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Do American Indians Celebrate Thanksgiving?

How do Native Americans make peace with a national holiday that romanticizes the 1621 encounter between their ancestors and English settlers, and erases the deadly conflicts that followed?

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Thanksgiving, as the United States' origin story, leaves out painful truths about the nation's history. Giving thanks, however, has always been part of Native Americans' everyday lives. Image: Earnest L. Spybuck (Absentee Shawnee, 1883–1949). "Shawnee Home Life about 1890," painted in 1910. Pottawatomie County, Oklahoma. 2/5785

This essay was originally published in 2011. It is updated every few years to add new comments from Native American readers.

When I think back about my earliest memories of elementary school, I remember being asked to bring a brown paper sack to class so that it could be decorated and worn as part of the Indian costume used to celebrate Thanksgiving. I was also instructed to make a less-than-authentic headband with Indian designs and feathers to complete this outfit. Looking back, I now know this was wrong.

The Thanksgiving Indian costume that all the other children and I made in my elementary classroom trivialized and degraded the descendants of the proud Wampanoags, whose ancestors attended the first Thanksgiving popularized in American culture. The costumes we wore bore no resemblance to Wampanoag clothing of that time period. Among the Wampanoag, and other American Indians, the wearing of feathers has significance. The feathers we wore were simply mockery, an educator's interpretation of what an American Indian is supposed to look like.

The Thanksgiving myth has done so much damage and harm to the cultural self-esteem of generations of Indian people, including myself, by perpetuating negative and harmful images to both young Indian and non-Indian minds. There are so many things wrong with the happy celebration that takes place in elementary schools and its association to American Indian culture; compromised integrity, stereotyping, and cultural misappropriation are three examples.

When children are young, they are often exposed to antiquated images of American Indians through cartoons, books, and movies. But Thanksgiving re-enactments may be their most active personal encounter with Indian America, however poorly imagined, and many American children associate Thanksgiving actions and images with Indian culture for the rest of their lives. These cultural misunderstandings and stereotypical images perpetuate historical inaccuracy.

Tolerance of mockery by teachers is a great concern to Native parents. Much harm has been done to generations of Indian people by perpetuating negative and harmful images in young minds. Presenting Thanksgiving to children as primarily a happy time trivializes our shared history and teaches a half-truth. And while I agree that elementary-school children who celebrate the first Thanksgiving in their classrooms are too young to hear the truth, educators need to share Thanksgiving facts in all American schools sometime before high school graduation.

Let's begin with Squanto (aka Tisquantum), a Patuxet, one of more than 50 tribes who formed the Wampanoag Confederacy. Around 1614, when he was perhaps 30, Squanto was kidnapped along with others of his people and taken across the Atlantic Ocean to Malaga, Spain, where they were sold into slavery. Monks in Spain bought Squanto, shared their faith with him, and made it possible for him to find his way to England in 1615. In England he worked for shipbuilder John Slany and became proficient in English. In 1619 Squanto returned to his homeland by joining an exploring expedition along the New England coast. When he arrived at the village where he has been raised, all his family and the rest of his tribe had been exterminated by a devastating plague.

What about the Pilgrims? Separatists who fled from England to Holland seeking to escape religious persecution by English authorities, and who later booked passage to North America, are now called "Pilgrims," though Americans did not widely use the term until the 1870s. In November, 1620, the Mayflower dropped anchor in present-day

Provincetown Harbor. After exploring the coast for a few weeks, the Pilgrims landed and began building a permanent settlement on the ruins of Squanto's Patuxet village, now renamed New Plymouth. Within the first year, half of the 102 Pilgrims who set out from Europe on the Mayflower had perished. In desperation the Pilgrims initially survived by eating corn from abandoned fields, raiding villages for stored food and seed, and robbing graves at Corn Hill.

Squanto was introduced to the Pilgrims in the spring of 1621, became friends with them, and taught them how to hunt and fish in order to survive in New England. He taught the Pilgrims how to plant corn by using fish as fertilizer and how to plant gourds around the corn so that the vines could climb the cornstalks. Due to his knowledge of English, the Pilgrims made Squanto an interpreter and emissary between the English and Wampanoag Confederacy.

