

# **A Nation in Gratitude**

**Debating America on Thanksgiving Day at the Turn of the  
Twentieth Century**

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## Abbreviations

### Newspapers

BBM	<i>B'nai B'rith Messenger</i>
CA	<i>California Eagle</i>
CS	<i>Common Sense</i>
DZ	<i>Deutsche Zeitung</i>
LAE	<i>Los Angeles Examiner</i>
LAT	<i>Los Angeles Times</i>

## **Preface**

The thesis at hand is the result of a tutorial on nationalism and historiography that started in November 2009 as part of the Master History of Politics and Culture at Utrecht University. In the summer of 2009 I learned about the existence of the exchange program between Utrecht University (UU) and the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), which made me decide to combine the writing of my MA thesis with a visit to the latter university.

Wholly in line with the subject of this thesis, I want to express my gratitude to a number of people. This project started when my supervisor Frans Willem Lantink proved very responsive to my plans for a delay in my course of study, in order to be able to stay in Los Angeles for several months. In Los Angeles Lynn Hunt enthusiastically agreed to be the second reader of my thesis, a fortune I could not have imagined before I left. The exchange was made possible by UU and the UCLA, but this whole venture to the American West would not have happened at all were it not for Arch Getty, who first told me about this opportunity during one of his classes on Soviet History as a visiting professor at Utrecht University. In Los Angeles, he also proved an entrance to American culture when he invited me to experience Thanksgiving Day in practice; a welcome addition to my previous conception of the day based only on books and archival sources. The valuable comments and advice of Liesbeth van de Grift, Frans Willem Lantink, Ido de Haan, Joris van Eijnatten, Jaap Verheul and Stephen Aron were furthermore great aids, and the editing of Hayley Moller greatly enhanced the readability of the text. In addition, my friends in both Utrecht and Los Angeles made my student days both a pleasant and stimulating time. Last but not least, I want to thank my parents; not just for their financial support during my years in university, but above all for their willingness to hear, encourage and add to my almost weekly changing fascinations and views.

## Introduction

On Monday November 26, 1894 the *Los Angeles Times* published a call for support and recognition of the oppressed Armenian people in the Ottoman Empire. Here, the secretary of the Phil-Armenia Association of Northwest-America, Herant Mesrob Kiretchian, aimed for a historical sense of freedom and justice of the American people to condemn the suffering of Christian Armenians in the Empire, of whom an estimated two hundred thousand were massacred between 1894 and 1896. The moment he selected for his plea was not a coincidence, as it was addressed to “the whole American people” and “on the day of their glad Thanksgiving”, celebrated that Thursday.<sup>1</sup> In an editorial, two days later, the *Times* responded with compassion, claiming it was a disgrace indeed that European powers had not yet aided the Armenian people. Furthermore, the American public should therefore be benevolent to the Armenians, and their appeal should “at this Thanksgiving season [...] surely not fall upon deaf ears in this land of liberty.”<sup>2</sup> Why did an Armenian association hope to find a friendly gesture on Thanksgiving Day, the day when Americans celebrated the founding and progress of their own nation? Was it just the hope of Christian charity and compassion towards fellow Christians abroad, or perhaps the specific character of this national celebration that made it the appropriate occasion to win the nation’s sympathy?

### The Debate on Nationalism

An inquiry into national celebrations in the United States commences with a consideration of the nation itself. A modernist interpretation of nations and nationalities came to dominate this debate after the Second World War. According to commentators such as Ernest Gellner and Elie Kedourie, nationalism was a strictly modern phenomenon that could only develop in modern states, and under the aegis of strong and centralized governments.<sup>3</sup> An insight on which a later generation of modernists expanded by deconstructing the nation – and consequently the nation-state’s claim to power – as a bourgeois invention. To this end Eric

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<sup>1</sup> “Give us aid”, *LAT*, 26/11/1894, 1; Peter Balakian, *The burning Tigris. The Armenian Genocide and America’s response* (New York 2003) 5.

<sup>2</sup> ‘The Armenians’, *LAT*, 28/11/1894, 4.

<sup>3</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Nations and nationalism* (Oxford 1983); Elie Kedourie, *Nationalism* (London 1960).

Hobsbawm investigated the “invented traditions” that constitute the foundations of national communities and their histories, while Benedict Anderson saw the nation as primarily an “imagined community”, therewith underlining the psychological dimension of national kinship. Likewise, Jörn Leonhard wrote an exhaustive study on the nation as a discourse, and the reciprocity between national discourses and war. In general, modernists see nationalism as merely serving the present needs of a ruling elite that finds sources of legitimate authority in a common past. In the eyes of modernists, the nationalist ideology therefore preceded the nation, and the deconstruction of that nation could also deconstruct its claims for power.<sup>4</sup>

The responses to these assumptions can be seen as a reconstruction of the nation, conducted by primordialists who point at certain flaws in the modernist argumentation. For example, in the case that the nation was indeed invented by an elite, why then would so many wholeheartedly respond to these constructions? Moreover, primordialists suggest, there are numerous indications of pre-modern national affiliations as well. According to Adrian Hastings, ethnical groups – defined as “intermarrying societies” – are therefore the key to explain the cultural origins and traditions of certain nationalities. Hastings agrees that states can adopt nationalism as an ideology, but then still need the consent of ethnical groups within their borders. There are moreover indications of anti-universalist and national affiliations in the Early Modern era, furthered by vernacular translations of the Bible. More so, ancient Biblical texts themselves provided a model for the formation of nations in the Christian world.<sup>5</sup> A similar approach is taken by Anthony D. Smith’s ethnosymbolic account of nationalism, which also uses ethnicity to explain the long-term kinship within pre-modern cultural collectives sharing memories, symbols and myths.<sup>6</sup> But despite certain gaps in the modernist argumentation, this does not fundamentally question the instrumental use – or misuse – of nationalism as a modern device to embed equally modern nation states in history.

In the historiography of such an American common past or national narrative, ideas of American ‘exceptionalism’ are often recurring. It describes the United States as a land of liberty and equal opportunities for all alike, which was even coined the “American Creed” by

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<sup>4</sup> E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and nationalism since 1780. Programme, myth, reality* (Cambridge 1990); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities. Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition; London and New York 2006); Jörn Leonhard, *Bellizismus und Nation. Kriegsdeutung und Nationsbestimmung in Europa und den Vereinigten Staaten 1750-1914* (Munich 2008); Joep Leerssen, *Nationaal denken in Europa. Een cultuurhistorische schets* (4th edition; Amsterdam 2006 [1999] ); Anthony D. Smith used ‘deconstruction’ in combination with these modernist interpretations of the nation, Anthony D. Smith, *Ethno-symbolism and nationalism. A Cultural approach* (London and New York 2009), 52 - 53.

<sup>5</sup> Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of nationhood, ethnicity, religion and nationalism* (Cambridge 2007[1997]).

<sup>6</sup> Smith, *Ethno-symbolism and nationalism*, 62 – 77.

the economist Gunnar Myrdal.<sup>7</sup> Nineteenth century historians such as George Bancroft wrote epic histories of the divine providence of liberty that linked the early settlers in New England in a straight line to the revolutionary war of independence against the British.<sup>8</sup> Around the turn of the century, the New History changed its aims to the writing of a democratic history that involved the entire nation, instead of merely its elite. Historical change was henceforth not caused by individuals, but by large economical or geographical structures; as exemplified in Frederick Jackson Turner's theory of the 'frontier'. The encounter between wilderness and civilization that occurred on the frontier, Turner said, furthered the practical and individualistic democracy that so much characterizes American history.<sup>9</sup> Historians also came to believe that they could and should advocated reform, as did Randolph Bourne when he questioned the American 'melting-pot'. In his 1916 essay on "trans-nationalism", Bourne stated that instead of attempting to 'naturalize' immigrants into one homogenous Anglo-Saxon culture, the unique conditions of American liberty could realize a truly cosmopolitan society of 'trans-nationality' and 'dual citizenship'.<sup>10</sup> Comparable ideas on American identity are still echoed nowadays by commentators such as by Samuel P. Huntington, who calls on twenty-first century Americans to re-embrace their "Anglo-Protestant culture" that is characterized, among others, by constitutionality, individualism and the English language.<sup>11</sup>

In the American public opinion, a sharp distinction is often made between patriotism and nationalism. While patriotic allegiance to national values is seen as an individualistic virtue, nationalism is the collectivist ideology of uncritical adoration of the nation-state and a sense of superiority toward other nationalities.<sup>12</sup> Regardless of this difference, scholars have often observed and scrutinized nationalism within American society as well. Randolph Bourne's critique on the American policy towards migrants, for instance, responded to certain exclusivist and 'nativist' sentiments that seized the United States in the years around the First World War. The emergence of such an American nativism is also the subject of John

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<sup>7</sup> Gunnar Myrdal, *An American dilemma: The negro problem and modern democracy* (New York 1944).

<sup>8</sup> Bancroft, George, *History of the United States of America, from the discovery of the American continent*, Russel B. Nye (Chicago and London 2000); Frederick Jackson Turner, *The frontier in American history* (New York 1962 [1920]); Ernst Breisach, *Historiography. Ancient, medieval and modern* (2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition; Chicago and London 1994 [1983]).

<sup>9</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, *The frontier in American history* (New York 1962 [1920]).

<sup>10</sup> Randolph Bourne, 'Trans-national America', in: Paul Lauter (ed.), *The heath anthology of American literature* D (6th revised edition; Boston 2010), 1957 – 1968; Breisach, *Historiography*, 286 – 290, 313 – 318.

<sup>11</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *Who are we? The challenge to America's national identity* (New York, London, Toronto and Sydney 2004).

<sup>12</sup> This conclusion draws from personal experience; comp. a sociological study that sees a "love of country and affirmation of cultural values versus hostility toward out-groups and conformity to authority", Linda J. Skitka, 'Patriotism or nationalism? Understanding post-September 11, 2001, flag-display behavior', *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 35 (10; 2005) 1995 – 2011, there 1996.

Higham's study *Strangers in the land*.<sup>13</sup> Such sentiments were already apparent among anti-foreigner groups halfway through the nineteenth century (such as the Know Nothings), and returned periodically. Different waves of nativist anxieties all had a fear of Catholicism and (European) political radicalism in common, as well as a belief in Anglo-Saxon superiority. And although nativism itself differed from nationalism – as defined in an 'American Creed' – American nationalism, according to Higham, indeed connected different waves of nativism. Building on these exclusivist elements in American nationalism, Cecilia Elizabeth O'Leary adds how a homogenous and federally sponsored, white, masculine and protestant patriotic culture could take shape during the First World War.<sup>14</sup> While Higham and O'Leary both approach xenophobia as an influential force on American nationalism around the turn of the century, Gary Gerstle asserts that liberal and constitutional ideals of a 'civic nationalism' fundamentally existed alongside a racially defined nationalism of common blood, skin color and an inherited fitness for self-government. Together, Gerstle says, these two components shaped American society of the twentieth century.<sup>15</sup>

### Flexible Nationalisms

It was said above that modernists deconstructed the teleological nature of modern nationalism, while premordialists made some valid points about pre-modern collectives and the experiences of human beings. The latter, however, could not refute the modernist allegation of nationalism as a modern source of power. What is needed, in short, is an approach that acknowledges both the pragmatic (mis)usages of the past, but keeps an eye on certain deeper origins and sentiments surrounding national identities. Mark Soileau suggests such an alternative in his study on the 'reinvention' of ancient saints as national heroes in twentieth century Turkey. What occurred there was not an invention, Soileau, asserts but instead an "innovation" of tradition that made mystical saints into humanistic role models.<sup>16</sup> National traditions thus need some form of attachment with a contemporary population, but can then be

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<sup>13</sup> John Higham, *Strangers in the land. Patterns of American nativism, 1860 – 1925* (New Brunswick NJ, 1994 [1955]).

<sup>14</sup> Cecilia Elizabeth O'Leary, *To die for. The paradox of American Patriotism* (Princeton 1999). According to O'Leary, this political shift can be explained by the entry of Southern values and hierarchies (especially in racial terms) into national politics. However, this traditional view on southern states as fundamentally different from the rest of the United States is questioned and approached as a persistent myth in recent studies, see Matthew D. Lassiter en Joseph Crespino (ed.), *The myth of southern exceptionalism* (Oxford 2010).

<sup>15</sup> Gary Gerstle, *American crucible. Race and nation in the twentieth century* (Princeton and Oxford 2001).

<sup>16</sup> Mark Soileau, 'The patron saints of Turkish humanism. Religion and the formation of national culture', in: Claire Norton (ed.), *Nationalism, historiography and the (re)construction of the past* (Washington 2007) 173-186.

remodeled to meet different aims.<sup>17</sup> National narratives, therefore, do not need to be uninterrupted histories to appeal and appear authentic. Moreover, these histories can be histories of the present, and studies on national identities rely on cultural memories.<sup>18</sup>

Because of the flexibility of cultural memories, national identities and histories are likewise open to alteration and debate. National histories are then not merely a device for domination, as modernists suggested, but a medium for sociopolitical and cultural debates as well. Because interpretations of the national past exist in the present, references to this national past can be used to judge and legitimize actions or claims in the present. A Democratic politician in the eyes of his Republican opponent is then not just wrong, but thoroughly ‘un-American’.

Let us return briefly to the above-mentioned Armenian appeal. We wondered how a group of Armenians could rely on an entirely American celebration. Therefore, we should know what national celebrations actually are. They reflect national identities, and the values and histories that together constitute these identities. Since, in itself, the nation is an abstract entity, a concrete manifestation of that nation – such as the celebration of its own existence – visualizes the nation. Evidently, these Armenians sensed that the celebration of Americanism on Thanksgiving Day allowed their ‘external’ appeal.

These national values and histories therefore also constitute an American political culture. Historians adopted this concept of political culture in the 1980’s, especially in their research on the French Revolution. While initially an empirical device in the political sciences, historians turned it into a more qualitative approach towards active political attitudes and discourses.<sup>19</sup> Lynn Hunt thus perceived profound changes in French political culture during the Revolution, and defined this political culture as the “values, expectations, and implicit rules that expressed and shaped collective intentions and actions”.<sup>20</sup> Political culture

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<sup>17</sup> Comp. Joshua Arthurs, ‘(Re)presenting Roman history in Italy, 1911 - 1955’, in: Norton, *The (re)construction of the past*, 29 – 44; Ulrike Storer, ‘Mapping the nation through performance in Yemen. Sanaa as ‘the capital of the present, the history and the unity’’, in: *ibidem*, 115 – 123.

<sup>18</sup> Comp. Michel Kammen, *Mystic chords of memory. The transformation of tradition in early American culture* (New York 1991).

