AMERICAN CIVIC HOLIDAY RESOURCES

THANKSGIVING DAY
NOVEMBER 28, 2024

Developed by Audi Hecht, Director of Education and Innovation

Thanksgiving invites many civic moments. It is a time when family and friends gather to connect, share, and reflect. It offers an opportunity to express the civic virtue of gratitude—personally, and collectively- as a community and nation. But what prompts feelings of appreciation? Are they organic emotions that emerge spontaneously, or can they be cultivated? And how do we distinguish between feelings of appreciation and expressions of appreciation?

In thinking about these ideas, it may be helpful to consider the components of gratitude. Thankfulness is predicated on the recognition that someone or something has done something from which we have benefited. This acknowledgment creates awareness, compelling us to recognize the good. Oftentimes, this awareness prompts a sense of obligation. It can translate into expressions of gratitude—giving credit and reciprocating the gesture of goodwill. It can also foster a sense of duty to mirror the goodness and sacrifice of others on our behalf.

On a collective level, Thanksgiving also invites a national expression of gratitude for our freedoms and for the sacrifices made by those who came before us. It prompts us to grapple with the complex history of the first Thanksgiving, particularly the interactions between the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag Tribe, who were indigenous to the land now known as Plymouth, Massachusetts, the site of the feast. Positioned between Election Day, the December holidays, and the New Year, Thanksgiving marks a time when leadership transitions—when terms of office conclude and new leadership begins. This season offers a chance to take stock of the work that has been done and to reflect on the new challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. The following resources will help elucidate some of the ideas highlighted and welcome layered discussions for students to consider as they reflect on the themes of gratitude, history, and civic responsibility. In addition, a classroom activity titled "Circle of Thanks" is included. This activity prompts students to think about the areas in their lives where they feel most grateful. It can be adapted to various grade levels.

Source 1: Aristotle. "Nicomachean Ethics." Book VIII, Chapter 1. Excerpts.

Now these qualities differ in kind; hence the affection or friendship they occasion may differ in kind also. There are accordingly three kinds of friendship, corresponding in number to the three lovable qualities; since a reciprocal affection, known to either party, can be based on each of the three, and when men love each other, they wish each other well in respect of the quality which is the ground of their friendship. Thus friends whose affection is based on utility do not love each other in themselves, but in so far as some benefit accrues to them from each other. And similarly with those whose friendship is based on pleasure: for instance, we enjoy the society of witty people not because of what they are in themselves, but because they are agreeable to us.Hence in a friendship based on utility or on pleasure men love their friend for their own good or their own pleasure, and not as being the person loved, but as useful or agreeable. And therefore these friendships are based on an accident, since the friend is not loved for being what he is, but as affording some benefit or pleasure as the case may be.Consequently friendships of this kind are easily broken off, in the event of the parties themselves changing, for if no longer pleasant or useful to each other, they cease to love each other. And utility is not a permanent quality; it differs at different times. Hence when the motive of the friendship has passed away, the friendship itself is dissolved, having existed merely as a means to that end...

The perfect form of friendship is that between the good, and those who resemble each other in virtue. For these friends wish each alike the other's good in respect of their goodness, and they are good in themselves; but it is those who wish the good of their friends for their friends' sake who are friends in the fullest sense, since they love each other for themselves and not accidentally. Hence the friendship of these lasts as long as they continue to be good; and virtue is a permanent quality. And each is good relatively to his friend as well as absolutely, since the good are both good absolutely and profitable to each other. And each is pleasant in both ways also, since good men are pleasant both absolutely and to each other; for everyone is pleased by his own actions, and therefore by actions that resemble his own, and the actions of all good men are the same or similar.—Such friendship is naturally permanent, since it combines in itself all the attributes that friends ought to possess. All affection is based on good or on pleasure, either absolute or relative to the person who feels it, and is prompted by similarity13 of some sort; but this friendship possesses all these attributes in the friends themselves, for they are alike, in that way5 Also the absolutely good is pleasant absolutely as well; but the absolutely good and pleasant are the chief objects of affection; therefore it is between good men that affection and friendship exist in their fullest and best form.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What does Aristotle say about friendship? What are the three types of friendship that he identifies?
2. Which of these three types of friendship does Aristotle consider the "true" form of friendship? Why?
3. How do you think Aristotle's view of friendship helps us understand the concept of gratitude?
4. What can we learn from Aristotle's idea of friendship in our own relationships today? How might his idea of "true friendship" challenge or align with modern ideas of gratitude in friendship?

Aristotle, marble portrait bust, Roman copy (2nd century BCE) of a Greek original (c. 325 BCE); in the Museo Nazionale Romano, Rome, Italy.