What really happened at the first Thanksgiving in 1621? The Pilgrims did not introduce the concept of thanksgiving; the New England tribes already had autumn harvest feasts of thanksgiving. To the original people of this continent, each day is a day of thanksgiving to the Creator. In the fall of 1621, William Bradford, the governor of the Plymouth Colony, decided to have a Plymouth harvest feast of thanksgiving and invited Massasoit, the Grand Sachem of the Wampanoag Federation, to join the Pilgrims. Massasoit came with approximately 90 warriors and brought food to add to the feast, including venison, lobster, fish, wild fowl, clams, oysters, eel, corn, squash and maple syrup. Massasoit and the ninety warriors stayed in Plymouth for three days. These original Thanksgiving foods are far

different from the meals prepared in modern Thanksgiving celebrations.

Squanto died in 1622, but Massasoit outlived the era of relative peace in colonial New England. On May 26, 1637, near the present-day Mystic River in Connecticut, while their warriors were away, an estimated 400 to 700 Pequot women, children, and old men were massacred and burned by combined forces of the Plymouth, Massachusetts Bay, and Saybrook (Connecticut) colonies and Narragansett and Mohegan allies. Colonial authorities found justification to kill most of the Pequot men and enslave the captured women and their children. Pequot slaves were sent to Bermuda and the West Indies. In 1975 the official number of Pequot people living in Connecticut was 21. Similar declines in Native population took place throughout New England as an estimated three hundred thousand Indians died by violence, and even more were displaced, in New England over the next few decades.

In this video sidebar, Paul Chaat Smith (Comanche), co-curator of the award-winning exhibition *Americans*, looks at why the Thanksgiving story is so important to the United States' image of itself as a nation. (National Museum of the American Indian)

This history raises the question, Why should Native people celebrate Thanksgiving? Many Natives particularly in the New England area remember this attempted genocide as a factual part of their history and are reminded each year during the modern Thanksgiving. The United American Indians of New England meet each year at Plymouth Rock on Cole's Hill for a Day of Mourning. They gather at the feet of a statue of Grand Sachem Massasoit of the Wampanoag to remember and reflect in the hope that America will never forget.

Do I celebrate Thanksgiving? No, I don't celebrate. But I do take advantage of the holiday and get together with family and friends to share a large meal without once thinking of the Thanksgiving in 1621. I think it is the same in many Native households. It is ironic that Thanksgiving takes place during American Indian and Alaskan Native Heritage Month. An even greater irony is that more Americans today identify the day after Thanksgiving as Black Friday than as National American Indian Heritage Day.

Again this year, I turned to the Internet to find out what Native people are thinking about Thanksgiving. Here are a few of the responses I have received, beginning with the most recent and ending with comments from 2011 (when I unfortunately didn't make notes about where people were writing from):

Mashantucket, Connecticut: Celebrating seasonal food gathering and production with a feast leans more toward local northeast Native traditions than it does to the English idea of a thanksgiving, which involved fasting and prayer, not food. The modern holiday is the 19th-century creation of Sarah Josepha Hale as a way to bring the United States together after the Civil War. Hale has been written out of history by the fictitious First Thanksgiving narrative, which also writes out a lot of Native history. So for me, it's fine to enjoy the day off with family, have a feast and give thanks for it, but we need to stick with the real history of colonization, in contrast to the friendly story of Pilgrims and Indians that is still taught in America's schools as fact.

Arlee, Montana: Personally I do not celebrate Thanksgiving. I live the idea of giving thanks, but I do that every day and don't need a holiday for it. I feel like the holiday has evolved a lot over time, and I believe it's a great activity to bring family and friends together. But with the ugly history in reference to our Native ancestors, I don't acknowledge the idea of Pilgrims and Indians. It would be great if the education system used it as an opportunity to teach the real history of what happened.

Tama, Iowa: I enjoy family on this day. On some level I agree with the idea that it is a Pilgrim holiday that exploits Native people but those thoughts are hidden to the children who love to come to the homestead, eat, talk, laugh, and oftentimes, when a family has a drum, sing together. All that outweighs the idea of canceling it due to anticolonial political views.

St. Louis, Missouri: We give thanks for our family and friends, give thanks for the meal. Our foods, which we grew on our lands, fed the starving Pilgrims, who had no clue about our foods, lands, etc.

York, Pennsylvania: My family and I don't celebrate the traditional holiday and have not for many years. We attend Poarch Creek powwow or family dances in Oklahoma. We take advantage of time off and school closing to travel away from home to be with powwow family or relatives.

Mandaree, North Dakota: Hell, yes, from a veteran. I have a lot to be thankful for.