<sup>19</sup> Van de Klashorst, ‘Politieke cultuur: het klassieke begrip en een nieuwe werkdefinitie’, in: Hans Righart, *De zachte kant van de politiek. Opstellen over politieke cultuur* (The Hague 1990) 51 – 65, there 55 – 58; Ton Zwaan, ‘Politiek, cultuur en pacificering. Politieke cultuur vanuit antropologisch perspectief’, in: Righart, *De zachte kant van de politiek*, 36 – 50; Ido de Haan, ‘Stijl, vorm, ontwerp. Nadeel en nut van het stijlbegrip voor de politiek’, in: Dick Pels en Henk te Velde, *Politieke stijl. Over presentatie en optreden in de politiek* (Amsterdam 2000), 225 – 251. For a critique on the historical use of the concept, see Ido de Haan, *Politieke reconstructie. Een nieuw begin in de politieke geschiedenis* (inauguration Utrecht University; Utrecht 2004).

<sup>20</sup> Lynn Hunt, *Politics, culture and class in the French Revolution* (Berkeley, Los Angeles en Londen 1984) 10 – 11. Hunt later summarized this as follows: “The point of the endeavor was to examine the ways in which linguistic practice, rather than simply reflecting social reality, could actively be an instrument of (or constitute)

is then part of the process of shaping and understanding social reality, and national celebrations are a concrete manifestation of this process.<sup>21</sup>

Such readings of public festivities as arenas of active political participation and debate center the public sphere.<sup>22</sup> Jürgen Habermas described this public sphere as staged amidst the governmental and private spheres, and containing public places such as clubs and salons that allow individuals to discuss the world around them.<sup>23</sup> In his study on American public festivals, David Waldstreicher perceives these festivals as comparable arenas for debate, in which he situated an emerging American identity during the Revolutionary War.<sup>24</sup> Celebrations of this new sense of national unity consequently incited subordinated groups (e.g. women and African Americans) to claim their participation in the nation. In accordance with Benedict Anderson, Waldstreicher sees an important role for the emerging print culture, which made it possible to “imagine” the nation.<sup>25</sup> Of most importance, however, were rituals and celebrations that added both drama and debate to the nation. National celebrations in general are therefore highly ambiguous, since they at the same time visualize and revise the nation.<sup>26</sup>

The Armenian appeal aimed for the universal values of liberty and democracy, which Americans celebrate on Thanksgiving Day. The rhetoric on that day is characterized by, on the one hand, notions of thankfulness and reflection on the past year, and by the reconfirmation and reinterpretation of national values on the other. By examining how Thanksgiving Day accommodates certain sociopolitical and cultural debates and changes within American society, this thesis conducts a discourse analysis on the rhetoric of that day.

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power, Lynn Hunt, ‘Introduction: history, culture, and text’, in: Lynn Hunt (ed.), *The new cultural history* (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1989) 1 – 24, there 17.

<sup>21</sup> Stephen Welch, *The concept of political culture* (New York 1993), esp. 9, 99 – 106; Van de Klashorst, ‘Politieke cultuur’, 56 - 57.

<sup>22</sup> E.g. Maurice Agulhon, *La République au village* (Paris 1970); Mona Ozouf, *La fête révolutionnaire: 1789 - 1799* (Paris 1976); Hunt, *Politics, culture and class in the French Revolution*; Peter Burke, *The French historical revolution. The Annales school, 1929 - 89* (Cambridge 1990) 85 – 89.

<sup>23</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit. Untersuchungen zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft*, transl. Thomas Burger, *The structural transformation of the public sphere. An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society* (Cambridge 1992).

<sup>24</sup> David Waldstreicher, *In the midst of perpetual fetes. The making of American nationalism, 1776 – 1820* (Chapel Hill and London 1997).

<sup>25</sup> Comp. Anderson, *Imagined communities*, 61 – 65: “we have seen that the very conception of the newspaper implies the refraction of even ‘world events’ into a specific imagined world of vernacular readers; and also how important to that imagined community is an idea of steady, solid simultaneity through time”.

<sup>26</sup> Geneviève Fabre and Jürgen Heidekin, ‘Introduction’, in: Heidekin, Fabre and Kai Dreisbach (ed.), *Celebratin ethnicity and nation. American festive culture from the Revolution to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century* (New York and Oxford 2001) 1 – 24, there 1 – 3.

Many of the sources used are from Southern California, yet it must be noted that this is a study on the functioning of a nationalist rhetoric on both the federal and the regional or local level, not on regional identities. At the turn of the twentieth century, Southern California was centered around the growing metropolis of Los Angeles. Founded in 1781, Los Angeles witnessed a significant growth in the decades after 1876, when the Southern Pacific railroad connected Los Angeles to San Francisco. We will investigate how the rhetoric of Thanksgiving Day reflected broader political discourses, changes and events within these national and regional or local realities in the period from 1880 to 1919; a period not only of urban growth in the region, but of the transition towards a growing significance of the United States on the world stage.

The first section of this thesis will consider governmental statements regarding Thanksgiving Day, from both the federal and the state level. The reading of these official proclamations will be by means of a so-called *framing analysis*, a method derived from the communication studies to categorize arguments based on common metaphors and symbols. Hence Claudia L. Menashe and Michael Siegel – in their analysis of the media coverage of the tobacco industry – define a frame as “a way of packaging and positioning an issue so that it conveys a certain meaning”.<sup>27</sup> Observers can thus investigate *if* certain topics appear during a given period, and, if so, *how* this happens or changes. In the case of the rhetoric in American celebrations this means that, for example, freedom and liberty are presented as intrinsically American qualities. Based on a framing analysis of Thanksgiving Proclamations between 1880 and 1919, it will be concluded that a distinction can be made between domestic and universalistic elements in the rhetoric of the day.

The second and third sections observe the several public usages of Thanksgiving Day. Out of the data from the first section, three single years (1898, 1904, and 1917) will be selected and expanded on by exploring a variety of newspapers. However, to approach these media in the same way as governmental proclamations – and thus categorize references to the day – would blur the diverse interpretations of the Thanksgiving tradition that were present in many articles dealing with the subject. Newspapers, therefore, ask for a hermeneutical approach that includes the backgrounds of senders and receivers, the historical context in which they operate, and the singularity of certain events and individual motivations (which,

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<sup>27</sup> Claudia L. Menashe and Michael Siegel, ‘The power of a frame: an analysis of newspaper coverage of tobacco issues - United States, 1985-1996’, *Journal of Health Communication* 3 (4; 1998) 307 - 325, there 310.

however, is not to say that these premises are wholly neglected in our framing analysis).<sup>28</sup> The second section will focus on the domestic usages of the Thanksgiving Day rhetoric, while the third section investigates the changing role of the United States within the world at large, with Thanksgiving Day as a medium to interpret these changes. In the end, this study investigates how the nation is at once celebrated and debated through the celebration of its own existence.

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<sup>28</sup> Vgl. Jürgen Wilke, 'Quantitative Verfahren in der Kommunikationsgeschichte', in: Klaus Arnold, Markus Behmer and Bernard Semrad (ed.), *Kommunikationsgeschichte. Positionen und Werkzeuge. Ein diskursives Hand- und Lehrbuch* (Berlin 2008) 323 – 341.

## 1. A Changing Rhetoric in Thanksgiving Proclamations

Thanksgiving Day at the turn of the century was a popular American holiday that was characterized by gatherings of family and friends, ‘turkey dinners’, and acts of charity towards the poor. Major newspapers therefore already issued previews of holiday-events and advertisements weeks prior to the actual celebration of the day on the last Thursday of November. The historian Matthew Dennis describes the late nineteenth century Thanksgiving Day as both elastic and ambiguous, a result of a little centralized coordination. As a result, a variety of interpretations of this public event was allowed to coexist.<sup>29</sup> Adding to this lack of steering from either Washington or – in the case of California – Sacramento, was also the ambiguous rationale behind the celebration itself that made it into a celebration with multiple possible interpretations. Not an homage to one specific historical character (e.g. Washington’s Birthday) or event (e.g. Independence Day), the rationale behind Thanksgiving Day was instead a vague myth of origins (i.e. the survival of the early settlers). And because such national origins and values are constantly revalued and revised, the meaning of an ambivalent Thanksgiving Day was open to negotiation and adjustment as well.

Contrary to this assumption of a constantly debated holiday, Matthew Dennis nevertheless concludes that Thanksgiving Day in the late nineteenth century became a “relatively comfortable, politically undemanding popular festival”.<sup>30</sup> With this, however, he tends to overlook the linguistic reinterpretations of the day and its meaning. These reconsiderations occurred in both written media and official statements, and on different grounds. In this section we will investigate how this occurred ‘from above’. Annually, the president, followed by the governors of each state, officially proclaimed a day for thanksgiving. These proclamations can be read as media that rhetorically channeled a national agenda, used by leaders who asked a certain group of people to express their gratitude for certain common values. The goal of this section is therefore to consider *who*, according to these leaders, had to be thankful for *what*, and how this changed over time. But first we will look briefly at the history – or rather histories – of Thanksgiving Day itself.

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<sup>29</sup> Matthew Dennis, *Red, white, and blue letter days: and American calendar* (Ithaca and London, 2002) 81 – 82.

<sup>30</sup> Dennis, *Red, white, and blue letter days*, 98 – 106.

### The Histories of Thanksgiving Day

On the last Thursday of November, Thanksgiving Day, the founding of the United States is celebrated. Ever since the arrival of European settlers, such festivities were held as expressions of gratitude and moments of reflection on the closing year. The modern version of Thanksgiving Day, however, lacks clearly formulated origins. Possible first Thanksgiving observances were held among others by the ‘Pilgrim Fathers’ at Plymouth Rock (1621), the Spanish in San Elizario (1598), and by English settlers in Virginia (1623). But following the Civil War, a Northeastern, New-England oriented narrative came to dominate national history; Plymouth thus defied, among others, the Southern claim that with the settlement of Jamestown (Virginia, 1607) America was founded. The same held true for the national observation of Thanksgiving Day that now celebrated a New England-based founding history, along its regional festal practices as the turkey dinner, charitable deeds and family reunions. Hence, the first observance of the day is now generally believed to be held by around fifty colonists from Plymouth (Massachusetts), who in 1621 showed their gratitude for that year’s harvest and blessings by feasting together with approximately ninety Wampanoag Indians from the vicinity of their settlement. The day’s symbol, the turkey, likewise corresponds with that occasion, since the festivities followed on a successful hunt on wild turkeys.<sup>31</sup>

The first day of gratitude with a national scope – held in honor of the Revolution – was proclaimed by George Washington, in 1795. But this occasion was only sporadically repeated during the decades that followed, and it was not until 1863 that the day became an official (i.e. legal) and annual holiday for the entire nation. In that year, Abraham Lincoln set the last Thursday of November as a national day of thanksgiving, thereby hoping to remedy the divisions that were caused by the Civil War. Ever since, the day is observed annually and nationwide, and is always symbolically selected and issued by the president, followed by the governors of the states.<sup>32</sup>

In the historiography of American celebrations it is often repeated that such festal events were at times highly politicized, especially in the decades between the American Revolution and the Civil War.<sup>33</sup> Revolutionaries, struggling against the British, for instance, saw festal toasts and parades as a means to encourage unity, and to present revolutionary

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<sup>31</sup> Ibidem 83 – 85; Kammen, *Mystic chords of memory*, 88 – 89; Applebaum, Diana Karter, *Thanksgiving: an American holiday, an American history* (New York 1984) 126, 183; David J. Silverman, ‘Thanksgiving Day’, in: *Encyclopædia Britannica. Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/590003/Thanksgiving-Day> (version 31/01/2011).

<sup>32</sup> In *LAT* a critical comment was made about the early Thanksgiving Proclamation by the governor of Alaska, who in fact had to wait for the proclamation by the president, ‘Personal Mention’, *LAT*, 13/11/1892, 4.

<sup>33</sup> Fabre and Heideking, ‘Introduction’, 3 – 7; Dennis, *Red, white, and blue letter days*, 281.

changes as in line with familiar traditional and cultural forms.<sup>34</sup> In addition, nineteenth century-observances of Thanksgiving Day saw multiple political usages of the day, such as the occasional Southern refusal to participate in such a ‘Northern’ celebration.<sup>35</sup> The decades following the Civil War and its consequential quieting political climate, however, are said to have resulted in a depoliticization of Thanksgiving Day towards a more civic and commercial celebration.<sup>36</sup>

An important component of the holiday’s success was indeed its commercial attraction.<sup>37</sup> In addition, Dennis states that since the 1870’s the holiday was absorbed by migrants who themselves revised the day into an eclectic new celebration. Thanksgiving Day was, for instance, adopted by Jews, whose alterations made it into a reflection of the American ideal of a diverse ‘melting pot’-society; an example we will see again in section two. Diana Applebaum on the other hand points at the nativists hope to Americanize migrants by means of American traditions such as Thanksgiving Day.<sup>38</sup> And yet, both authors merely focus on the concrete usages of the day, but thereby overlook the ways in which the Thanksgiving rhetoric functioned as a vehicle for various sociopolitical purposes. Especially in times of crises or major change – as we will see in the following sections – Thanksgiving proved a stage to debate the nation, and its composition and government.

### **A Note on Thanksgiving Proclamations**

Thanksgiving Day, as said before, was annually proclaimed by both presidential and gubernatorial decree in official Thanksgiving Proclamations. A proclamation is a compelling governmental instrument aimed at those outside the government, and announcing a certain law or condition within a given jurisdiction (i.e. a state or federal level); one of the most famous examples of which is probably Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation that abolished slavery.<sup>39</sup> Because of the regular (i.e. annual) appearance of Thanksgiving Proclamations, they provide an insight in changes and continuities over time. A framing

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<sup>34</sup> Waldstreicher, *In the midst of perpetual fetes*, 17-52.

<sup>35</sup> Dennis, *Red, white and blue letter days*, 96.

<sup>36</sup> Applebaum and Dennis.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem* 98 – 106; Applebaum, *Thanksgiving*, 196 - 205; Many advertisements in newspapers such as *Los Angeles Times* and *Los Angeles Examiner* concerned products that appealed to the private character of Thanksgiving, such as furniture, food, tableware and clothing. Sports – popular were baseball, football, and a diversity of races – were a popular form of entertainment on the day itself.

<sup>38</sup> Dennis, *Red, white, and blue letter days* 106; Applebaum, *Thanksgiving*, 222 – 226.

<sup>39</sup> Brandon Rottinghaus, ‘The American presidency project’, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/proclamations.php> (version 26/01/2011).

analysis conducted on these texts can then systematically categorize arguments based on their common metaphors and symbols.

The proclamations that were issued by both presidents and governors all had several features in common. The first part of the text often reconfirmed the purpose of Thanksgiving Day as an occasion to commonly show gratitude for the blessings of the past year. The authors always concluded their message with the announcement that he – the given president or governor – therewith officially declared Thanksgiving a legal holiday. The proclamation’s middle section diverged the most, and it is here that we find the clearest differences between individual leaders and eras. Here, the authors often explained why exactly his contemporaries should be thankful, and addressed their public (as citizens of, in our case, either the United States or California) while reflecting on what this public was or should be (a free people or a disciplined people). We therefore concentrate our framing analysis on the question *who* should be thankful for *what*.