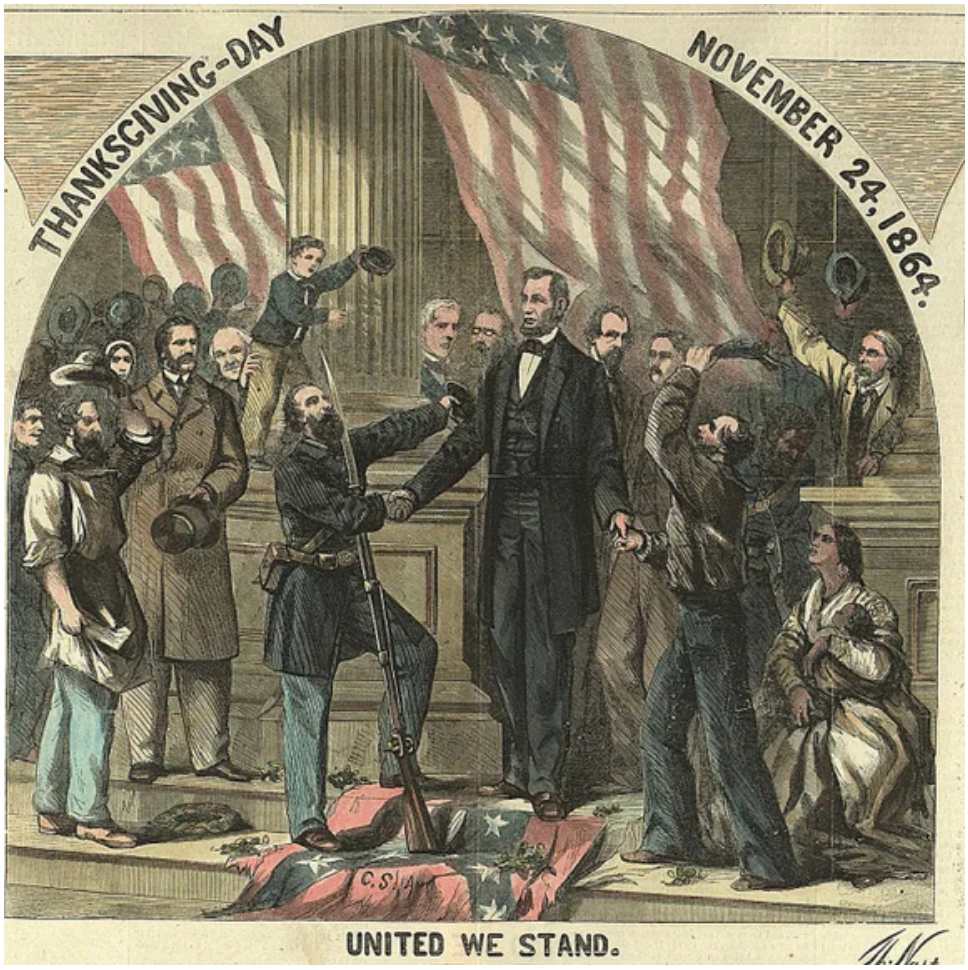
Source 2: Abraham Lincoln. "A Proclamation: Thanksgiving Day." 3 October. 1863, National Archives.

The year that is drawing towards its close, has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added, which are of so extraordinary a nature, that they cannot fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever watchful providence of Almighty God. In the midst of a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity, which has sometimes seemed to foreign States to invite and to provoke their aggression, peace has been preserved with all nations, order has been maintained, the laws have been respected and obeyed, and harmony has prevailed everywhere except in the theatre of military conflict; while that theatre has been greatly contracted by the advancing armies and navies of the Union. Needful diversions of wealth and of strength from the fields of peaceful industry to the national defence, have not arrested the plough, the shuttle or the ship; the axe has enlarged the borders of our settlements, and the mines, as well of iron and coal as of the precious metals, have yielded even more abundantly than heretofore. Population has steadily increased, notwithstanding the waste that has been made in the camp, the siege and the battle-field; and the country, rejoicing in the consciousness of augmented strength and vigor, is permitted to expect continuance of years with large increase of freedom. No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy. It has seemed to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently and gratefully acknowledged as with one heart and one voice by the whole American People. I do therefore invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens. And I recommend to them that while offering up the ascriptions justly due to Him for such singular deliverances and blessings, they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to His tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty Hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquillity and Union.

In testimony whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the Seal of the United States to be affixed.

Questions for Discussion:

1. In his Thanksgiving Proclamation, what are some of the things that Lincoln mentions as sources of national blessing? What does he attribute his gratitude to?
2. Given the context of this message during wartime, do you find Lincoln's message to be aspirational, too optimistic, or helpful for a nation enduring the ravages of war? Why or why not?
3. In your view, does gratitude require inserting positive feelings with the hope that they will manifest or are they not sensitive to the time when they are conveyed?



Sketch by Thomas Nast. Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum.

Source 3: Theodore Roosevelt. "Inaugural Address." 4 Mar. 1905.

