

MAYOR MARVIN'S COLUMN

Every Thanksgiving during my tenure as Mayor, I have been asked to participate in the ecumenical service coordinated by all the Christian churches in our area on Thanksgiving morning.

What started out for me as a - "How can I go to church, prepare my portion of the family meal and get to New Jersey by lunchtime?" - has evolved into my favorite portion of the holiday and a welcome and anticipated Mayoral obligation. My role is to open the service by reading the President's Thanksgiving Proclamation. Until I was asked to participate, I did not even know that this document existed. It prompted me to research the entire topic and I discovered some of the most beautiful words spoken by our Presidents throughout history. They particularly resonate in 2009, given the world situation.

By way of reference, our U.S. tradition of a Thanksgiving begins with the meal held in 1621 sometime between September 21st and November 11th by the Wampanoag Indians and the Pilgrims in Plymouth, Massachusetts to give thanks to God for surviving a brutal winter and reaping a plentiful harvest. The first Thanksgiving feast lasted three days!

Thanksgiving was historically a religious observance to give thanks to God for a plentiful harvest, to commemorate a military victory or even to celebrate the adoption of a state's constitution but has evolved into a secular celebration as well. For example, a Thanksgiving Day celebration was held in December 1777 in the colonies to commemorate the defeat of the British at the Battle of Saratoga.

The first national Proclamation of Thanksgiving was declared by the Continental Congress in 1777 with very timeless and profound wishes to thank the Almighty for, "the greatest of all human blessings, independence and peace."

President George Washington created the first Thanksgiving Day designated by the national government uttering poignant words that are particularly apropos today. Washington beseeched the Lord to "enable us all, whether in public or private stations, to perform our several and relative duties properly and punctually, to render our national government a blessing to all the people by constantly being a government of wise, just and Constitutional laws."

Presidents Washington, John Adams and Madison issued Thanksgiving Proclamations though not every year and Thomas Jefferson penned no Thanksgiving messages. A "Thanksgiving Day" was annually appointed by the Governor of New York dating back to 1817.

No Presidential Thanksgiving Proclamations were issued from 1816 to 1861, but Presidents have issued Thanksgiving Proclamations regularly ever since President Lincoln's 1862 message.

President Lincoln believed that despite being mired in a divisive and deadly Civil War, we as Americans still had so much for which to give thanks. He asked, "the Almighty Hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with

Divine purposes to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony and tranquility.” These words are as relevant today as when they were proclaimed in 1863. Lincoln declared the final Thursday of November as a national day of Thanksgiving.

In the late 1800’s, Sarah Hale, an enormously influential magazine editor and author, waged a tireless campaign to make Thanksgiving a national holiday, something that was not achieved until 1941. Ultimately, Miss Hale’s enduring claim to fame came as the author of the nursery rhyme, “Mary Had A Little Lamb”.

In an effort to help businesses, President Franklin D. Roosevelt became embroiled in a major controversy over the date of Thanksgiving. In 1939, retailers asked the President to move the date up from the last Thursday of November to the fourth Thursday to gain an additional week of Christmas shopping. When he acquiesced and dated his Proclamation the 23rd instead of the 30th, school vacations were disrupted and parades and football games all had to be rescheduled. The Mayor of Atlantic City was so incensed that he called the holiday “Franksgiving”.

Our cherished tradition of the Macy’s Parade also evolved from economic needs. In an effort to launch the shopping season in 1924, Macy’s employees paraded down Fifth Avenue with animals borrowed from the Central Park Zoo. The parade has continued uninterrupted ever since.

President Obama issued his first Thanksgiving Proclamation this past week recalling that, “in times of tragedy and triumph, Americans have come together to celebrate Thanksgiving.”

He asked us this year to, “reach out to our neighbors and fellow citizens in need of a helping hand.” This is a time for us to renew our bonds with one another and we can fulfill that commitment by serving our communities and our Nation throughout the year.” He issued a call to action to every American to help others in need.

One only had to read the paper or watch the news to know that more Americans were in need of help this year than in years past. Lines were longer at food pantries, supplies were depleted and more citizens showed up for free holiday meals.

As the holiday season officially begins, may we give thanks for all the blessings we have and share our bounty with others.