### **Broadening of the Thanksgiving Rhetoric**

An overview of the frames as drawn from Thanksgiving Proclamations between 1880 and 1919 can be found in Tables 1 and 2.<sup>40</sup> A glance at this rhetorical categorization immediately reveals how official proclamations extended in their scope, roughly around 1900. The proclamations of the decades until 1900 predominantly contained the usual reasons for thanksgiving (prosperity, health, and peace), and addressed a civic nation that was liberal and democratic. But from the late 1890s onwards, proclamations became more specific and comprehensive. To begin with, state officials began addressing the nation in a more historical way, as we can see in a rise in the number of references to the national past following the Spanish-American War of 1898. Moreover, notions of domestic social-economic tensions decreased from the presidencies of McKinley and Roosevelt on, and instead it became the nation’s duty to ‘serve mankind’ and lead humanity.

The years around the turn of the century proved a transition period. The presidents William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt were the first to perceive their Thanksgiving Proclamations as vehicles to air their political views on the nation (Table 1). One of the outlines that reappeared frequently concerned America’s position within the world at large. This was among others reflected in references made about certain ‘duties’. This specific duty, to serve not only one’s country but also humanity as a whole, was absent from earlier

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<sup>40</sup> See Appendix, pages 51 and 52.

proclamations. Notwithstanding President Chester A. Arthur's 1881 prediction that "our sacred duty is at hand", he did not specify what exactly he intended. This contrasted sharply to Theodore Roosevelt's notion of "our duty to ourselves and others", which he expounded in his Thanksgiving Proclamation issued in 1904:

Our success will mean much not only for ourselves, but for the future of all mankind; and every man or woman in our land should feel the grave responsibility resting upon him or her, for in the last analysis this success must depend upon the high average of our individual citizenship, upon the way in which each of us does his duty by himself and his neighbor.<sup>41</sup>

Roosevelt mentioned just as much his contemporaries' duties as human beings and American citizens, as the awareness that the United States served the whole future of mankind. This concept of the United States as an example for the world was hinted at in many of the presidential proclamations that appeared from the late 1890s onward. By the same token McKinley praised the heavenly blessings that brought honor and safety to the nation, when he stated in 1900 that "[o]ur power and influence in the cause of freedom and enlightenment have extended over distant seas and lands".<sup>42</sup>

A significant event in the universalizing of the Thanksgiving Day rhetoric was the Spanish-American War, fought in the Caribbean and Southeast-Asia in 1898. The war launched the United States as a colonial power with authority over Cuba (until 1902), Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippines, and also brought a renewed confidence about the American position and influence within the world at large.<sup>43</sup> Americans should therefore be inspired by "a sense of the rights of others", as President William Howard Taft remarked, and spread their democratic tradition and additional values of political and religious liberty.<sup>44</sup> They should also become a model of morality, self-control and discipline, and withstand the pleasures of their own prosperity. This was presented as a contrast to the moral decay of the late nineteenth century capitalist 'Gilded Age' era, and it anticipated moral legislation such as the prohibition of alcohol in 1919. Roosevelt warned for precisely such dangers when he said: "Ever throughout the ages, at all times and among all peoples, prosperity has been fraught with

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<sup>41</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, 'A proclamation' (Washington D.C. 1904), John T. Woolley and Gerhard Peters (ed.), *The American Presidency Project*, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=69477> (Santa Barbara; version 18/01/2011).

<sup>42</sup> William McKinley, 'A proclamation' (Washington D.C. 1900), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=69276> (version 18/01/2011).

<sup>43</sup> Comp. Higham, *Strangers in the land*, 106 – 107.

<sup>44</sup> William Howard Taft, 'A proclamation' (Washington D.C. 1911), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=72437> (version 18/01/2011).

danger, and it behooves us to beseech the Giver of all things that we may not fall into lose of ease and luxury; that we may not lose our sense of moral responsibility; that we may not forget our duty to God, and to our neighbor.”<sup>45</sup>

Such an outward view required a firm domestic basis, as is suggested by the rising references to Americans as a “united people” (varying from notions of ‘brotherly kindness’ and ‘domestic mutual dependence’ to ‘common action’; Tables 1 and 2). After 1900, therefore, direct notions of poverty disappeared from the presidential proclamations. Almost annually, and in particular in times of economic downturn such as during the 1890s, presidents as well as governors added appeals to help poor and sick fellow-citizens. Like that, in 1893 President Grover Cleveland wrote: “Let the reunion of kindred and the social meeting of friends lend cheer and enjoyment to the day, and let generous gifts of charity for the relief of the poor and needy prove the sincerity of our thanksgiving”; likewise Governor George Perkins said in 1880 to “forget not the poor and the unfortunate; let charity and mercy be the attitude to mark this day”.<sup>46</sup> And after years of labor strikes in the 1890s (such as the Pullman Strikes that hit the railroad companies in 1894), McKinley comparably praised the “improved working conditions” (Table 1) of the country in 1897 and 1899. During the first decades of the twentieth century – times, moreover, of economic prosperity – the charitable tradition of Thanksgiving Day did sporadically return, but appeals to domestic poorness never again came as directly as before.<sup>47</sup> Thus President William McKinley in general terms expressed his gratitude for the fact that “[t]he works of religion and charity have everywhere been manifest” in 1900, and Woodrow Wilson, referring to those abroad suffering under the First World War, asked Americans for their sympathy and “to contribute out of our abundant means to the relief of their suffering”.<sup>48</sup>

Another sound illustration of such a universalizing rhetoric are the references to national greatness by President Cleveland in 1888 and Roosevelt in 1908. While for Cleveland “national greatness” resulted from blessings such as domestic order and prosperity, Roosevelt described a transformation of thirteen colonies “hemmed-in but a few miles west of tidewater by the Indian haunted wilderness” into “the mightiest republic which the world has

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<sup>45</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, ‘A proclamation’ (Washington D.C. 1907), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=72436> (version 18/01/2011).

<sup>46</sup> Grover Cleveland, ‘A proclamation’ (Washington D.C. 1893), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=70766>; George G. Perkins, ‘Thanksgiving Proclamation’ (Sacramento 1880).

<sup>47</sup> The one exception was Governor James Gillett (Table 2), who in 1908 asked to “be mindful of those less fortunate, the poor, the needy, the sick”, James Gillett, ‘Proclamation’ (Sacramento 1908).

<sup>48</sup> McKinley, ‘A proclamation’; Woodrow Wilson, ‘A proclamation’, (Washington D.C. 1916), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=72442> (version 18/01/2011).

ever seen”.<sup>49</sup> While Cleveland noticed the affluence of present-day America, Roosevelt saw how a dependent and divided collection of settlements had transformed itself into an unprecedented world power.

This example of Roosevelt’s reference to the thirteen colonies reflected another way in which domestic stability and certainty were rhetorically advocated, namely by a historicizing of the origins of Thanksgiving Day. As said before, the day reflected the nation itself by constantly referring to its founding principles and history. By historicizing the national rhetoric, and thus suggesting unity through time, decisions in the present obtained greater historical importance and legitimacy. This development must be seen within the light of a historicizing American culture in general. In his study on American cultural memory, author Michael Kammen describes how since the Civil War a national and self-conscious American memory emerged, based on a sense of a common history. For a long time, and in contrast to nations such as France and Britain, the public debate was hardly influenced by scholarly publications on national history. This only changed in the final decades of the nineteenth century, which was reflected in, for example, schoolbooks even later.<sup>50</sup>

Earlier proclamations, by contrast, saw almost no clear references to the national past. As can be seen in Tables 1 and 2, most leaders throughout the epoch opened their proclamations with a reference to the national custom of a day of gratitude. To that end, Governor Stoneman said merely to act “in accordance with a law of the State, and in conformity to the proclamations of the President of the United States”, and President Arthur acted in “conformity with a custom the annual observance of which is justly held in honor by this people”.<sup>51</sup> The proclamation of the day was thus frequently presented as a national custom, but only later turned into a day with a “long and continuous observance”, as Governor Gillett characterized it in 1907.<sup>52</sup> And while references to the past were not entirely new, the events and legacies mentioned became more specific, thus specifying previous notions of “our fathers” and the “national heritage” of democracy.<sup>53</sup> The historicizing of

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<sup>49</sup> Cleveland, ‘A Proclamation’ (Washington D.C. 1888), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=71753> (version 18/01/2011). <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=69627>; Roosevelt, ‘Thanksgiving Proclamation (Washington D.C. 1908), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=69627> (version 18/01/2011).

<sup>50</sup> Kammen, *Mystic chords of memory*, 3 – 100, 287 – 294.

<sup>51</sup> Robert Stoneman, ‘To all to whom these presents shall come, greetings’ (Sacramento 1885); Arthur, ‘A Proclamation’ (Washington D.C. 1882), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=68783> (version 26/01/2011).

<sup>52</sup> Gillett, ‘Proclamation’ (Sacramento 1907).

<sup>53</sup> Benjamin Harrison, ‘A proclamation’ (Washington D.C. 1891), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=71016> (version 18/01/2011); Cleveland, ‘A proclamation’ (Washington D.C. 1895), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=70686> (version 18/01/2011).

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Thanksgiving Proclamations became especially apparent during the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt, who was, after all, a historian by training. He provides us with a sound illustration of this development:

When nearly three centuries ago the first settlers came to the country which has now become this great Republic, they fronted not only hardship and privation, but terrible risk to their lives. In those grim years the custom grew of setting apart one day in each year for a special service of thanksgiving to the Almighty for preserving the people through the changing seasons.<sup>54</sup>

And so a more historical approach came to dominate the Thanksgiving Day rhetoric, with references to heroic and characteristic events in the national past. Following the declaration of war against Germany, for instance, Wilson reminded Americans of the Declaration of Independence. Stephens likewise compared the nation's "spirit which has built this Nation into one of the great powers of the earth" with revolutionary battles fought at Lexington and Valley Forge.<sup>55</sup>

### California in Proclamations

As far as the ways in which Californian Governors reflected their own state as a particular part of the United States are concerned, the official proclamations offer a pattern that is less clear. Most of all, it seems, this is a consequence of the brevity and formality of many of these official statements, which frequently but followed the statements made by the president. One might also suggest that regional identities and self-awareness were stronger in other parts of the country than in the relatively new state of California. In particular the states of the agrarian 'Old South' developed a strong regional identity in the years after the Civil War. The popular image of the 'Lost Cause' that originated there responded to what was seen as the defeat of freedom, fallen victim to the industrial and military might of the North. In that interpretation the Southerner was seen as a 'fallen soldier', who had fought for the righteous political cause of freedom, and against encroachment by the federal government.<sup>56</sup> Conversely, Californian governors omitted references to a clear regional identity (and

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<sup>54</sup> Theodore Roosevelt, 'A proclamation' (Washington D.C. 1905) <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=69633> (version 18/01/2011).

<sup>55</sup> Woodrow Wilson, 'A proclamation' (Washington D.C. 1917), <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=72443> (version 18/01/2011); William Stephens, 'Proclamation' (Sacramento 1917).

<sup>56</sup> David W. Blight, *Race and reunion. The civil war in American memory* (Cambridge, MA and London 2001). Blight defines the 'lost cause' on p. 37-38.

opposition to other regions). Even a progressive, republican governor such as Hiram Johnson – in office during a period that was characterized by a strong and extensive rhetoric in presidential proclamations (1911 – 1917) – addressed not the people of California nor the nation as a whole, as did his progressive counterpart Theodore Roosevelt.

But still, the two decades after 1900 give us some indications of an adjustment in the way denizens of the state of California itself were addressed (see Table 2). In the decades prior to 1900, governors mainly noted the reasons why Californians in particular should show their gratitude, as did Robert Waterman in 1887, when he recalled in general terms “[...] the great prosperity that has attended all the great interests of the State”.<sup>57</sup> After the turn of the century we see a rise in such proclamations that specifically addressed the people of California. Firstly, this happened in times of crisis; for instance when an earthquake had devastated San Francisco in 1906, and Governor Pardee praised the “brotherly kindness” from other states and foreign countries that had aided his fellow Californians. Governor William Stephens on his part, after the First World War came to an end, stated that Californians had served both the nation and even mankind with their food and financial supplies, and manpower.<sup>58</sup> Secondly, a good climate as something distinctively Californian – and therefore a reason to be grateful – recurred several times, something we see in other media of the time, such as newspapers as well.<sup>59</sup>

The official (i.e. governmental) rhetoric of Thanksgiving Day became more geared towards the inhabitants of the nation and, although in a lesser degree, the state. Americans, for instance, were more often addressed according to their common history, a development that became noticeable during the presidencies of McKinley and Roosevelt. But the historical reading of especially the so-called national duty to mankind must be seen as a reinterpretation of the national history instead of necessarily a manipulation thereof, as different interpretations were simply added to certain constant aspects of the Thanksgiving rhetoric. Like that, we will see below how the war against Spain provided a stimulus for visions of

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<sup>57</sup> Waterman, ‘Thanksgiving proclamation’ (Sacramento 1887).

<sup>58</sup> George Pardee, ‘Thanksgiving proclamation’ (Sacramento 1906); Stephens, ‘Thanksgiving proclamation’ (Sacramento 1918); Stephens, ‘Thanksgiving proclamation’ (Sacramento 1919).

<sup>59</sup> Pardee, ‘Thanksgiving proclamation’ (Sacramento 1904); Gillett, ‘Proclamation’ (Sacramento 1908); Gillett ‘Proclamation’ (Sacramento 1909). In 1889, *LAT* wrote: “The earth, like the human race, is rich in spots. Geography has its valley of the Nile and Euphrates, as history has its Augustine and Elizabethan period. One of the regions where Nature was lavish is Southern California”, ‘A caressing zephyr’, *LAT*, 20/11/1889, 4; *LAT* often referred to a warm Thanksgiving as opposed to the holiday season on the east coast, often mentioning how many winter tourists ventured westward, e.g. ‘Editorials’, *LAT*, 18/11/1889, 7; *LAT*, 24/11/1891, 4; ‘Reason to be thankful’, *LAT*, 24/11/1891, 7.

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American exceptionalism in written media as well, where it was often phrased as a historical or providential mission that had its origins with the early settlers. But besides this sense of universalism, it seemed that American leaders became simply more aware of the possibility to address a national or regional community as a unity, especially on a day that celebrated precisely that unity. This was clearly illustrated by the Californian proclamations. While specific notions of regional identity were lacking, the people within the state were addressed in an increasingly direct way. It was during the First World War that a new dimension of exclusion was added to the idea of national unity, when immigration terms were tightened to further national homogeneity. Americanism likewise became a governmentally sponsored category, narrowly described in protestant, male and racial terms.<sup>60</sup>

In the following two sections, we will turn our attention to newspapers to see whether there are hints of a similar rhetoric of Thanksgiving Day within public means of communication. Two years that saw foreign war – against Spain in 1898 and the Central Powers in 1917 – will illustrate how major crises recurred in observances of the celebration. Meanwhile, 1904 proved a fruitful year in both domestic politics (presidential elections) and the rhetoric present in official proclamations (see Table 1 and 2). In addition, the two wars differ from the year 1904 that saw relative peace and quiet following the late-nineteenth century decade of crises and turmoil.

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<sup>60</sup> O’Leary, *To die for*, 195 – 245; Higham, *Strangers in the land*, 158 – 233.