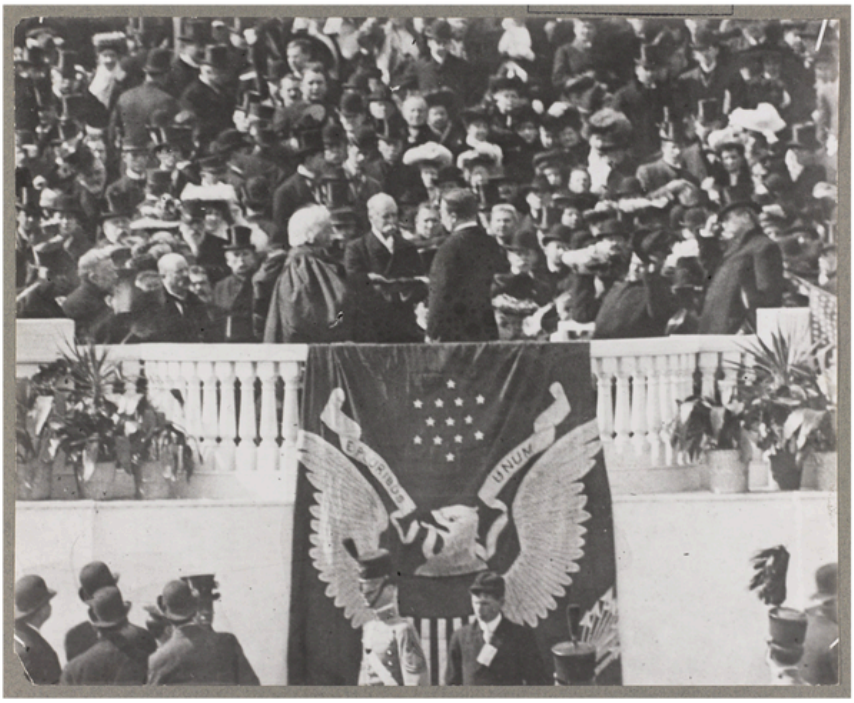
My fellow-citizens,

No people on earth have more cause to be thankful than ours, and this is said reverently, in no spirit of boastfulness in our own strength, but with gratitude to the Giver of Good who has blessed us with the conditions which have enabled us to achieve so large a measure of well-being and of happiness. To us as a people it has been granted to lay the foundations of our national life in a new continent. We are the heirs of the ages, and yet we have had to pay few of the penalties which in old countries are exacted by the dead hand of a bygone civilization. We have not been obliged to fight for our existence against any alien race; and yet our life has called for the vigor and effort without which the manlier and hardier virtues wither away. Under such conditions it would be our own fault if we failed; and the success which we have had in the past, the success which we confidently believe the future will bring, should cause in us no feeling of vainglory, but rather a deep and abiding realization of all which life has offered us; a full acknowledgment of the responsibility which is ours; and a fixed determination to show that under a free government a mighty people can thrive best, alike as regards the things of the body and the things of the soul.

Much has been given us, and much will rightfully be expected from us. We have duties to others and duties to ourselves; and we can shirk neither. We have become a great nation, forced by the fact of its greatness into relations with the other nations of the earth, and we must behave as beseems a people with such responsibilities. Toward all other nations, large and small, our attitude must be one of cordial and sincere friendship. We must show not only in our words, but in our deeds, that we are earnestly desirous of securing their good will by acting toward them in a spirit of just and generous recognition of all their rights. But justice and generosity in a nation, as in an individual, count most when shown not by the weak but by the strong. While ever careful to refrain from wrongdoing others, we must be no less insistent that we are not wronged ourselves. We wish peace, but we wish the peace of justice, the peace of righteousness. We wish it because we think it is right and not because we are afraid. No weak nation that acts manfully and justly should ever have cause to fear us, and no strong power should ever be able to single us out as a subject for insolent aggression.

Questions for Discussion:

1. In his inaugural address, what does Theodore Roosevelt say we ought to be grateful for as a nation? What do you think of the idea of collective gratitude?
2. How does Theodore Roosevelt connect the themes of gratitude and civic responsibility?
3. How, according to Theodore Roosevelt, should one express thankfulness? Do you agree or disagree? Why?



President Roosevelt's Inauguration, 1905. Library of Congress.

Classroom Activity: Circle of Thanks

Discussion Prompt: What does gratitude mean to you? Can you think of people or groups who have helped you get where you are today?

- Have students create 5 concentric circles.
- Each Circle should be labeled Self, Family, Friends, Community, Country.
- Students are instructed to fill in each circle. For instance, for the Self Circle they write what achievements or personal growth aspects they are grateful for. For "Country," they can write what they are thankful for as a nation, society or culture.
- **Historical Moment:** Students can reflect on a moment in history for which they are grateful.
- In pairs or in groups, students can share why they chose to write about specific items and share more about their meaning.
- **Reflection:** How does expressing gratitude in these domains help connect one more to others?
- **Action Item:** What is one thing students can do to express gratitude to someone in one of your circles?