Saraland, Alabama: My family likes to gather, share food, and give thanks without it being an actual holiday. It's just what we enjoy doing as Native people. On the last Thursday in November, you will find us at some type of powwow or Native social gathering. I like to think that publicly displaying the things that "real Indians" do helps to debunk some of the myths that are out there about us. So we do have our traditions for Thanksgiving, but I am not sure that they would be considered celebrating the holiday.

Minneapolis, Minnesota: Maybe we celebrate, after all that has happened to our Native people, that we are still here. We still have our songs and dances, our ceremonies that make us who we are.

Naples, Florida: My perspective has changed over the years. At one time, I thought, "How could a day of thanksgiving hurt anyone?" Now I equate Thanksgiving Day to Columbus Day. That may have been precipitated by the Interior Department's decision to reverse the Mashpee Wampanoag Tribe's efforts to have their lands secured in trust. I believe it's time that America comes to terms with the truth about Thanksgiving.

Santa Fe, New Mexico: This was the first year in 20-some years of teaching that I've actually had students who are six and seven years old say that they're not going to celebrate Thanksgiving because all it is is a celebration of death. These children are woke. I haven't even done my "Thanksgiving what?" lesson yet.

Carnegie, Oklahoma: Every day is Thanksgiving Day for me, but especially in Vietnam in 1966 and when I got home in 1967. No

mater why the holiday was created, or who celebrates it, it's an American Holiday of thanks and feasting. At the Carnegie Red Buffalo Hall, an Elder Thanksgiving Meal is available to those 60 and over at the Kiowa Complex. It is a time for prayer, singing, and reflecting on those who have gone on and those far off who can't come home.

Wisconsin Dells: My family is full of gratitude for all our Heavenly Father blesses us with. I remember when I was a young girl traveling to be together with all the relatives. Deer hunting was a huge family event, and the meal was prepared with prayers and love. I learned the history of Thanksgiving. I acknowledge the negative events surrounding that time in history. However, Thanksgiving continues to be a time of family, prayers, and love. We must move forward. We continue to teach the entire story of our Indigenous people of this continent. Speak truth. The day and all days are about togetherness and heartfelt gratitude for all that our Heavenly Father blesses us with: spirituality, health, love, and compassion.

Webster, Massachusetts: The fall harvest feast, which we call harvest moon feast, is something our Eastern tribes have done since the beginning of time. Getting together and giving thanks for the harvest, family, and friends is certainly something all should enjoy. The Thanksgiving narrative, however, is problematic on many fronts and can be justifiably referred to as a day of mourning.

Pine Ridge, South Dakota: We celebrate having a family feast. It's never mentioned during or after about Pilgrims or any kind of history. It's a time for food, football, and pumpkin pie. We never think, "Should we?" We just do. It's all part of the holidays and Christmas right around the corner.

Gulfport, Mississippi: If you look at the true reason for Thanksgiving, it was the Natives' having their harvest ceremony and then sharing with the Pilgrims. So for us to say it's a racist holiday is wrong. Most of the Natives who say that don't even practice any type of greencorn celebration. The Pilgrims were having a feast, so there were traditional European foods there. That is, till the Natives pitied them and brought the foods only found on this continent that we all now associate with Thanksgiving. We can celebrate the Native side of it, or the part that we gave hospitality to a people who didn't appreciate it. Either way, it's ours, not theirs.

Auburn, Washington: "Thanksgiving" was derived from Indigenous ceremony. That's where settlers got the idea from—seeing Native tribes of the eastern woodlands celebrating the Green Corn Ceremony where we gave thanks to Creator for all the many blessings. Why should we give up what is *ours* because someone else tries to paint a different image on it. We just keep the meaning as it originally was and journey on.

Fort Washakie, Wyoming: Well ,here in Newee Sosoree Sogope (the Shoshone people's territory Warm Valley, Wyoming) we

celebrate Thanks Giving like many people, giving thanks for the good and even the bad that we have been given by the Creator. We have a feast for the people and feed all who show up. Then we may have a traditional dance in the evening. One of our elders will pray for the food and our people. It's more about the sharing and bringing together of the people, family, and relatives near and far. For my family, if we are not traveling to the in-laws in Arizona, we spend time with who is around, my brother or sister, and have dinner and eat together and share and spend time with each other as a family. We don't really celebrate the Pilgrims' and Natives' gathering of history. But we would welcome any Pilgrims, non-Natives, undocumented aliens, etc., to the table to share and eat. We pray and give thanks for all that we have received, and watch football and basketball or do something outside, weather permitting. We try to spend some time with each other's relatives, friends, and visitors. We pray and be thankful for all the Creator has provided.