## 2. Domestic Issues

Thanksgiving Day 1917 saw two major Los Angeles newspapers arguing over the government's role in times of world war. The *Los Angeles Examiner*, a Democratic newspaper, reproached the Republican *Los Angeles Times* for hampering the war efforts of the nation's Democratic president, Woodrow Wilson, while the *Times* deemed the war-government too interfering and paternalistic. Contributors of both newspapers found in Thanksgiving Day a welcome medium to filter their criticisms. In this section we will investigate how different interpretations and usages of Thanksgiving Day operated side by side, and were influenced by their historical contexts. This diversity points at the varying interpretations of this particular national celebration. Before moving on to the war years and the impact on the domestic political debate, however, we will approach the political climate of 1904, when, among others, a socialist party joined the presidential race for the first time. We will end by looking at the ways in which Germans, Jews and African-Americans elaborated on and added to Thanksgiving Day and its rhetoric.

### **The Elections of 1904**

During the 1890's the United States witnessed a polarized political climate, in part because of the populist response to the economic decline of the decade. The Populist Party was founded in 1892, and participated in that year's presidential elections, although the Democratic candidate Grover Cleveland won in a landslide victory. However, the economic downturn that occurred between 1893 and 1897 meant a new stimulus for populist politics. The widely admired William Jennings Bryan saw himself nominated by both the Democratic and Populist Party for the 1896 elections, only to lose against the Republican nominee, William McKinley. Once more, in 1900, Bryan and McKinley competed for the presidency, but the populist' appeal had withered under a strengthened economy and American military successes against Spain in 1898. The economic downturn followed the 1870s and 1880s, which are often referred to as the Gilded Age. It was an age of rapid economic growth. Major political differences dampened after the Civil War, and power concentrated in the hands of several

large corporations, or trusts, that controlled whole industries. Trusts and trust breaking became a major political issue following the 1890s.

The assassination of McKinley in 1901 unexpectedly brought vice-president Theodore Roosevelt into office. Roosevelt had fought decisive battles in the Spanish-American War with his ‘Rough Riders’, and “Teddy” later became an admired president, though not by everyone. Despite his trust breaking-policies against major corporations such as Standard Oil and U.S. Steel, Roosevelt nevertheless condemned socialism and radical labor. It made Roosevelt and his Republican Party into a target of labor agitation, which was expressed in leftist newspapers and periodicals such as Los Angeles-based *Common Sense*, which in 1904 stated that “[t]he Republican Party is the political side of capitalism, capitalism is the greedy side of monopoly; monopoly is the hoggish side of humanity, or rather the human side of hoggishness”.<sup>61</sup>

Published by the Los Angeles Socialist Party since 1901, *Common Sense* had a circulation of about 1400, but ceased to exist in 1909.<sup>62</sup> Not only were its editors fiercely opposed to the Republican administration, they also ridiculed its local component, the *Los Angeles Times*, as the “the Great Christian Daily” that merely served the needs of Republicans and their capitalist interests.<sup>63</sup> The *Times* was founded in 1881 as the *Los Angeles Daily*, and became a major national daily with an eye for local affairs under the aegis of its editor Harrison Gray Otis. As *Common Sense* suggested, the *Times* was indeed a fierce interpreter of Republican interests and had close ties with several Republican leaders such as McKinley and Taft. After the elections of 1884, for example, this led to a peculiar situation, when the newspaper reported that not Cleveland but his Republican opponent James Blaine was the new president, only to rectify the news eleven days later. Organized labor, as said, fiercely resisted the *Times*’ interests and policies. This made Otis into the symbol of anti-union sentiments in Los Angeles. As a result, the *Times* witnessed numerous strikes that were organized by the Typographical Union, and on October 1, 1910 even had its headquarters bombed by two members of the Ironworkers Union, thereby killing 21 employees and injuring a hundred more. The *Times* nevertheless remained a newspaper of national

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<sup>61</sup> ‘Facts and figures’, *CS*, 19/11/1917, 3.

<sup>62</sup> Until 1904, the newspaper was called the *Los Angeles Socialist*; Information derived from the colophon of *CS*, 26/11/1904, 2 and *California Newspaper Project*, online accessible on <http://cbsrdb.ucr.edu/cgi-bin/starfinder/26685/cnppublic.txt/> (version 18/01/2011).

<sup>63</sup> ‘Charity’, *CS*, 3/12/1904, 1.

significance, which in 1904 had a circulation between 34.000 and 64.000, and reaching 59.000 to 111.000 in 1917.<sup>64</sup>

The November 1904 presidential election was the first to witness the participation of the Socialist Party. Eugene Debs was nominated to challenge Roosevelt, and Alton Brooks Parker represented the Democratic Party. After Roosevelt was reelected, *Common Sense* drew on that year's Thanksgiving Day on Thursday 24, to reflect on the elections and the past year. Here, the rhetoric of thanksgiving was used as a source of political satire. In an article entitled 'What I am thankful for', author John A. Morris reflected on the political affairs and blessings of the past year:

I am thankful that in some places they [the Socialist Party] have put the democratic party in a ridiculous position of third place. I am thankful that the way the Socialist party is growing numerically, the two old parties will soon have to unite their voting strength into one party in order to beat the Socialist, and then in some places will be unable to do it.<sup>65</sup>

And even the outcome of the recent elections strengthened the workers cause:

I am thankful that "Teddy" the Terrible is once more on the throne-and as the Man on Horseback can ride Capitalism to its death.<sup>66</sup>

As a new presence within national politics, socialists foresaw a bright future, and considered it only a matter of time for that future to appear. The capricious character of Roosevelt would in addition but aid the proletariat. Morris thus used a rhetoric of thankfulness to reflect on the political future of the nation, and to satirize the bourgeois representatives of its social order.

Another response to the Republican viewpoints of the *Times* was the *Los Angeles Examiner*. Founded in 1903 by the Democratic publisher and politician William Randolph Hearst and part of the Hearst Corporation, the *Examiner* was hostile to trusts and sought to become a labor and union-friendly alternative to the *Times*. As a politician, Hearst leaned towards the populist side of the Democratic Party. He was elected for the U.S. Congress in 1902, and even ran for the presidential nomination two years later. The *Examiner* was

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<sup>64</sup> Marshall Berges, *The life and Times of Los Angeles* (New York 1984); Jack R.Hart, *The information empire: the rise of the Los Angeles Times and the Times Mirror Corporation* (Washington 1981); Robert Gottlieb and Irene Wolt, *Thinking big. The story of the Los Angeles Times, it's publishers and their influence in Southern California* (New York 1977); 'October circulation of the Times', *LAT* 13/11/1904, 4; "'The Times" day by day circulation gains', *LAT* 1/11/1917, 11. Note that in 1904 *LAX* estimated the *Times*' total of 56.3000 copies on one particular day to be 20.000 copies lower. According to this statement 'It was just pure "bluff" [...] The "Examiner's" great Sunday circulation of nearly 50.000 sold copies has never been equaled by any newspaper in this city, and the growth is continuing', "'Circulation"', *LAX*, 22/11/1904, 14.

<sup>65</sup> John A. Morris, 'What I am thankful fore', *CS*, 26/11/1904, 4.

<sup>66</sup> Morris, 'What I am thankful fore', *CS*.

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designed to boost this electoral campaign, and was part of Hearst's nationwide media network with key articles appearing in multiple newspapers. Democrat party leaders, however, nominated Parker, fearing Hearst's tendency to the working class. But the *Examiner* remained, and in 1904 claimed to have a circulation of 50,000.<sup>67</sup>

Perhaps because Hearst and the Democratic Party were defeated by Roosevelt's electoral successes, but the Thanksgiving rhetoric of the *Examiner* did not reflect on the recent elections in the way *Common Sense* did. Instead, Thanksgiving accounts and interpretations were characterized by confidence, reflecting the years of optimism and economic growth that followed the end of the nineteenth century. In an account of the Thanksgiving sermon in the First Presbyterian Church, for instance, Rev. Frank DeWitt Talmage was quoted, who said that:

I find we have a better government, a better church, better homes, better physical and mental men and women and better children to take our places after we are gone. Let us thank God, on this coming Harvest Festival for what he has done for us.<sup>68</sup>

He moreover dissociated himself from "a false collection of misanthropic pessimistic prophecies". In contrast to one hundred years before, ministers did not drink alcohol after services and churches were no longer involved in gambling practices; the world, in short, had become a better place.<sup>69</sup> Therewith the *Examiner* did not differ much from the *Times*, where the same DeWitt Talmage was quoted:

Everywhere, we find that governments are better than their predecessors.  
Even modern Turkey is an improvement over ancient Turkey.<sup>70</sup>

The elections seemed not to affect, let alone politicize the Thanksgiving rhetoric of the larger newspapers of the region. Socialists managed to utilize the rhetoric that was known nationwide, and restructured this into a political critique on representatives of capitalism. Different, conversely, was the situation in 1917, when war and governmental policies fundamentally influenced people's lives.

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<sup>67</sup> David Nasaw, *The chief. The life of William Randolph Hearst* (Boston and New York 2000) 168 – 185; 'Circulation', *LAX*, 22/11/1904, 14.

<sup>68</sup> *LAX*, 21/11/1904, 9.

<sup>69</sup> *LAX*, 21/11/1904, 9

<sup>70</sup> 'A better world', *LAT*, 21/11/1904, 13.

### Hooverization and the Battle at the Dinner Table

The United States entered the First World War on April 6, 1917. Federal policies were, notwithstanding the war, a serious source of dispute between Democrats and Republicans. The Democrat Woodrow Wilson had won the presidential election of 1912, partly because of a schism within the Republican Party caused by a dissatisfied Roosevelt himself. His newly formed Progressive Party overtly competed with the Republican nominee and current president, William Howard Taft. After the United States declared war on Germany, Wilson appointed Herbert Hoover head of the United States Food Administration. Under his credo that “food will win the war”, Hoover encouraged Americans to reduce their food consumption; the gains could then be used to supply the army. This policy, aimed to serve the war effort and soon labeled ‘Hooverization’, stimulated a debate between the *Examiner* and *Times* wherein either the nation’s successes in the war or its future prosperity was at stake. The latter warned of the failure of the economy, and urged above all to increase the production of food.<sup>71</sup> The *Examiner* responded by explaining that necessary sacrifices were needed to win the war. In a section called ‘How I save food’, for instance, readers could submit suggestions for fine but moderate dishes, and several satirical cartoons portrayed an alliance of corporate trusts and the *Times* to stop Hoover and ‘Uncle Sam’ from winning the war.<sup>72</sup>

This debate intensified and became more concrete once people noticed that national Thanksgiving customs were endangered. Obviously, the primary symbol of an endangered Thanksgiving was the turkey. Continuing on his food policies, Hoover had urged Americans to alter their annual custom by having a “turkeyless Thanksgiving”, and the Ralph Merritt Food Conservation Committee did the same in California.<sup>73</sup> In the *Times* this consequently led to numerous items that underlined the necessity of the turkey as the indispensable part of a Thanksgiving feast, and even a symbol of national pride. In this fashion, columnist Alma

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<sup>71</sup> ‘The food question’, *LAT*, 30/11/1917, II4: “There has been ample evidence [...] to show that Mr. Hoover and his associates are well aware that the only decisively effective way in which to meet the food situation is for America to move heaven and earth to increase actual food production. [...] “It is vitally necessary [...] not only for America to produce as it has never produced before from the lands already under cultivation, but to put millions upon millions of idle, slacker acres into immediate use.”

<sup>72</sup> Also by assuring the “practically unanimous” agreement of butchers with a wheatless Wednesday, and the leading pioneering position of both Los Angeles and California. ‘Meatless day to be made fact’ *LAX*, 19/11/1917, 9); ‘LA in lead on food rules’, *LAX*, 20/11/1917, 5; ‘Wheatless day is well observed here’, *LAX*, 23/11/1917, III; ‘California leads nation in signing pledges to save food’, *LAX*, 29/11/1917, 7. Cartoons appeared in *LAX*, 24/11/1917, II7; *LAX*, 25/11/1917 II3.

<sup>73</sup> A. Rancher, ‘Not a turkeyless thanksgiving’, *LAT* 3/11/1917, II8; comp the announcement by the Ralph Merritt Food Conservation Committee “Turkeys that are poor and underdeveloped are worth more on the ranch than on the Thanksgiving table. Don’t send lightweight birds to markets; they are an economic loss unless they are fattened enough”, : ‘Fatten all turkeys is plea to farmers’, *LAX*, 21/11/1917, 6.

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Whitaker lamented that the government-designed moderation had become the new moral standard of the day. To have a traditional meal, in short, was now even deemed “unpatriotic, treacherous, traitorous, criminal, pro-German”.<sup>74</sup> According to Whitaker, these, very Thanksgiving dishes were a proof of civilization and its progress: “How unutterably disgusting was the ancestral feast – the gluttons! We had advanced so far beyond their vulgar ken. Civilization had taught us so much. WE could stuff like gentlemen.” And not merely a gastronomical history, but even the advancement of the American character itself was at stake:

We who have been brought up to know that no celebration is complete without a perfect gorge –[...] we, I say, must lay aside the noble traditions of a lifetime, the happy surfeits to which our high-bred, free and independent stomachs have been accustomed, and remember Hoover.<sup>75</sup>

Comparable to Whitaker, Lester J. Skidmore wrote in a poem entitled ‘A Thanksgiving appeal’ about the connection between morality and custom. But in contrast to Whitaker’s notion of the nation’s progress, Skidmore suggested that charity, one of the main traditions of Thanksgiving, was now endangered.

We’re supporting Mr. Hoover in his conservation plan,  
And we signed the food pledge gladly, and will do all that we can  
To eliminate the wastage that prosperity has fed;  
And with clearer understanding live the frugal life instead.  
Wheatless days were weekly features that we first of all installed;  
Meatless days soon followed after, ‘though the thought at first appalled.  
Now we ask you, Mr. Hoover, let us have (just once) our way – Let us celebrate  
Thanksgiving in the good, old-fashioned way.

[...]

We’ll admit it’s hardly proper – selfish, too, to say the least –  
In these dark days to be planning for a big Thanksgiving feast.  
But if you’ll grant dispensation for this day of all the days,  
We’ll be grateful, Mr. Hoover, and repay a thousand ways.  
Furthermore, we’ll feed the hungry, search them out and freely give.<sup>76</sup>

The Thanksgiving custom of charity was thus presented as endangered by the cutting of supplies. Alma Whitaker, in another column, wrote that the economy could only remain stable when the rich kept on spending their wealth on luxury, instead of economizing as the

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<sup>74</sup> Alma Whitaker, ‘Farewell to the perfect gorge’, *LAT* 9/10/1917, II4.

<sup>75</sup> Whitaker, ‘Farewell to the perfect gorge’.

