiving Day was proclaimed a national holiday. Influenced by a series of appeals by Sarah Josepha Hale, Abraham Lincoln issued the proclamation on Oct. 3, 1863, citing “the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies” amid a “civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity.”

None of us can tell what the rest of this year will bring or what 2006 may hold in store. There may be difficult days but it is also true that good days await us. Without looking very hard we can all find many things for which to be thankful. As we approach next Thursday, let’s focus on the blessings of life and liberty, of family and friends, and of the privilege we have of living in this land of plenty.

If you have comments or questions about this week’s column or any other matter involving state government, please do not hesitate to contact me. You can reach my office by e-mail at matt_bartle@senate.state.mo.us or by phone at (888) 711-9278.

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