Chicago, Illinois: Absolutely not. The original thanksgiving holidays were celebratory feasts after eradicating or relocating tribes from the East Coast. I do not celebrate genocide with a feast. It has nothing to do with a harvest festival.

Wellington, Kansas: Thanksgiving was a blending of two different cultures, one culture helping another to survive. The historical knowledge we have now of what was actually taking place may not be the same as what was being experienced in those days. Our

assessment now may not be fair because of all that the Native people have endured.

Exeter, California: Being the only Native American classroom teacher at a public school, raised mostly in an urban setting steeped heavy in traditional American holidays, and around many other native people on weekends while traveling to dance, this has always been a challenging question for me that I cannot claim to know the answer for. I see many other teachers I work with who are not native struggle with knowing how to address the issue comfortably. I have to say, I have fear that if we avoid the issue altogether, Native people will be forgotten about. I have seen some teachers decide to stop teaching about Native Americans for fear of offending. I personally get sad when I see that happen. I know Thanksgiving is a controversial subject, and there are so many viewpoints. I share the modern theme of Thanksgiving, which I think has good intentions—family and community. I have also chosen to teach about Native American culture, even more heavily in November because of Thanksgiving, even though it is no longer a part of the curriculum. I have found ways to integrate it while teaching something that I think is important. I do an assembly for the students in which we dance, and I emphasize how it is not possible to teach everything there is to know about Native Americans in just one assembly. I emphasize the diversity among native people.

Sevierville, Tennessee: Regardless of all the political views of Thanksgiving, we can all find something to be thankful for!

San Antonio, Texas: Except for the last four years, the twenty years before that I spent 95 percent of my Thanksgivings at the table of my brother-in-law. Our gatherings were about giving thanks for what we had. As for Native American history being left out of teaching, it is an outrage. Educate our fellow educators on how to teach it. It would be a great way to help others teach courses and show how to respect the culture.

Edmonton, Alberta: We have family members with addiction issues. The kids get to eat, which my mom loves. And we are thankful not only to survive colonization, but also grateful to feed family.

Norman, Oklahoma: We celebrate and give thanks for our loved ones' being able to be together again. But when my daughter was young and the realization hit, as it does all young American Indians, she said to me , "Do you think we should have helped them?" There will be extra prayers for Standing Rock at our table.

Hydro, Oklahoma: Could we just start over and go forward? We can't change the past, but we can work for peace and unity in the future. History needs to be taught correctly in our schools—that is what needs to happen. My daughter had to write a paper about Big Tree, Satank, and Satanta. She interviewed Satanta's great-grandson, who was in his 90s, and told the story as he told it to her, including their transport from Fort Sill and how the feather was turned into a knife as they passed the giant tree, causing the

soldiers to shoot and kill Satank. She got an AAA+ from her teacher.

Ecuador via Bozeman, Montana: It's important to share the whole, true story of the first Thanksgiving. Many of us were told a fairytale lie that led us to believe the same old story: Colonization was good for everyone and colonization was relatively peaceful (the violence was necessary, the ends justify the means). Now, a lot of us are learning more, and that comes from educating ourselves with the help from those who do know. I will say this, the generic idea of thanksgiving, or taking the time to be with family and friends and give thanks for all the blessings in our lives, the big and small, is a great practice and should happen more often. I wonder how we can turn a negative into a positive? Can we have an honest Thanksgiving? Can we move forward and, if so, where do we begin?



Marshall Lomakema (Hopi, 1935–1975). "A Hopi Feast," ca. 1965. Songoopavi, Second Mesa, Hopi Reservation, Arizona. 23/7401

Santa Fe, New Mexico: My family and I celebrate Thanksgiving, not so much in the way that the Pilgrims may have done with the Indians. We give pause, and acknowledge all of the blessings that we received in the past year. We think of family and friends; of the homeless; of those away from family in hospitals, elders in nursing homes, those incarcerated, the soldier men and women overseas, around the world, standing watch and guarding our freedom. We think of those in mourning, whose family have gone ahead of them. We also think of those in school, no matter what age. And, finally, we pray for traveling mercies said for folks traveling home.

