

Thank you Lawrie. It is a great pleasure to be here tonight for what I understand is a tradition of some 40 years standing of Thanksgiving dinners.

My fellow Americans, and my fellow Australians, it is my very great pleasure this evening to ask you to stand and join me in a toast.

Please stand.

Ladies & Gentlemen: To the President of the United States of America and to the great people and nation that he serves. **The President.**

Tonight we are here in a joyous and abundant celebration of Thanksgiving and it is therefore especially appropriate that we give recognition to the Gadigal people of Sydney who were the traditional owners of the land upon which we now stand.

Thanksgiving Day is an annual one-day American holiday to give thanks (traditionally to God) at the close of the harvest season ; U.S. tradition associates the holiday with a meal held in 1621 by the native American Indians and the Pilgrims who had settled in Plymouth, Massachusetts less than twelve months earlier. Its meaning in the 21st century has been transformed well beyond the original gratitude of the settlers for the bountiful harvest that autumn, which would ensure their survival over the oncoming winter.

Thanksgiving today means many things to many people. It is a traditional day for football, with season ending games for high schools, often between ancient rivals and since 1934 the Detroit Lions have hosted a game every year except during the Second World War. For the merchants of commerce amongst us, it represents the starter's gun for the retail run up to Christmas as the Friday after Thanksgiving is the biggest shopping day of the year in the United States. Parades march down the main streets of cities across the USA and the Macy*s Thanksgiving Day Parade alone attracts over a quarter of a million people and a national television audience.

But I think that I can say without reservation, and I am sure that you will agree with me, the abiding memory that most Americans share of Thanksgiving is of food and family. The imagery of Thanksgiving feasts is replete with turkeys stuffed to the limit, pumpkin pie, cranberry sauce, all sorts of potatoes, vegetables, nuts and sweets, so much so that across the land a most common post Thanksgiving scene is of fathers and uncles sprawled across sofas and arm chairs, children and dogs scrambling around their feet, dozing in front of the televised football.

For most of my life, over the second half of the last century, most Americans did have reason to be thankful at Thanksgiving for they were living in the so called "American Century" in a period of strong economic growth, security and plenty.

The first Thanksgiving, in November of 1621 was in circumstances few of us can imagine tonight. Of the 102 original colonists who had sailed from The Netherlands the year before seeking freedom to worship fewer than half survived, the rest had succumbed to disease and the harsh conditions of the New England winter. The combination of persecution in Europe followed by untold deprivation in the new world

meant that the surviving Pilgrims could be forgiven had they not felt grateful about their lot in life.

However, they had made a peace treaty with the local indigenous community, the Wampanoag tribe of Indians in March of that year, and the Pilgrims had enjoyed a bountiful harvest over the summer of 1621. Thus, in this contemporary account from that autumn Edward Winslow could write about the first Thanksgiving,

"....many of the Indians cam(e) amongst us, and among the rest their greatest king Massasoit, with some ninety men, whom for three days we entertained and feasted, and they went out and killed five deer, which we brought to the plantation and bestowed on our governor, and upon the captain and others. And although it be not always so plentiful as it was at this time with us, yet by the goodness of God, we are so far from want that we often wish you partakers of our plenty."

It is this spirit of Thanksgiving that has endured for nearly four centuries. Of peace with one's neighbours, no matter how different their culture, of gratitude for the abundance of the earth and of the importance of community and family.

Over the next two hundred years, Thanksgivings were celebrated from time to time and from place to place across the growing landscape of North America. Then, in response to public opinion and in a great and terrible war that had rent the nation asunder, and in the year of the battle of Gettysburg which turned the tide of the Civil War in favour of the Union, President Abraham Lincoln echoed the spirit of the Pilgrims in his Thanksgiving Proclamation of 1863.

"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; 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. 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."

It seems to me that today, in Australia, and in the United States, we have much to be thankful for. We live in vigorous, robust democracies with a standard of living that is unprecedented and the envy of much of the rest of the world. Yet I sense a growing level of unease in both countries. We are engaged in a deeply unpopular conflict halfway around the world in Iraq with no clear way out. There has never been a war fought on Australian soil, and none in more than 150 years in the United States, yet I perceive a palpable fear in the land, which is often expressed by our political leadership as "the war on terror." Here, much of the country is gripped by

drought, and the hard to predict consequences of climate change and global warming also give us cause for concern and uncertainty.

I am sure that those of you with fond memories as children of the comfort and serenity of Thanksgiving celebrated in your families' homes, have moments of doubt and anxiety about the Thanksgivings to come for your children and grandchildren and their children and grandchildren.

Yet it is exactly at this time of disquietude that I urge you to consider the enduring power and worth of the values that we celebrate, remember and pass on from generation to generation at Thanksgiving. Religious freedom and democracy, twin pillars of the Pilgrim society are the bedrock of the western canon that is at the heart of society in Australia and the United States. These values along with our other beliefs, such as access to education and freedom of speech are worth celebrating. They are worth promoting, articulating and communicating. They are worth fighting for. They define us and our societies. They are cause for gratitude to those who have come before us, and it is our obligation, if you agree with me that they are worth saving, to pass on these values and beliefs to those who will come after us. They are worthy of being thankful for them, and in that spirit, I wish you and your families and communities, whether they are near or far, a most joyous and healthy Thanksgiving.

Thank you.

Delivered at The American Club
131 Macquarie Street
Sydney
23 November 2006