

ORIGINS OF VETERANS DAY

Veterans Day marks the armistice signed between the allies of World War I and Germany to end the war, which took effect at 11 a.m. on the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918. In November 1919, President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed November 11 as the first commemoration of Armistice Day.

On May 13, 1938, the U.S. Congress made November 11 an annual legal holiday—a day to be dedicated to the cause of world peace and to be thereafter celebrated and known as “Armistice Day.” Armistice Day was primarily a day set aside to honor Veterans of World War I.

In 1954, after World War II had required the greatest mobilization of soldiers, sailors, Marines and airmen in the Nation’s history, and after American forces had fought aggression in Korea, the 83rd Congress amended the Act of 1938 by striking out the word “Armistice” and inserting in its place the word “Veterans.” With the approval of this legislation (Public Law 380) on June 1, 1954, November 11 became a day to honor American Veterans of all wars.

Later that same year, on October 8, President Dwight D. Eisenhower issued the first “Veterans Day Proclamation” which stated: “In order to insure proper and widespread observance of this anniversary, all Veterans, all Veterans’ organizations, and the entire citizenry will wish to join hands in the common purpose.”

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Veterans Day continues to be observed on November 11, regardless of what day of the week on which it falls. This preserves the historical significance of the date, and helps focus attention on the important purpose of Veterans Day, a day to honor those who have served in the American military. It is a celebration to honor America’s veterans for their patriotism, love of country, and willingness to serve and sacrifice for the common good. Unlike Memorial Day (which is a somber day to remember those who died in service), a happy Veterans Day and thank you for your service can appropriately be wished to those who served.

For veterans, serving in the military meant pushing past their own physical and mental limits in order to defeat the enemy. Many African American veterans were fighting two wars, the battles abroad and the battle to break through the racial bias and discriminatory limits placed upon them by society. Whether they fought stateside or overseas, in integrated or segregated units, or during World War II, Korea, or Vietnam, the African American veterans persisted past prejudice to serve their country with honor. Upon returning to the United States, they were faced with persistent discrimination and injustice, unable to secure decent jobs, housing or educational opportunities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ENDING RACISM

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has developed a wide range of programs in support of advancing racial justice for veterans who are minorities. The term “Veterans who are minorities” means veterans who are identified as African Americans, Asian American/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, Native American/Alaska Native, and Native Hawaiian.

The Department of Veterans Affairs has established a Minority Veterans Program to increase the awareness of the issues faced by minority veterans and develop strategies to encourage minority Veterans to participate in VA benefit programs. As a minority servicemember or veteran, individuals may qualify for a wide range of benefits offered by the Department of Veterans Affairs.



Image courtesy of the U.S. Department of Defense



ORIGINS OF THANKSGIVING DAY

Americans consider Thanksgiving Day a national holiday based on a harvest feast shared by English colonists (Pilgrims) of Plymouth and the Wampanoag Native American people in 1621 in New England.

The history of the Thanksgiving holiday has its origins in the late 17th century. In September 1620, a ship called the Mayflower set sail from Plymouth, England, with 102 passengers on board who wanted to seek a new life in the “New World.” They were a blend of religious separatists, looking for a new home where they could practice their faith free of persecution, and people who were enthralled by the possibility of owning land and building a prosperous life.

The tradition of celebrating Thanksgiving continued sporadically in different parts of the country. Sarah Josepha Hale, editor of the popular magazine Godey’s Lady’s Book, campaigned for a national Thanksgiving Day to promote unity. She finally won the support of President Abraham Lincoln. On October 3, 1863, during the Civil War, Lincoln proclaimed a national day of thanksgiving to be celebrated on the final Thursday of November.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt officially established the fourth Thursday in November as Thanksgiving Day. It was mandated by a joint resolution passed by Congress in 1941 and a proclamation issued in 1942, making Thanksgiving a national holiday observed throughout the United States to this day.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The tradition of eating turkey on Thanksgiving can be traced back to the very first Thanksgiving feast in 1621. Unfortunately, the story of Thanksgiving is usually told from only one side – that of the European pilgrims who came to America. Rarely is it told from the perspective of the people who were already here. According to historical accounts, the Wampanoag people who attended the dinner brought five deer and “wild fowl” to share with the Pilgrims.

The role of the Wampanoag in helping the pilgrims survive is often downplayed or ignored. Many Native Americans view Thanksgiving as a day of mourning because it is a reminder that in return for their help, the Europeans stole their land and killed their people.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ENDING RACISM

Sharing the history of Native Americans is a crucial step in developing awareness of the prejudicial practices and injustices they experienced. Discussions of this event are often sanitized and centered around the white settlers. The fact is that Native Americans had been on the land for centuries before the Europeans arrived, and their story far predates a joint feast.

When Europeans began coming to what is now known as the United States, about four years before the Mayflower arrived, they carried foreign illnesses which killed Native people at exceedingly high rates. Colonizers took over Native lands and sold Native Americans into slavery. From the perspective of the Native people, there is no reason to observe a Thanksgiving holiday.

CHALLENGE

During Thanksgiving, promote conversations about the history of Native Americans and racial justice, or donate to organizations that work on Native American issues. Visit the National Museum of the American Indian. <https://americanindian.si.edu>

November 2024



Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11 Veterans Day	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28 Thanksgiving Day	29	30

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