

MEMO FROM THE MAYOR

SUBJECT: Much to be thankful for, there is.

At a Glance:

- "Our country is in danger, but not to be despaired of. Our enemies are numerous and powerful; but we have many friends, determining to be free, and heaven and earth will aid the resolution. On you depend the fortunes of America. You are to decide the important question, on which rest the happiness and liberty of millions yet unborn. Act worthy of yourselves." —Joseph Warren (1775)
- "In everything give thanks...." 1 Thes 5:18 (KJV)

Turn That Frown Upside Down

I noted on the internet the other day—so it must be true because the Internet Monitors scrub all mis- or disinformation from its medium—that Pocatello had an ordinance making it a public offense to frown. The message Pocatello apparently wanted to convey was “Don’t worry—be happy!” These days, that’s hard.

With gas prices having more than doubled in the last two years, and less-than-robust stock, bond and real estate markets, the threat of nuclear war coming out of Europe and perhaps an even graver danger lurking in the Pacific, it’s hard to be “happy”—let alone thankful—as we approach the national celebration known as Thanksgiving Day.

Thankfully, An Official Thanksgiving Proclamation

On 3 October 1863, President Abraham Lincoln made a Proclamation creating an official Thanksgiving holiday that began, “The year that is drawing towards its close, has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies....” Fruitful fields? Healthful skies? Was Lincoln smoking some of that wacky tobacky? He certainly put a positive spin on things.

1863 brought the bloodiest time of war in our nation’s history with tremendous loss of life on both sides, Union *and* Confederate, as the American Civil War progressed and prepared to enter its third year. How can fields be fruitful when they are full of blood, parts of flesh and rotting corpses, not just from humans but animals, as well? How can skies be healthful when whole forests and groves are being defoliated from rounds of all sizes, including cannon, buzzing through them like angry carnivorous wasps, smashing into any trees or limbs unlucky enough to be in their line of travel? Lincoln’s proclamation constitutes strange language, indeed, considering the times.

From Chancellorsville, to Vicksburg, to Gettysburg, young and not-so-young men were dying and losing limbs. How could Lincoln write such happy talk? Had he taken up Grant's habit?

The October 1863 Proclamation was not the first Lincoln had executed about setting aside a day to give thanks to God. For example, he ordered the closure of government offices for a local Day of Thanksgiving on November 28, 1861. However, in September of 1863, a magazine editor named Sarah Josepha Hale wrote Lincoln, imploring him to make the day he set aside two years earlier, a fixed National Day—at least in the Union. She argued that a day of thanksgiving should be held nationwide on the same day—not a series of different days in the various states. She desired a permanent and fixed American custom.

It must be noted, however, that Lincoln was not the first President to declare a Day of Thanksgiving. That honor goes to George Washington, who, ironically, made such a proclamation on 3 October 1789, exactly 74 years before Lincoln's. As it turns out, Sarah Hale was like the persistent widow in the parable. She had been asking presidents for 15 years to set aside a day of Thanksgiving as a national holiday, but Lincoln was the first to honor her request—and we're better off for it.

Another side note regarding Lincoln's proclamation is that unlike the Gettysburg Address, he did not write the Thanksgiving Day Proclamation; Secretary of State William Seward did (he of Seward's Folly fame). So, we can see, then, that these are not the words of Lincoln, though he adopted them by signing the document. They are, instead, the words of an optimist. One who fenagled the second greatest land purchase in US history, next to Monroe and Livingston closing the deal on the Louisiana Purchase on behalf of the United States and President Jefferson. (The Louisiana Purchase caper, by the way, in our early history, created the Implied Powers Doctrine for the Executive under our Constitution since there is nothing in Article II that says the President can negotiate the purchase of land to increase US territory.)

Coming back to Seward, his words in the proclamation give us a clue as to how, in such chaos as our civil war, he would deign to suggest we set aside a day to thank the Creator of us all, for the blessing we receive: "In the midst of a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity, which has sometimes seemed to foreign States to invite and to provoke their aggression, peace has been preserved with all nations, order has been maintained, the laws have been respected and obeyed, and harmony has prevailed everywhere except in the theatre (sic) of military conflict..."

Well, maybe, if we forget about the five days of bloody rioting in New York in July of

1863 over the draft and Lincoln's suspension of Habeas Corpus and the constitutionally infirm Emancipation Proclamation that forgot to mention the freeing of slaves in Kentucky, Maryland and Delaware, Missouri and West Virginia. Otherwise, everything was simply peachy. So, we find our blessings, then, where we can...well...find them.

What Are You Thankful for This Year?

What will you be thankful for this year? I'm thankful for a wonderful wife of going on 54 years, three wonderful kids who do wonderful things for their communities and eight grandkids who bring joy to their grandparents. Also, the greatest staff a mayor could possibly desire; they excel in all they do, with awards to prove it. And a town that takes care of its own through such outstanding organizations as the Friendship Coalition and a plethora of service and veterans' organizations. In everything, give thanks!"