<sup>76</sup> Lester J. Skidmore, ‘A Thanksgiving appeal’, *LAT* 27/11/1917, II3.

government demanded. Not to eat turkeys for Thanksgiving would moreover keep the birds alive, which would cost more food to feed them than initially expected. Therefore, Whittaker reasoned, “the longer we think about it, the more obvious it is that turkey becomes not only a gastronomical pleasure but a patriotic duty”.<sup>77</sup>

Editors of the *Examiner* countered these allegations by emphasizing the unquestionable goodwill of the government. With regard to the celebration of Thanksgiving Day food restrictions were being lifted, as was the new ban on ice cream that was by exception sold on Wednesday instead of Thursday in order to spare Thanksgiving Day.<sup>78</sup> And the Wednesday-ban on wheat products was lifted as well, yet under the condition that “the bakers making their sales will request that their patrons show their patriotic spirit and not consume any white bread until tomorrow, Thanksgiving Day”.<sup>79</sup> Readers were likewise remembered that they were not alone in these difficult times, and that president Wilson and his wife served as examples, who partook in the sober observation of Thanksgiving.<sup>80</sup> But not just the government was sympathetic to its citizens. Americans themselves were similarly benevolent and knew their duty, as was stated in an editorial published on Thanksgiving Day:

We should be deeply grateful that our populace everywhere has shown a cheerful willingness to submit to food restrictions, trusting to the national authorities to protect against speculators and extortioners in bread and other prime necessities.<sup>81</sup>

The *Examiner* warned its readers about food shortages and the consequences it could have on the war effort. Price speculation could only be prevented by strong government-regulations. It was therefore not a coincidence that the *Times*, as a representative of Republican big business, disapproved with these regulations – an allegation we already saw above.

The *Times* continued its attacks on the Democrats in Washington when the president announced a Thanksgiving meal for soldiers in Camp Kearny (San Diego, California) and

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<sup>77</sup> Alma Whitaker, *LAT*, ‘Stuffed turkey and false economy’, 6/11/1917 II4; A. Rancher, ‘Not a turkeyless thanksgiving’. See also the reports of scarcity: ‘Turkey prices seek the sky’, *LAT* 8/11/1917, II7; ‘Ostrich for Thanksgiving’, *LAT*, 22/11/1917, 7; ‘Turkey and chicken join high costs’, *LAT* 29/11/1917, 1; ‘Local produce market’, *LAT* 30/11/1917, II7.

<sup>78</sup> ‘Thursdays will be ice creamless days’, *LAX*, 28/11/1917, 9.

<sup>79</sup> ‘Breadrule relaxed for feast day’, *LAX*, 28/11/1917, 3.

<sup>80</sup> “Dinner at the White House was a simple and informal affair. Only members of the President’s household were present and the menu was arranged with a view to food conservation, Mrs. Wilson having been one of the first signers of the food pledges cards”, ‘Food Savings rules white house feast’, *LAX*, 30/11/1917, 3.

<sup>81</sup> ‘For blessings of year we give thanks today’, *LAX*, 29/11/1917, II10; comp. “After the church services the President, surrounded by members of his household, enjoyed a Thanksgiving dinner at the White House, prepared, it was stated, in accordance with the rules advocates by Food Administrator Hoover. The President’s turkey this year, a forty-pounder, came from the Kentucky farm of South Trimble, Clerk of the House,” ‘Wilson hears war sermon’, *LAT*, 30/11/1917, 3.

Camp Lewis (Tacoma, Washington).<sup>82</sup> The *Times* questioned the high costs of such a gift that came on top of the already astronomical war expenses. It was estimated that Camp Lewis alone would need 6900 turkeys plus additional ingredients, totaling more than 30.000 dollars. Why should the government pay for these expenses with tax money, editors asked. Whether “Uncle Sam is a sentimental chap” or not, the soldiers’ families would provide for their sons themselves.<sup>83</sup> The private character of Thanksgiving, and the responsibility of individuals obtained a symbol in the person of ‘Little mother Luke Lederman’ from Venice, who was awarded for her “patriotic work” by providing recruits with delicacies for Thanksgiving. She hoped that nationwide “some unselfish, patriotic woman in every community” would follow her example, so that soldiers “will be sent away with something more substantial than a “smile,” and kept supplied with good things from home after they reach camp”.<sup>84</sup> The day after Thanksgiving Day, the undesirability of such a “paternal government” was once again underlined:

In addition to the food provided by a paternal government, friends and relatives sent in many boxes and packages containing home-cooked nutriment. Many of the boys could be seen lugging these boxes over from the depot. That is one occasion when a man doesn’t object to serving as a beast of burden. There always is a certain delightful mystery about a box from home, and one has just to bust it open with an ax to find out what it contains.<sup>85</sup>

In short, in the eyes of contributors to the *Times*, Thanksgiving Day was a private holiday, and the government should not have meddled in its traditions. Likewise, the government should not have taken the daily lives of citizens in hand, notwithstanding that a war was raging.

The *Examiner* did not deny such individual responsibility, and its editors praised organizations and families who took care of soldiers staying in Los Angeles during Thanksgiving Day.<sup>86</sup> But regardless of the good intentions of individuals, it was suggested, soldiers who were far from home deserved to be rewarded.<sup>87</sup> And thus indisputably, “Uncle Sam always provides a turkey dinner for his soldiers’ Thanksgiving and again on Christmas.

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<sup>82</sup> For the government-sponsored Thanksgiving meal see: ‘Fourteen tons of turkey for soldier’s Thanksgiving’, *LAT*, 11/11/1917, III; ‘Eight miles of troops in Camp Lewis review’, *LAT*, 21/11/1917, III. Also soldiers fighting in France were given a meal, see: ‘Americans rout Germans when dugout is rushed’, *LAT*, 14/11/1917, 5; ‘Thanksgiving for fighting men’, *LAT*, 29/11/1917, 3.

<sup>83</sup> ‘Tons of turkeys and “fixin’s” for Camp Lewis Thanksgiving’, *LAT*, 18/11/1917, II7.

<sup>84</sup> ‘Thanksgiving Day eats for soldiers’, *LAT*, 26/11/1917, II5; ‘Box of goodies for drafted men’, *LAT*, 18/11/1917, III.

<sup>85</sup> Harry A. Williams, ‘Kearny dinner scores big hit’, *LAT*, 30/11/1917, II7.

<sup>86</sup> ‘Turkey dinner for sailors, soldiers’, *LAX*, 27/11/1917, 7. One of these individuals happened to be William Randolph Hearst himself: ‘Mr. Hearst is host to 400 U.S. soldiers’, *LAX*, 30/11/1917, 1.

<sup>87</sup> ‘20.000 soldiers feast in camp’, *LAX*, 30/11/1917, 5.

The turkey, a pound to a man, is charged in on the rations account for the month”.<sup>88</sup> Americans, however, should not be afraid for the high costs the *Times* warned for:

But as the Government buys the turkeys far in advance and in enormous numbers, the cost per pound is not exorbitant, and any good mess sergeant can manage the mess for the month without having to skimp other days to make up for the turkey.<sup>89</sup>

In the *Examiner*, the government was not deemed paternalistic or meddling, but provided merely for those whose annual Thanksgiving tradition was endangered. As much as the government knew how to respect national festal traditions, it respected its citizens; yet times of war demanded sacrifices from everyone. Remarkable, as well, was an editorial on Thanksgiving Day that once again explained the history of Thanksgiving Day. The newspapers there revised the Northern reading of the celebration that, as we saw, persisted after the Civil War. These origins were more complicated, the article stated: “That feast was celebrated in Virginia for years before the New England Governor Bradford, in 1623, proclaimed a day of Thanksgiving. That was the genesis of the name but not of the feast”.<sup>90</sup> With a Democrat from Virginia in the White House, the *Examiner* seemed to suggest, it was again obvious who could rightly claim the nation’s founding and survival. Hence, the fierce political debate during the First World War seemed to revive regional strife as well.

### **Germans in Southern California**

Amidst these war anxieties and debates about the government’s tasks in times of war, there remained the issue of Southern Californians of German descent. An important means of communication was the *Süd-Californische Deutsche Zeitung*, an independent weekly established in 1887, with a circulation of one thousand.<sup>91</sup> The *Zeitung* reflected the uncertainties of Germans living in a country that fought Germans overseas. German Americans ages fourteen years and older had to register themselves, and, unlike those from other enemy nations, were restricted in their moving.<sup>92</sup> They were moreover suspected of disloyalty and conspiracy against the United States. When a fire at the end of November, for

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<sup>88</sup> ‘Holiday leave for soldiers’, *LAX*, 27/11/1917, 9.

<sup>89</sup> ‘Holiday leave for soldiers’, *LAX*.

<sup>90</sup> ‘For Blessings of year we give thanks today’, *LAX*, 29/11/1917, II2.

<sup>91</sup> Karl J.R. Arndt and May E. Olson, *The German press of the Americas* 1 (3rd revised edition; Munich 1976) 25.

<sup>92</sup> ‘Registrierung aller Reichsdeutsche Männer’, *DZ*, 23/11/1917, 1; ‘Oust Germans from new zone’, *LAX*, 22/11/1917, 1.

instance, destroyed the Los Angeles Hauser Plant, the *Examiner* immediately spoke of a “Teutonic sabotage” aiming to hamper the shipment of meat that was concentrated in the plant. Only later they reported that an employee by accident had set fire to a van of gasoline. The 350 employees of the plant, though, still had to undergo a “test of patriotism”.<sup>93</sup> The *Zeitung* attempted to soothe these anxieties, and pictured German-Americans as perfectly integrated and adjusted citizens. In a statement copied from the *Illinois Staats-Zeitung* (printed in English!), it was lamented that many German-American Societies had to stop their activities. With regard to the German-American National Alliance, it was stated that only citizens were accepted who endeavored the naturalization of every German in America. The statement concluded by underlining that “[We] are living here in one house, under one flag, and shall continue to do so forever”.<sup>94</sup>

The American customs of Thanksgiving Day (*Danksagungstage*) therefore proved a welcome medium for German-Americans to prove their loyalty and adjustment. Accounts of German participation in the *Zeitung* above all sought to prove the sameness of Germans and Americans. The newspaper gave previews of Thanksgiving activities, and German experiences of Thanksgiving Day and food regulations. Looking ahead, these regulations were deemed problematic, especially for housewives who had to prepare feasts: “Schwere Zeiten für die Hausfrau, wo jeden Tag Sparsamkeit gepredigt wird”.<sup>95</sup> And just like the many Americas who planned their wedding on Thanksgiving Day, the German couple Marie Moese and Hermann Stroh married on that day; an account of which was published in the *Zeitung*. Their dinner saw a “Freundschaft und Fröhlichkeit”, and a cosmopolitan businessman and friend of the family gave a speech. Another friend of the bride, Herr. Thomas, married on that day as well. The *Zeitung* underlined that both these men served the country they lived in, as Stroh was a Sergeant in Coast Artillery, and Thomas a pilot who was soon to leave for France. The newspaper, looking ahead, therefore hoped for the best:

Hoffen wir das es ihm vergönnt ist, nach Friedensschwung wohlbehalten nach des sonnigen Gestaden Süd-Californiens zurückzukehren.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> ‘Teutonic Sabotage campaign hits L.A.’, *LAX* 22/11/1917, 1; ‘Hauser employee arrested for fire’, *LAX*, 23/11/1917, 1.; ‘Patriot Test’ of labor begins’, *LAX*, 24/11/1917, 1.

<sup>94</sup> ‘German-American Societies’, *DZ*, 13/7/1917, 3.

<sup>95</sup> ‘Stadt und County’, *DZ*, 28/11/1917, 4; ‘Berichtigung’, *DZ*, 7/12/1917, 1; ‘Feder und Schere’, *DZ*, 7/12/1917, 1.

<sup>96</sup> ‘Hochzeits-Glocken’, *DZ*, 12/11/1917, 1.

Not only did these German-Americans enjoy a perfectly American Thanksgiving-wedding, but the husbands involved moreover knew their duty and left to fight in Europe. It also corresponded with the pledge made by the German-American National Alliance of naturalization, understanding and adjustment.

### **Recognition and Equality**

The Civil War had brought the abolition of slavery and the theoretical equality of black and white Americans. In practice, however, this equality proved a farce, as racial discrimination against African-Americans persisted. Fraternities, civil organizations and unions, for instance, were the centers of American civil society and political life, but in general refused black membership. As a response, and in an attempt to participate in American national life, African-Americans started their own fraternal and sisterly organizations. Some of these paralleled their white counterparts, while others were distinctive orders with their own rituals and intentions.<sup>97</sup> The Los Angeles-based newspaper *The California Eagle* pursued a comparable aim of participation in American civil society. Founded as the *California Owl* in 1879, editor Charlotta Bass changed the name in 1912. The weekly aimed at African-Americans in the West, but its call for equality and social justice appealed to many nationwide. This was reflected in its high circulation number, which in 1924 was announced to have reached 60.000.<sup>98</sup>

This partially resulted in typical, American Thanksgiving observations in the newspaper: dinners and services were given, charitable activities organized, and in advertisements weekend trips and bazaars were promoted.<sup>99</sup> The *Eagle* also supported government policies such as the prohibition of alcohol and Hoover's food restrictions. Thus in a November 1917 report from Thanksgiving in Pasadena, it was stated that:

The citizens of Pasadena are thankful that they live in a country that has the largest city in the world that, in 130 days, will not have a barroom in it. But the saloon keepers should

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<sup>97</sup> Theda Skocpol and Morris P. Fiorina, 'Making sense of the civic engagement debate', in: Skocpol and Fiorina (eds.), *Civic Engagement in American Democracy* (Washington and New York 1999), 1 – 23; Theda Skocpol, Ariane Liazos and Marshall Ganz, *What a mighty power we can be. African American fraternal groups and the struggle for racial equality* (Princeton and Oxford 2006), passim, on p. 32 it is estimated that African Americans constituted a 10 to 11% part of the population, and likewise was an estimated 12% of the American federations.

<sup>98</sup> "'The West's greatest journal'", *CE*, 4/4/1924, 8; Southern California Library, 'Charlotta Bass and the California Eagle', <http://www.socallib.org/bass/story/index.html> (version 15/12/2010).

<sup>99</sup> *CE*, 10/11/1917, 6; *CE*, 17/11/1917, 3, 6; *CE*, 24/11/1917, 2, 5, 7.

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have known that when the Church, newspapers and the women's clubs combined against them, victory was certain. We are proud to know that The Eagle did its part.<sup>100</sup>

Thus the contributors emphasized the contributions of African-Americans to American society: not only had the newspaper supported the improvement and preservation of society, its editors had done "their part". But an agenda of social justice and equality was present as well, as in the report account of a Baptist Thanksgiving service, that echoed a Booker T. Washingtonian message of hard work and dignity: young African-Americans should make use of education to shape their own future.