We are thankful each day for Creator's gifts, but on Thanksgiving it seems we focus and are concentrated in our thoughts about these blessings.

Fairfax, Oklahoma: Our folks and ancestors left a good road to follow and prayed for gifts or successes for us that they may not have achieved. We have opportunities even more than them in these days and days to come. Long time ago we sat down in thanksgiving and had a great day. That's what Thanksgiving is to me, to enjoy and continue to achieve for yourself and them. They are smiling when we achieve. Aho.

Lawton, Oklahoma, with gentle humor: Do we have to feed the Pilgrims? Again?

Aylett, Virginia: It is good to celebrate the concept of gratitude and thankfulness. When the holiday story is based on a lie that covers up the national moral atrocity of genocide, the statement about the people who celebrate is not good. Shining light on the truth will always bring about healing.

Montville, Connecticut: Thanksgiving was celebrated for murder and slavery rather than friendship and harvest.

Greenbelt, Maryland: I don't necessarily look at the holiday as Pilgrims-meet-Indians-and-chow-down. I celebrate it as the time the cycle of alcoholism was broken in our family, and we have a feast to celebrate that.

Norman, Oklahoma: It's pretty much a family reunion for me, and there is eating, visiting, being thankful, and having a good time. Because of that, there is no reason to worry about the history. Similar to the idea that our dances fall on the 4th of July and instead of celebrating independence, it is more like a homecoming to our Kiowa people.

California: When I went to school there was two Indians in our class me and a Hopi girl neither one of us had to endure any of this because her mother and my mother both raised hell with the principal no fake headbands or feathers for us.

Pala, California: When my kids were in pre-school is when I decided I needed to represent our people at this time of year more than any other. I would be damned if my kids were gonna wear paper bags like the other students. I wasn't having that. I learned to get the story across at their age level and show them the beauty and generosity of our people. I remember growing up and my mom getting upset with me because on Thanksgiving day I would come to the dinner table in my PJs and hair unbrushed, knowing the day was not a celebration. But now that I'm a mother of three and a grandmother of one, I understand that as Native people we give thanks to the Creator every day. On Thanksgiving Day I'm just grateful our people are still here and still stand strong.

Salt Lake City, Utah: Thanksgiving, to me, is to be grateful for all the good blessings that came my way. Good health. Gift of family. Regardless of history, there are still many Natives in the land, and

that shows how resilient we are. To honor those who went before us, let us share our culture and stories, teach the youth to learn from the past and to make our lives so our ancestors are proud of us. Example is a great educator.

Alberta, Canada: It is an opportunity for those who do take note. . . . There will be those who roll their eyes, and others who may gain deeper appreciation, to honor (maybe even emulate) a more giving nature, . . . that of their Creator.

Crow Agency, Montana: My Dad used to say, "We give thanks everyday, so if they want to give us a holiday to give thanks, I'll take it."

I was infuriated when my daughter's school had a mock feast complete with paper mache headdresses and Pilgrim hats!

When they did that to my kids in elementary, I TORE those items up and signed my kids out of school for that day.

For Thanksgiving I was the Indian. Umm Go figure. . . .

Someone took a picture of me in front of the class, and to this day . . . it bothers me.

Tonight I have to lead a children's Bible class, and they want me to theme it around Thanksgiving. I will, but it's not going to be about the happy Pilgrims and all that stuff. Thankfulness to God is one thing, but elevating Pilgrims to hero status is out of the question.

When my daughter Victoria was in grade school, she had a teacher give them the assignment to write a report on Thanksgiving dinner, and Victoria wrote hers on why our family doesn't celebrate Thanksgiving. Victoria got an F on the paper, and I threatened to go to the school board if the principal didn't get it changed. Victoria got an A, and the class got a lesson on Native American heritage.

Ignorance and not near enough education in the school systems! It is very sad that a majority of what is taught is very superficial and the dark aspects of our history are neatly tucked away. Very sad!

Considered a day of mourning in our house.

For skins [American Indians], Thanksgiving should be the Last Supper.

To read more on Thanksgiving, see *Everyone's history matters*. The Wampanoag Indian Thanksgiving story deserves to be known on this site and the essay *The Invention of Thanksgiving*, by historian and National Museum of the American Indian trustee Philip Deloria (Standing Rock Sioux Tribe), in *The New Yorker*.

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American History