

# There's still much to be thankful for

WHEN SARAH JOSEPHA Hale proposed, in 1858, that the last Thursday in November be "consecrated as the day of National Thanksgiving for the American people," the United States was bitterly divided over slavery, women did not enjoy the right to vote, and the nation was spiraling ever closer to a bloody civil war.

Despite the adversity, Hale, editor of a Philadelphia-based women's magazine, urged her readers to "consecrate that day to offer gratitude to the Divine giver of all our blessings" and to "pledge a renewed love to the Union, and to each other." Hale's eloquent plea reminds us that Thanksgiving Day offers a refreshing opportunity to remember how fortunate we are as Americans to live in a free society no matter how dismal our circumstances may be at the time. Hale first launched her crusade for a national Thanksgiving Day in 1827.

Not until 1863, however, did the idea come to fruition. Grateful for the Union victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg, President Abraham Lincoln designated the last Thursday of November 1863 as a day of "Thanksgiving and Praise."

Succeeding presidents followed his example, usually during a time of national crisis. During the Great Depression, for example, Franklin D. Roosevelt declared the third Thursday of November as "a Thanksgiving holiday" to help businesses by increasing the length

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## COMMENTARY

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of the Christmas shopping season.

Two years later, as the United States mobilized for World War II, Congress re-established the fourth Thursday of November as "Thanksgiving Day" and made it a permanent national holiday.

Thanksgiving comes at an especially critical time this year. Our country needs to set aside the political, social, and economic differences that divide us and "pledge a renewed love to the Union, and to each other."

Instead of being divided over the results of a contentious presidential campaign and charges of voter fraud, we need to be grateful for the privilege that we live in a free society that allows us to vote and to express our opinions, without the fear of persecution. Instead of continuing to blame our government for its failure to prevent the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, we need to be grateful that we live in (a) country where such attacks are the exception and that state and federal authorities have taken significant measures to ensure our future safety.

Instead of fearing for the lives of the young men and women who are serving our country abroad, we need to be grateful for their courage and pride in

our country.

Instead of criticizing the medical community for the rising cost of health care, we need to be grateful that the United States enjoys a higher quality of life than most other countries because of the humanitarian commitment of those physicians and researchers who have been responsible for achieving it.

Instead of blaming our schools for failing to providing a sound academic and moral education for our young people, we need to be grateful for those teachers who are making a meaningful difference in the lives of our children.

Such gratitude does not make us weak by surrendering to a sense of false optimism, or less resolute in confronting the injustices of the society in which we live. Nor should they make us forget the painful lessons we have learned or the loved ones we have lost.

"Selfless gratitude with one heart and one voice by the whole American People" for the privileges we enjoy can only make us stronger as a nation. Such gratitude compels us to address the challenges that lay before us by "acting on the better angels of our nature." At least that's what Abraham Lincoln believed when he issued his Thanksgiving Proclamation more than 140 years ago.

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TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 23, 2004 PAGE 11A