No race, no creed, no color, but each man working out his destiny under God, as seems best to him, without in any manner interfering with the rights of others so to do; equal opportunities to all men everywhere; and peace, and happiness, and clean living. Men and women who are doing things worth while are not among cabaret entertainers, dance instructors and others who are practicing evil occupations, who are causing the bars of high standard to be indiscriminately lowered.<sup>101</sup>

The *Eagle* called for equality, justice and recognition of African Americans as part of America. Their being part of that nation was underlined; the church was decorated in "red, white and blue", and it was emphasized that "[t]he public is always invited in worship with us".<sup>102</sup>

Although this is not to say that the national holiday was never used to address race hatred and bigotry in a more direct way. In November 1898, a direct appeal to President McKinley and "the liberty-loving people of America" was made by the black churches of Los Angeles, and published in the *Times*. Therein, they pointed at the persistence of racial violence and lynching practices in the South. Thus Thanksgiving Day "brings gratitude to the Caucasian American, [but] brings only sorrow and death to the Afro-American".<sup>103</sup> Or more directly:

Here is an appalling picture of the nineteenth century civilization in the midst of the greatest Christian nation of the world. While our republic extends help to Cuba and the Philippines, it makes no serious efforts to protect its own citizens, whose

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<sup>100</sup> 'Pasadena Notes', *CE*, 24/11/1917, 5; with regard to food policies comp. an editorial in *CE* 1/12/1917, 4: "If we are going to win this war, we must fight Germany man for man, shell for shell, potato for potato" [...] Yes, the woman I the kitchen is helping to win the war"; 'Notes from Camp Lewis', *CE*, 8/12/1917, 4.

<sup>101</sup> 'Thanksgiving Day', *CE*, 8/12/1917, 7.

<sup>102</sup> 'Thanksgiving Day', *CE*; 'What the churches are doing', *CE*, 24/11/1917, 2; Isabelle Clay Bynoe, 'Churches vs. oppressions', *CE*, 24/11/1917, 2.

<sup>103</sup> S.W. Hawkins, J.E. Edwards and J.E. Ford, 'Race hatred', *LAT*, 25/11/1898, 1.

representatives braved the heights of San Juan and El Caney to uphold national honor.<sup>104</sup>

African-Americans participated in Thanksgiving celebrations, but under their own terms. They adopted traditions of thanksgiving services and liberty as ‘true Americans’, thus using these to criticize injustice and inequality. But they also utilized Thanksgiving Day to remember their fellow-citizens of the African American contributions to American society, for instance during battles in Cuba (“San Juan and El Caney”) and in the moral uplifting of the nation (the newspaper’s support of prohibition).

### **A Universalist Thanksgiving**

Another group that made use of Thanksgiving Day to place themselves within a celebrating nation were the Jews. From 1897 on, the Los Angeles branch of the Jewish organization B’nai B’rith published its own biweekly under the name *B’nai B’rith Messenger*. In the December 9, 1898 edition, we find an interpretation of Thanksgiving Day slightly different from those above. Here, author Rabbi A.W. Edelman revised that day so that it corresponded with the Jewish holiday of Chanukah that celebrates the rebellion of the Maccabees. The rebellion was aimed at Antioches Epiphanes, ruler of the Seleucid Empire during the second century B.C. and “tyrannizing over the persons and properties of his Jewish subjects”.<sup>105</sup> Thus the revolt received a tone comparable to popular histories of the American struggle for liberty against the British ‘tyrant’ King George III. And also the Jewish day of celebration showed remarkable similarities to the American one:

[T]he old, time-honored songs mingle with the notes of the rejoicing people of the present age, offering to the Lord our thanks and praises for the hundredfold blessings he has bestowed upon us; and gladly do we voice the words of any of the Presidents of these United States. [...] With loving kindness He has constantly led us in the way of prosperity and greatness.

Different traditions and grounds for celebration were thus blended into one universal Thanksgiving Day celebration. This was not always accepted, as happened in November 1904, when Rabbi Samuel Koch was criticized for omitting references to ‘our Lord and savior, Jesus Christ’ in his part of a mixed Thanksgiving service in Pensacola (Florida). The

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<sup>104</sup> Hawkins, Edwards, and Ford, ‘Race hatred’, *LAT*.

<sup>105</sup> A.W. Edelman, ‘The feast of Chanukah’, *BBM*, 9/12/1898, 2.

newspaper printed the response of the Rabbi, who pointed at the secular, instead of religious, origins of the celebration:

[...] in Pensacola, for one day in the year at least, patriotic citizenship evinces a stronger cohesive force than religious differences a disintegrating one. And thus, from a slightly different aspect, a religious union service on Thanksgiving Day – a Union Thanksgiving service, brings home to us once again the lesson of tolerance and universalism.<sup>106</sup>

By combining American traditions with those from their own backgrounds, Jews thus tested Americans on the universal promise of their own values and traditions.

### Turkeys Wearing Ties

Apart from these different interpretations of Thanksgiving Day, the characteristics of the celebration itself were not fundamentally altered. The government kept fulfilling a marginal role in the observance of the day, and leaders did not much more than proclaim it. When the federal government was involved in Thanksgiving practices – as in the organization of a turkey dinner for soldiers in 1917 – it was in a way that built on practices that were commonly accepted – such as having a turkey dinner – and without any further ideological aims. The tradition of charity furthermore structurally returned throughout these years. Collections were held by multiple organizations and individuals, and for different purposes – many of which were covered in newspapers.<sup>107</sup> Likewise, this charitable tradition produced the critique of John Morris in *Common Sense* that a tiny bit of what was stolen from the working class was returned to contend them.<sup>108</sup> His criticism became more evident when the *Times*, on the day after Thanksgiving 1904, pointed at the harsh conditions faced by American Indians in the Campo reservation in San Diego County, especially in contrast to the abundance of Thanksgiving Day:

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<sup>106</sup> ‘Orpheum’, *BBM*, 16 12 1905, 7.

<sup>107</sup> E.g. by Masons, Good Samaritarians, movie stars, and the Salvation Army: ‘Shriners give shoes to orphans and needy’ *LAX*, 25/11/1904, 11; ‘Shriner’s gift of gratitude’, *LAT*, 20/11/1904, 1; ‘News from Southern California towns. Pasadena’, *LAT*, 21/11/1898, 9; Grace Kingsley, ‘Frivols’, *LAT*, 30/11/1917, II3; ‘Salvationist’s Thanksgiving’, *LAT*, 15/11/1904, 12. E.g. for newsboys, the army and war casualties, Armenians, and orphans: ‘Thanksgiving dinner for hungry newsboys’, *LAX*, 24/11/1904, 11; ‘Carnival to aid military fund. Fete to continue three days’, *LAX*, 28/11/1917, 7; ‘Friends to hold annual service’, *LAT*, 26/11/1904, II5; ‘Charity nut trees’, *LAT*, 20/11/1898, II5; ‘Everyone made war on turkey’, *LAT*, 30/11/1917, II6.

<sup>108</sup> “I am thankful that the poor are always with us, so that the rich can gratify their charitable mindedness toward the under dog and by alms giving and philanthropic library donations, a la Carnegie, return to the people a portion of that of which was stolen from them”, Morris, ‘What I am thankful fore’, *CS*.

Now that we of Southern California, in common with the rest of the nation, have come well fed from the fat larders of our great feast of thanksgiving, let us turn in earnest to those fellow-creatures of ours who yesterday went hungry and who will be hungry tomorrow unless we go to their aid.<sup>109</sup>

Editors of *Common Sense* condemned this false gesture of humanity, and pointed at the deportations and exploitations of Indian peoples, in order to serve the needs of a wealthy minority.

[Indians] were forced there [in reservations] by the working of a system that simply demanded their exile for the sake of profit. Everything in the world must yield to the pressure of this demand of capitalism for profits.<sup>110</sup>

The praising of charity and humanity by the *Times* and others was nothing more than hypocrisy, Morris judged. More so, “[s]ocialism is itself the greatest and truest charity, and will drive this mock charity and hypocrisy out of the world”.<sup>111</sup>

Another symbol of Thanksgiving Day that frequently returned in the period prior to the festivities was the turkey itself. Especially the more elaborately illustrated newspapers – such as the *Times* and the *Examiner* – often used the turkey as a symbol that represented Thanksgiving Day as a whole. In 1917, for instance, the *Examiner* published a large print labeled ‘Turkey Trot’, showing two soldiers (from the navy and the infantry) arms linked with a woman, and with an giant turkey towering in the background. Both of these men moreover hold an invitation to a Thanksgiving dinner, thus portraying an ideal of patriotic hospitality during times of war.<sup>112</sup> In addition, the turkey featured in many advertisements published around Thanksgiving Day. In the *Times*, among others, we find turkeys wearing ties to promote a tie shop, while a clothing shop and ‘Bishop’s Uncolored California Tomato Catsup’ were represented by respectively a crying turkey facing a scaffold and axe, and a roasted turkey.<sup>113</sup>

Thanksgiving Day, in short, was quite an open and ambiguous celebration. Matthew Dennis described this quality as multicultural and even postmodern. Different ethnic groups reinvented Thanksgiving, Dennis says, which made the day into a blend of cultural practices;

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<sup>109</sup> ‘The Starving Indians’, *LAT*, 25/11/1904, 8.

<sup>110</sup> *Common Sense* ‘Charity’, *CS*, 3/12/1904, 1.

<sup>111</sup> ‘Charity’, *CS*.

<sup>112</sup> *LAX*, 29/11/1917, II10.

<sup>113</sup> *LAX*, 23/11/1898, 9; *LAX*, 22/11/1898, 4; *LAX*, 28/11/1917, II8.

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as holds true for the Jewish interpretation of Thanksgiving Day.<sup>114</sup> Dennis, however, sees this multiculturalism as the only political segment of the holiday, after national dichotomies withered in the 1880's. On the other hand, we saw how, after the Gilded Age, the rhetoric of Thanksgiving in Southern Californian newspapers was still at times highly politicized, and was used to voice and debate different viewpoints and ideologies. On the one side this served a debate between major political designs, but on the other it could be used as an argument in favor of social equality, recognition or universalism. It should therefore be noted that Germans and African Americans made their claims exactly by celebrating a 'truly' American Thanksgiving Day, thus underlining their presence and participation within that same nation.

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<sup>114</sup> "Thanksgiving provided a powerful way for immigrant Jews in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to become American without abandoning who they were ethnically", Dennis, *Red, white and blue letter days*, 81 – 118, quote on 109.

### 3. The United States in the World

Two wars, against Spain and Germany, triggered a passionate war-enthusiasm. Many interpreted the war against Spain in 1898 as proof that American values of morality could indeed be exported; a feeling that, again, climaxed after the United States entered the First World War in 1917. On Thanksgiving Day, this was reflected by a confident rhetoric and the events organized for the day. In this section we will investigate how a changing international approach and situation influenced the domestic rhetoric and observance of Thanksgiving Day. As a guide we will make use of the several short stories and poems that were often published by the *Times* around Thanksgiving, and reflect the differing universalistic perspective on the day in the years under observation.

#### **'Bosson: A story of Thanksgiving in the Indian Territory'**

On November 20, 1898, the *Times* published a story about the East Coast boys Waldo and Ted, and their African-American friend Billy Bean, better known as Bosson, “[b]ecause out West, boys don’t know that it’s Boston Bean; then, he’s about the color of Boston baked bean”.<sup>115</sup> Bosson was raised in a fatherless, low-income family. Following Ted and Waldo’s first meeting with Bosson, their mother and aunt bar them from playing with him, as he told them lies about his racial background, emotions and an alleged business he owns with a friend. Still, Ted and Waldo think Bosson is “the funniest boy ever happened”. And when it turns out that Bosson stopped lying since they had met, mother and aunt suggest that they “might some day invite Bosson to take tea with them”. Behind their backs, however, Ted already invited Bosson over for their Thanksgiving dinner. Before mother and aunt can decide what to do next, their cousin Serena calls to invite them (but not Waldo and Ted) to her dinner party. In the end, Waldo and Ted end up around the dinner table of Bosson and his mother, and bring dishes from their own house to have a joyful Thanksgiving Day after all.<sup>116</sup>

Apart from the fiercely racist storyline, the story is also about an ideal of unity and morality. The African-American Bosson overcomes his habit of lying, and, by becoming an honest person, is eventually accepted within a white family. At the same time, two white boys

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<sup>115</sup> Sarah Winter Kellogg, ‘Bosson.’ A story of Thanksgiving in the Indian Territory’, *LAT*, 20/11/1898, 22.

<sup>116</sup> Kellogg, ‘Bosson’ *LAT*.

are invited to celebrate Thanksgiving with a black family. Even the location of the story can be interpreted as such. The boys meet Bosson during a visit to the Indian Territory, centered in and around the state of Oklahoma. In earlier decades, many native Americans were displaced to this area, which in a sense distinguishes the state from sectional strife between North and South, between East and West.

After a decade of crisis, many saw the short and successful 1898 war against Spain – a common and foreign enemy – as an instrument to unify a fragmented nation. A symbol of this patriotic war-enthusiasm was Theodore Roosevelt, who resigned from his position at the navy to lead a cavalry unit soon known as the Rough Riders. The military and patriotic enthusiasm that followed the war was reflected in a large-scale soldiers' drill – “which will appeal to all patriotic citizens” – on Thanksgiving Day that was organized in the Agricultural Park in Riverside.<sup>117</sup> Aiming to offer visitors a glimpse of life in boot camp, the event was held to finance a monument and a soldier's relief fund, and was the largest event in Los Angeles for that year's Thanksgiving Day. With many of the 35,000 tickets available sold the day was a great success.<sup>118</sup>

Others reflected on the unifying blessings of the war in a more direct way. General Horace Porter did this at a Thanksgiving reception in Paris, when he explained how the American people had endorsed “the principle of expansion”. This was a “wise and patriotic” tendency, since “the war has made us respected abroad and stopped sectionalism at home”.<sup>119</sup> Likewise, the *Times* summarized the causes for thanks as articulated by different ‘eminent Americans’ as a “reunited country from which the last trace of factional bitterness has been wiped out”.<sup>120</sup> By the same token, the Episcopal minister Van de Water (from New York but printed in the *Los Angeles Times* as well) interpreted in his Thanksgiving sermon the gains of the war: “Our country, though big, is none too big for unanimity when the cause is one common to humanity”.<sup>121</sup> Van de Water issued not merely the usual expression of thanks for the nation's health, prosperity, peace and national unity, but a blessing as well for the successes on the battlefield, where young men were willing to sacrifice for an ideal. The war, therefore, was a just war, and Van de Water applauded that “the time at least is there when

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<sup>117</sup> ‘Soldiers’ monument fund’, *LAT*, 15/11/1898, 5.

<sup>118</sup> ‘The benefit drill’, *LAT*, 17/11/1898, 14; ‘In Camp Pratt’, *LAT*, 17/11/1898, 11; ‘Programme fixed’, *LAT*, 18/11/1898, 5; ‘All along the line’, *LAT*, 18/11/1898, 9; ‘All along the line’, *LAT*, 19/11/1898, 9; ‘Soldiers’ Thanksgiving Day’, *LAT*, 22/11/1898, 7; ‘Soldiers’ Thanksgiving’, *LAT*, 23/11/1898, 8; ‘Mustering out’, *LAT*, 23/11/1898, 14; ‘All along the line’, *LAT* 24/11/1898, 9; ‘Seventh regiment benefit’, *LAT*, 26/11/1898, 9; ‘The Gail Ferguson fund’, *LAT*, 26/11/1898, 8.

<sup>119</sup> ‘Turkey in Paris’, *LAT*, 24/11/1898, 2.

<sup>120</sup> ‘Why Americans should be Thankful’, *LAT*, 20/11/1898, 13.

<sup>121</sup> R. van de Water, ‘Our morning sermon’, *LAT*, 20/11/1898, 23.

war can be merciful”.<sup>122</sup> Because, as a rule, wars waged by Americans were just, no other righteous countries had to fear the American might. The recent war merely pursued the noble ideals of peace and liberty, and of progress for an oppressed people. That superior American morality was proven by the fact that they were righteous to their enemies too, as even wounded Spanish soldiers were aided.<sup>123</sup> This notion was echoed in the aforementioned words of thanks by eminent Americans. There Colonel Roosevelt spoke of a “righteous war”, the financier Russell Sage saw an astonishing performance that had saved a people from “tyranny” within only a hundred days, and general Nelson A. Miles rejoiced that the American people had “inherited from their ancestors the spirit of liberty, courage, self-sacrifice, and humanity”, and that they knew when to perform a “duty to humanity [...] in order to save the national honor and to uphold the national character”.<sup>124</sup>

Nelson was not the only to add a historical and even providential component to the war. By similar token, in an editorial the *Times* historicized the escape of “might Liberty” from conservative Britain in the seventeenth century; the same spirit had led their “Teutonic forefathers” away from England centuries before them.<sup>125</sup> In the New World liberty could settle, and combine the gains from Greek democracy and Italian republicanism with God’s divine plan. America’s entry into world politics was therefore no coincidence, but rather the conclusion of an ongoing evolution, and an example for the world.<sup>126</sup>

The Power that watches over the evolution of government, the God whose hand-maiden is Liberty, is the conservator of our national weal. To him we render the tribute of humble and grateful hearts for the mercies of the past, the opportunities of the present, the hopes of the future. A united nation, enjoying the sympathy of those who love liberty the world over, feeling within ourselves the restless energy that impelled our forefathers to conquer the wilderness, we fearlessly face the coming years, knowing that the destiny of the world is civilization, and that America is its messenger and standard-bearer.<sup>127</sup>

Likewise, in the Thanksgiving sermon observed by President McKinley it was said that, thanks to Providence, it was finally possible to “wage a more just and humane war”. And according to another sermon Americans should be thankful for a war that had been “the grandest sight seen on this earth for the last eighteen hundred years”.<sup>128</sup> The recent war was thus seen as a war with historical consequences. The nation had finally decided to educate the

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<sup>122</sup> Van de Water, ‘Our morning sermon’, *LAT*.

<sup>123</sup> Ibidem: “Love your enemy, do good to them that despitefully use you”

<sup>124</sup> ‘Why Americans should be Thankful’, *LAT*, 20/11/1898, 13.

<sup>125</sup> ‘Let us give thanks’, *LAT*, 20/11/1898, 2.

<sup>126</sup> ‘Let us give thanks’, *LAT*.

<sup>127</sup> Ibidem: “this nation stands today as an example of the expansive power of free manhood”.

<sup>128</sup> ‘Peace exists’, *LAT*, 25/11/1898, 1; ‘Church exercises’, *LAT*, 25/11/1898, 16.

world on liberty, justice and morality, and had abandoned its politics of isolation. A minister, in his service at the Pasadena Tabernacle, explained this sentiment to his audience. He expressed his thanks for the obvious evidence that the nation was not degenerated. Moreover, he confessed that until a few months before, he had opposed expansionist politics. Now, however, he had realized that he could no longer ignore Providence, and had changed his opinion in favor of expansion:

God made a Monroe doctrine for the Jews once, but the time came when he bade them to go out. He called on his chosen people, whom he had hedged about so long, to expand. The day has now come for us to expand.<sup>129</sup>

A more or less official revision of the Monroe Doctrine followed in 1904, but the spirit was already noticeable. “To Cuba; Porto Rico, too, / and Philippines they’ve said adieu”, preached a patriotic song in the *Times*: war was welcomed as both proof of national might and justice, and the bringer of the unity the author of ‘Bosson’ longed for.<sup>130</sup>

### **‘Thanksgiving in Bunnyville’**

A fable about the animals of Bunnyville illustrated American self-awareness at the beginning of the twentieth century. When Mayor Jack Rabbit and his family receive news that more family is on their way to celebrate Thanksgiving Day, they hurry to prepare a banquet. Mrs. Jack Rabbit – a “new woman” who “did not believe in staying at home in idleness while her dear-little mate was out working” – brings the children to their beds and warns them of foxes.<sup>131</sup> While working they themselves are nonetheless noticed by Mr. Reynard the fox. He would have eaten them, were it not for the intervention of their friend Father Bruin the bear: “[w]ith one stroke of his great brown paw he knocked old Reynard in the head and killed him”. Relieved, Mrs. Rabbit remarks that “[w]e will have him for dinner. It will only serve him right for trying to kill you, dear.”<sup>132</sup> After a while a California Eagle returns the tired Mrs. Rabbit back home on his back, while the rest continue working. The story closes at the Thanksgiving table: “There were good things in abundance, but the Mayor seemed to enjoy,

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<sup>129</sup> ‘Pasadena. Rev. R.L. Bruce delivers a stirring sermon’, *LAT*, 25/11/1898, 15.

<sup>130</sup> R.J.H.F., ‘For Thanksgiving Day’, *LAT*, 24/11/1898, 9.

<sup>131</sup> Jessie Juliet Knox, ‘Thanksgiving in Bunnyville’, *LAT*, 20/11/1898, VI2.

<sup>132</sup> Also: “Foxes have no respect for rabbits, even if they do hold high positions”, Knox, ‘Thanksgiving in Bunnyville’, *LAT*.

more than anything, the tenderloin of fox (there was good reason for this) and Father Bruin had to have three helpings of his old enemy Sir Reynard".<sup>133</sup>

In 1904, few Thanksgiving Day interpretations and observances focused intensively on themes of freedom and liberty, as had happened in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War and, as we will see below, during the First World War. Instead, a column by John A. Logan, published in the *Examiner*, reflected a sense of tradition and nostalgia. Instead of an eulogy on the nation and its ideals, her column was about the necessary preparations for Thanksgiving Day. She also longed for a time of genuine celebration, for example with cider that "exhilarates, but does not intoxicate" and recipes which people no longer knew how to make. This sharply contrasted with her notion of the contemporary observance that was most of all a "festal day". The first Thanksgiving Day, by contrast, was primarily a time to praise a bountiful harvest, "and so it became the custom to have a day of Thanksgiving and prayer after harvest".<sup>134</sup>

Reflected in the story of Bunnyville was a sense of self-awareness about the nation's own strength. The whole village of Bunnyville lives in harmony with each other (rabbits, a bear, an eagle), except for the vile fox, who thereby seals his own faith. This self-awareness was central to the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, which the president proclaimed in his Annual Message to the Congress on December 6, 1904. For decades, the Monroe Doctrine (1823) had determined American foreign policy. While the Monroe Doctrine warned European powers not to intervene in the Western Hemisphere, the Corollary justified American interventions that served American interests. According to some scholars, the main purpose of the Corollary was to impose American superior moral values on nearby Latin-American countries.<sup>135</sup> In addition, John Morris satirized the ways in which such 'civilizing missions' were legitimized under a guise of humanity, thus enabling the equation of "international scoundrelism" with "benevolent assimilation".<sup>136</sup>

This strengthened self-awareness regarding European powers, was voiced clearly after a Thanksgiving meeting in London, in 1904. While in 1898 commentators expressed their gratitude for the British benevolence during war against Spain, this time the atmosphere in

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<sup>133</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>134</sup> John a. Logan Winter, 'Thanksgiving today and in the days of the old', *LAX*, 24/11/1904, 16.

<sup>135</sup> Serge Ricard, 'The Roosevelt Corollary', *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36 (1; March 2006) 17 – 26.

<sup>136</sup> "I am glad today war is "patriotism," international scoundrelism "benevolent assimilation" and military murder "national honor and heroism"', Morris, 'What I am thankful fore', *CS*.

London was different.<sup>137</sup> During a Thanksgiving meeting at the American Society in London, one of the British attendants had critically commented on the American presence in the western hemisphere. In the first place, naming their ambassador the “American Ambassador” falsely suggested American rule over the whole Western hemisphere; which was obviously not the case. Instead, it was suggested, the country should refer to itself as the “*United States of North America*”, or simply “Unona”. Second, he ridiculed “the miserable underpayment of American judges and America’s waste of energies in providing for survivors of the Civil War and in building ironclads which she would never use”. Americans, in short, unjustly named themselves after the whole western part of the earth, and built a fleet of useless warships, and consequently suffered from hubris. In a reply, the ambassador reconfirmed that Americans were perfectly consent with their present name, which he saw underlined by the recent reelection of Roosevelt: a “great man”.<sup>138</sup> More aptly put was the critique in an editorial of the *Times*, the following day. The name of the continent, it was said, was a fact and could not be redeemed. Indeed, “[t]he name was originally foisted upon us by a fraud and has been continued in injustice to the man who stands in history as the real discoverer of the western world”. Thus if things had gone the way they should, the continent would bear the name of Christopher Columbus. However, it was Amerigo Vespucci’s name that was used, and no one could change that. Now it was custom and there was no rationale in changing the name, since “[i]t is now, thank God, a great name – the greatest and the grandest in the world”.<sup>139</sup>

The role the United States should fulfill in the world had not changed, and was even strengthened. The United States was now a colonizing power, as were its European counterparts. The war against Spain, and the war on the Philippines that raged until 1902 had resulted in the U.S. establishing colonies in the Pacific and the Caribbean. Indeed, as in the story of Bunnyville, Roosevelt reestablished the American presence in the Western Hemisphere. But such universalism was less clear within the rhetoric of Thanksgiving. While the war of 1898 had triggered the legitimizing of liberty and justice as the founding principles of the nation, which were celebrated on Thanksgiving Day, the story of Bunnyville and the controversy in London mainly reflected a lesser occupation with these principles. A point of

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<sup>137</sup> Comp: “It would be difficult, he said, to foretell the consequences should England and America ever decide upon joining action in any part of the world. It would be a combination difficult to defeat, and tending to the advancement of the human race,” ‘Glorification in London’, *LAT*, 25/11/1898, 1. Also: “Old Uncle Sam and Johnny Bull / In future will together pull. / Sure, they will get a bellyful, / Who fight this combination,” R.J.H.F., ‘For Thanksgiving Day’, *LAT*, 24/11/1898, 9: “

<sup>138</sup> ‘Clark derides “American”’, *LAT*, 25/11/1904, 2, my emphasis.

<sup>139</sup> ““America” a misnomer’, *LAT*, 26/11/1904, 4.

focus for universal pride was lacking, in contrast to the wars that liberated Cuba in 1898 and even the world in 1917.

**“A Wide World - Free”**

On Thanksgiving Day 1917, the *Times* published the following poem by Boaz Duncan, entitled ‘Thanksgiving Day’.

Almost three hundred years ago  
A little band  
Of Pilgrims fired by Freedom’s glow  
In Freedom’s land  
Established a Thanksgiving Day,  
Devoutly spent  
That they might grateful homage pay  
For blessings sent.

And once again the Autumn glow  
O’er wooded hills  
Sends through us pilgrim’s here below  
Thanksgiving thrills  
And yielding to its potent spell,  
Let us today  
Ring “Liberty’s” Thanksgiving Bell  
And humbly pray

That God who rules through age on age  
And in whose sight  
A thousand years are but a page  
Or one short night,  
May wipe Earth’s Teuton curse away  
And let us see  
United, next Thanksgiving Day  
A Wide World – FREE!<sup>140</sup>

Duncan’s main interpretation of the origins of Thanksgiving Day, is that of a day to celebrate and commemorate freedom. On that day Americans “ring “Liberty’s” Thanksgiving Bell”. And thus the war against “Teuton” Germany was a divine mission that served humanity by fostering a peaceful and united world, and to make the entire planet as free as America was.

In April 1917, the United States was drawn into the conflict on the European Continent. The “war to end all wars”, as Wilson once coined it, was the opportunity to teach the world about American liberty. And the rhetoric of Thanksgiving Day, as well, was again dominated by liberty and the service to mankind. An example, for instance, was the annual

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<sup>140</sup> Boaz Duncan, ‘Thanksgiving Day’, *LAT*, 29/11/1917, II4.

Ascot Races on Thanksgiving Day, held in the Ascot Park in Gardena, east of Los Angeles. In 1917 the name of the event was temporarily changed into the ‘Liberty Sweepstakes’, and the prizes, totaling 5.000 dollars, were all paid in ‘liberty bonds’, the government war loans in which every patriotic citizen could invest.<sup>141</sup> With about 15.000 visitors, the race was the main-event of that year’s Thanksgiving.<sup>142</sup> Thanksgiving Day itself was now seen as the commemoration of self-sacrifice by the Pilgrim Fathers, who had to plant “liberty trees” under rough conditions.<sup>143</sup>

Because liberty, democracy and righteousness were endangered, “democracy’s” or “Liberty’s” army fought, again, a just war against German militarism – an army, besides, that had many Southern Californians in its best regiments.<sup>144</sup> Contrasting German aspirations, the American intervention was moreover not an effort to impose their “kultur” on others, as wrote *Times* columnist Walt Mason. Instead, he stated, Americans should be grateful that they were on the right side of the war and had a just cause to defend on the battlefield: “No words need then be spoken in Uncle Sam’s defense; he has no pledges broken in spirit or in sense”.<sup>145</sup> The *Examiner* likewise reported an optimistic and festive atmosphere during Thanksgiving Day in Los Angeles, fueled by the allied successes in Europe.<sup>146</sup>

Comparable to the Spanish-American War, the First World War was seen as radiating a sense of national unity. Part of this regained unity was caused by the general conscription. This produced a sense of communal feelings and was a foundation for national citizenship; in times of war and afterward, when military service would produce “healthy, vigorous and strong young men”.<sup>147</sup> But the war itself was also thought to have mainly positive outcomes. Thus editors of the *Examiner* expressed their thanks that “the birth of a real nation” would end an era of the “provincialism and un-nationalism” of a sectional divided United States, and

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<sup>141</sup> “This name was selected by Mr. McAdoo [Secretary of Treasury] because the money will be spent to the last dollar in the fight which democracy is waging against autocracy”, ‘Liberty loan to be name of our billions for war’, *LAT*, 29/4/1917, 2.

<sup>142</sup> E.g. ‘Hudson enters 2 super-sixes’ *LAX*, 20/11/1917, II5; ‘Ascot features first on card’; *LAX*, 21/11/1917, 3; ‘Too many entries, closes tonight’, *LAX*, 26/11/1917, II3; ‘Races at Ascot thrill 15.000’, *LAX*, 30/11/1917, II4; ‘Automobile races and aerial exhibitions for Ascot Speedway on Thanksgiving Day’, *LAT*, 4/11/1917, VII1; ‘Speed kings gathering for winter season on Ascot Speedway’, *LAT*, 11/11/1917, VII7; ‘Seven entries received for Liberty Sweepstakes’, *LAT*, 20/11/1917, 6; ‘Eleven speed demons enter’, *LAT*, 26/11/1917, 5.

<sup>143</sup> E.g. “We give thanks that God reigns and Liberty still lives in our land,” ‘A Thanksgiving reverie’, *LAT*, 29/11/1917, II4; Williams, ‘Kearny dinner scores big hit’, *LAT*.

<sup>144</sup> E.g. in a speech, a soldier spoke that “[w]e are thankful beyond expression that our awakening came before our land was inundated with a world-conquering militarism,” ‘20.000 soldiers feast in camp’; *LAX*; ‘Fourteen tons of turkey for soldiers’, *LAT*; ‘Tons of turkey and “fixin’s for Camp Lewis Thanksgiving’, *LAT*; ‘Cabinet ministers tell why to give thank’, *LAT*, 29/11/1917, 2; ‘New York plays host to nation’s fighters’, *LAT*, 30/11/1917, 8; ‘Men in blue and khaki our Thanksgiving honor guests’, *LAT*, 30/11/1917, III.

<sup>145</sup> Walt Mason, ‘Rippling Rhymes. Thanksgiving’, *LAT*, 16/11/1917, II4.

<sup>146</sup> ‘Thanksgiving Day observance toned by war activity’, *LAX*, 29/11/1917, 3.

<sup>147</sup> ‘For blessings of year we give thanks today’, *LAX*, 29/11/1917, 10.

after the war “[t]he form may continue, but the public spirit, let us hope forever hereafter, will be national and not local”.<sup>148</sup> The war, therefore, had a unifying impact. On the one hand as the experience of a shared war effort, or on the other as in terms of a providential battle. In the last instance, the war effort was interpreted as the fight for liberty that – as in Duncan’s poem – was in line with the efforts of the bearers of liberty who settled on the shores of the New World three hundred years ago, and now were to definitely “wipe Earth’s Teuton curse away”.

The widespread enthusiasm caused by the wars against Spain and the Central Powers can be seen partly as the result of the extensive media coverage of these modern wars. But still many felt optimistic that these just wars could spread American civilization internationally, and simultaneously heal domestic strife (e.g. sectional, economic and racial). There was moreover the sense of an historic rivalry between nations, regarding the “Teuton curse”, but also the rising superpower of Japan.<sup>149</sup> It is moreover striking how both these international and domestic scopes of Thanksgiving Day could exist next to each other, as was illustrated by the *Examiner*. This third section ended with the suggestion, made in an editorial of the said newspaper, that the First World War would end “provincialism and un-nationalism”. While also in 1917, as we saw in the former section, the same newspaper questioned the commonly accepted origins of the nation itself by means of Thanksgiving Day, when it was stated that the Thanksgiving Day was originally from Virginia. Unity, to be sure, was desirable, but under certain conditions. These wars in particular were nevertheless a moment to rethink and reconfirm the nation’s core principles of liberty and morality, and just wars could spread these principles.

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<sup>148</sup> ‘For blessings of year we give thanks today’, *LAX*, 29/11/1917, 10.

<sup>149</sup> Leonhard, *Bellizismus und Nation*, 801 – 811.

## Conclusions

This thesis opened with a plea aimed at the American people, and asking them to support the Armenians suffering under Ottoman oppression. It was, we said, not a coincidence that this appeal was made on the American national celebration of Thanksgiving Day. The inkling of the *Times*' editors, that the "land of liberty" would certainly hear them, only confirmed this assumption. The celebration of Thanksgiving Day, it seemed, could be phrased in such a way that it fitted even an Armenian appeal. And indeed, the atrocities that were reported in many a newspaper generated widespread outrage, protest and collections for humanitarian relief.<sup>150</sup>

We saw how the rhetoric of Thanksgiving Day existed within a political discourse that made people experience politics and act politically. This served two purposes. First, it accommodated a debate about what the nation was, and who was part of it. Second, it was a means to place the nation, and its universal democratic values, in the world. The last component in particular gained importance when the United States was playing an increasingly important part on the world stage. In a broader sense, these different usages of Thanksgiving Day reveal how national histories, and public celebrations thereof, are flexible and multi-interpretable by different groups and for different purposes. While suggesting continuity as an entrenched national history, national narratives – as does all historical writing – in effect serve the needs and trends of the present. They thus provide a medium to understand and legitimize contemporary problems that are ever-changing.

Likewise is it incorrect to conclude that the national rhetoric of Thanksgiving Day was constant, although proclamations by presidents and states' governors contained a set of recurring elements. But because Thanksgiving Day was both a clear and ambiguous celebration, it was open to different interpretations. The day was clear in the sense that – at least in the era under observation – there was the general consensus about what was celebrated, namely a national founding history of the first genuine Americans who had ventured to New England to establish a land of liberty. On the contrary, the exact content of the day remained uncertain. Traces of harvest feasts were ever apparent in the expressions of gratefulness for prosperity and yields from the land, but it was also a moment to restate the founding principles of the nation as *the* land of liberty. Therefore every proclamation and

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<sup>150</sup> Balakian, *The burning Tigris*, 4, 62; comp. 'Annihilation', *LAT*, 26/11/1894, 2.

service contained reflections on the past year's success stories (prosperity, peace, health) and thoughts on major historical events (calamities, war). Persistent as well were references to certain 'civic nationalistic' values: universal values such as liberty and righteous government that in popular histories were the founding principles of the Pilgrim Fathers, and ever since defined American exceptionalism.

The period observed witnessed the definite American entry on the world stage, especially following the war against Spain and cumulating with the intervention in Europe during the First World War. These changes in the geopolitical composition of the world were additionally reflected in the rhetoric of Thanksgiving Day. Leaders in particular reflected this changing position within the world in their different readings of the day, and we saw how the urge to educate the world on such universal topics as liberty, justice and morality became more prominent in the universalizing language of Thanksgiving Day. The applied rhetoric started to emphasize Americans' duties, not only to their fellow-citizens, but even to the whole of mankind; a belief already present in the outrage about the treatment of Armenians in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>151</sup> Major newspapers with an international scope echoed this tendency to elevate humanity as well, for example by stressing how 'just wars' made Americans exceptional. Especially during the wars against Spain and the Central Powers, this exceptionalism as an example for the world recurred manifold.

But then again, these principles were at the same time under constant debate and revision. Times of crisis and far-reaching change in particular, provided the occasions to rethink the nation and its fundamentals; these debates reached the surface on days that celebrated the nation and its fundamentals themselves. Hence, the 'debate over the dinner table' between Democrats and Republicans touched on the very basis of the government's role versus individual and state rights. A debate on liberty thus found its way to the celebration of Thanksgiving because traditions that many saw as symbolic for the American pride and personality – maybe even its exceptionalism – were deemed endangered by a paternalistic and overactive government. But African Americans as well pointed to the same central ideas in Americanism, and questioned why they, as American citizens, were nevertheless barred from freedom and equality. A similar sense of assimilation was expressed by Germans, who saw their positions deteriorate amidst war anxieties. What better proof of loyalty than to participate in a national celebration of the nation's roots? Jews on their part asked the liberty-loving American public how universal their traditions and values actually were. They fully

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<sup>151</sup> Balakian, *The burning Tigris*, 5 speaks of this sympathy for the Armenians as "a humanitarian project" amidst imperialist designs of the 1890s.

adopted Thanksgiving Day, but fluently merged this with a Jewish holiday, thus at once challenging and reconfirming the universality that American traditions promised.

Therefore, while crises on the one hand ‘changed’ the nation’s history that was celebrated, the celebrations provided a steady base as well. African Americans used Thanksgiving Day as a common American heritage that could underline the profound inequality they experienced, while German Americans used it to show their similarity with their fellow citizens.

In more general terms, there is a close connection between political discourses and a national(ist) rhetoric. National histories constitute such political discourses, which can serve different needs in the present. Exactly because they can sever such a diversity of agendas, national histories (and its celebrations) are flexible. What follows is a constant – as Mark Soileau phrases it – “innovation of tradition”.<sup>152</sup> While a bond of shared origins is commonly accepted, this is subsequently used as a rhetorical vehicle to underpin why exactly a given policy is un-American, or another is entirely in line with French or Dutch traditions. We see, in short, how history functions as a foundation for various sociopolitical and cultural claims, and are therefore flexible in essence. Many theorists on nationalism have overlooked such a participatory factor within national histories.

The aim here was not to be comprehensive – an impossible task – but to illustrate how flexible national narratives are. National histories are never fixed, but are instead constantly revised and debated by contemporaries and historians alike; a process that becomes highly visible in concrete manifestations of the nation during celebrations of its own existence, as happens on Thanksgiving Day. This remains relevant in the twenty-first century as well. In the eyes of the conservative American ‘Tea Party’-movement, for instance, Thanksgiving Day is primarily about the ineffectiveness of socialism. This lesson was learned by the first settlers, who in fact were early socialists starting a communal system that lacked incentives to work, and encouraged thievery and famine. Thanksgiving Day, therefore, primarily celebrates the fact that they eventually realized the error of their collectivist ways, and embraced capitalism.<sup>153</sup> And in another instance, on the day following Thanksgiving Day 2010, the manager of the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) drew on a rhetoric of

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<sup>152</sup> Soileau, ‘The patron saints of Turkish humanism’, 185.

<sup>153</sup> Kate Zernick, ‘The Pilgrims Were ... Socialists?’, *New York Times*, 20/11/2010. Accessed online, [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/21/weekinreview/21zernike.html?\\_r=1&pagewanted=all](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/21/weekinreview/21zernike.html?_r=1&pagewanted=all) (version 16/01/2011).

gratefulness to cheer on federally funded attacks on online violators of copyrights.<sup>154</sup> The nation, it seems, remains a clear and legitimate argument by itself.

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<sup>154</sup> Nate Anderson, 'Undue process: how Uncle Sam seized BitTorrent domain names', 20/12/2010, <http://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/news/2010/12/busting-bittorrent.ars?comments=1#comments-bar> (version 16/01/2011).

# Appendix

**Table 1. Presidential Thanksgiving Proclamations**

	Nation Addressed	Reasons for thanksgiving	Custom	Poor
1880	Liberty; United people	Liberty; Prosperity; Peace; Health		Poor
1881	Liberty; Duty	Liberty; Prosperity; Peace; Health	Custom*	
1882	Liberty; National Unity	Liberty; Prosperity; Peace; Health	Custom	
1883	Liberty	Liberty; Prosperity; Peace; Health; National unity	Custom	
1884				
1885	United people	Prosperity; Peace; Health; National unity		Poor
1886	Liberty	Liberty; Prosperity	Custom	Poor
1887	Patriotism	Prosperity; Peace; Health	Poor	
1888	Liberty; National greatness	Liberty; Prosperity; Peace	Poor	
1889		Prosperity; Peace; Health		
1890	Liberty	Prosperity; Peace	*	Poor
1891	Liberty; Patriotism	Liberty; Prosperity; Peace		Poor
1892		Liberty; Prosperity; Peace; Health		
1893				Poor
1894		Prosperity; Health	*	Poor
1895	Liberty; Patriotism	Liberty; Prosperity; Peace; Health; Patriotism	*	Poor
1896		Prosperity; Peace; Health; National unity		Poor
1897	Liberty; United people	Liberty; Prosperity; Peace; Improved working conditions		Poor
1898	United people; Serving mankind; Discipline	Prosperity; Victory; National unity		
1899	Serving mankind; patriotism; Moral	Prosperity; Peace; Health; Patriotism; Improved working conditions	Custom*	Poor
1900	Liberty; United people; Serving mankind	Prosperity; Peace; Health	Custom	Poor
1901	Liberty; United people; Serving mankind; Duty	Prosperity; Peace; Health	Custom*	
1902	United people; Duty; Moral	Prosperity; Peace	Custom*	
1903	Liberty; Serving mankind; Preparedness	Liberty; Prosperity; Peace; Health	Custom*	
1904	Liberty; Serving mankind; National might; Duty	Liberty; Prosperity; Peace	Custom*	Poor
1905	Discipline	Prosperity; Peace	Custom*	
1906	Discipline; Moral	Prosperity	Custom*	
1907	Liberty; Discipline; Moral	Prosperity; Peace; Health	Custom*	
1908	Serving mankind; National might; Discipline; Moral	Prosperity	Custom*	Poor
1909		Prosperity; Peace; Health	Custom*	
1910	Serving mankind	Prosperity; Peace; Health	Custom*	
1911	Serving mankind	Prosperity; Peace; Health	Custom*	
1912	Liberty; Serving mankind	Liberty; Prosperity	Custom*	
1913	Serving mankind; Duty	Prosperity, Peace	Custom	
1914	United People; Serving Mankind; Discipline; Duty; Moral	Prosperity, Peace	Custom	
1915	Liberty; Serving mankind; Discipline; Duty	Prosperity, Peace	Custom	
1916	Duty	Prosperity, Peace	Custom	Poor
1917	Liberty; United people; Serving mankind; Patriotism; Duty	Prosperity; Opportunity to serve mankind	Custom*	
1918	Liberty; Serving mankind; Duty	Peace; Victory	Custom	
1919	Liberty; Serving mankind; Patriotism; Duty	Liberty; Prosperity	Custom*	

Table 1: Thanksgiving Proclamations by the President of the United States of America (1880 - 1919); historical references are marked with \*.

Table 2. Gubernatorial Thanksgiving Proclamations

Year	State Addressed	Reason for Thanks	Custom	Poor
1880	Liberty; United people	Liberty; Prosperity; National unity		Poor
1881	Liberty; United people; United people (CA)	Prosperity; National unity	Custom*	Poor
1882	Liberty	Liberty	Custom*	Poor
1883	Liberty	Prosperity; Peace; Health	Custom	
1884			Custom	
1885				Poor
1886	Liberty	Liberty; Prosperity	Custom	Poor
1887		Prosperity (CA)		
1888			Custom	
1889			Custom	
1890			Custom	
1891		Prosperity (CA); Peace (CA); Health (CA)		
1892		Prosperity (CA)	Custom	
1893				
1894			Custom	Poor
1895			Custom*	Poor
1896				
1897		Prosperity; Peace; Victory		Poor
1898			Custom*	Poor
1899			Custom*	
1900				
1901				
1902				
1903	United people (CA)	Prosperity (CA); Health (CA)	Custom*	
1904	Liberty (CA); Peace (CA); Climate (CA); National Unity; Moral	Prosperity	Custom*	
1905		Prosperity (CA); Peace; Health (CA); Worldwide sympathy (CA)		
1906		Prosperity	Custom	
1907			Custom*	
1908	Climate (CA)	Prosperity (CA)	Custom*	Poor
1909	Climate (CA)	Prosperity; Prosperity (CA)	Custom	
1910		Prosperity; Health; Climate, Peace	Custom*	
1911			Custom	
1912			Custom	
1913			Custom	
1914			Custom	
1915			Custom	
1916				
1917	Patriotism (CA)	Prosperity (CA); Patriotism (CA); Duty (CA)		
1918	Liberty; Serving mankind; Serving nation (CA)	Liberty; Peace; Victory		
1919	Liberty; Patriotism; Serving mankind (CA)	Liberty; Prosperity;		
			*	

Table II: Thanksgiving Proclamations by the Governor of the State of California (1880 - 1919); historical references are marked with \*

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