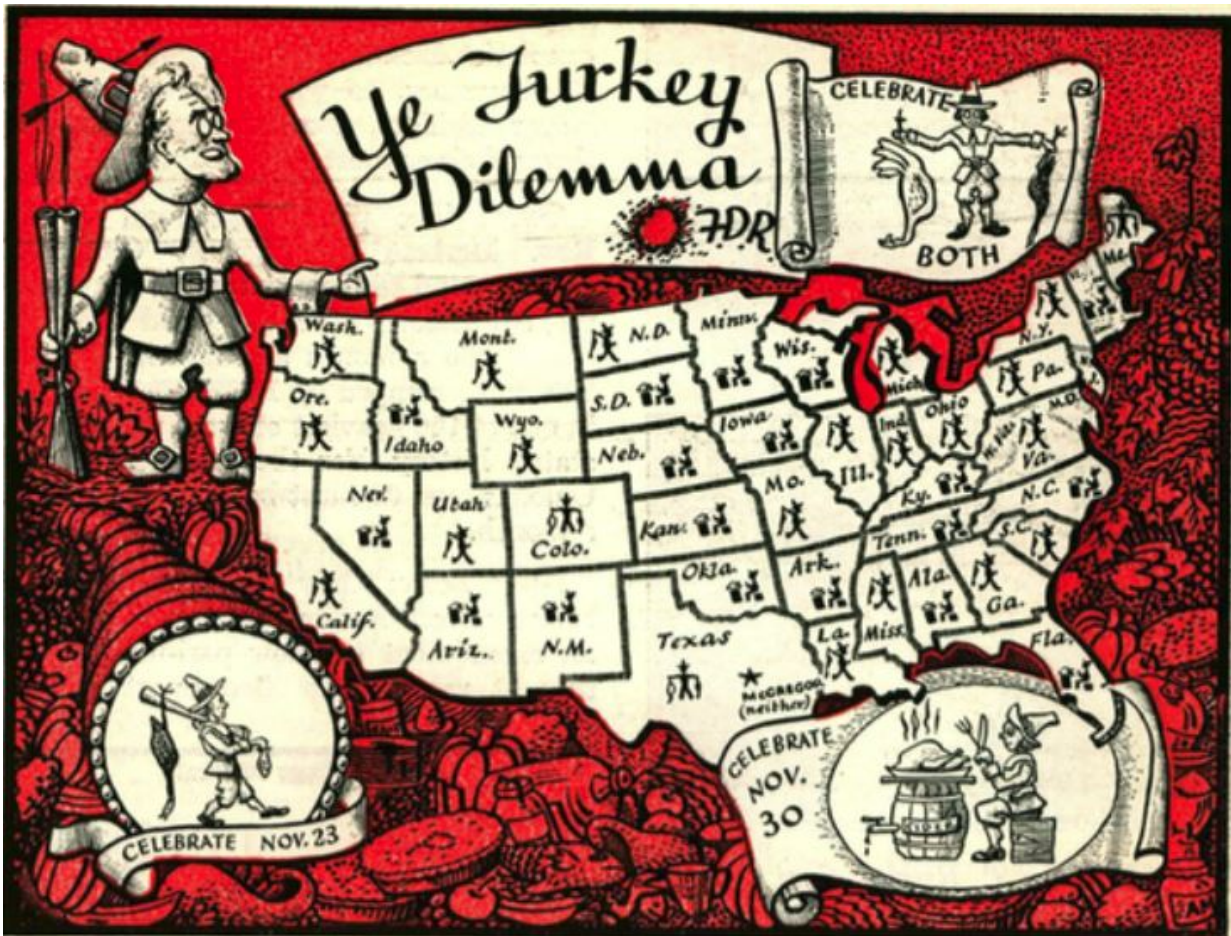


Documents that changed the world: FDR's Thanksgiving Proclamation, 1939

November 26 2015, by Peter Kelley



This image from a copy of Newsweek magazine needed President Roosevelt over his 1939 presidential proclamation to change the day Thanksgiving is celebrated. Credit: Wikimedia commons

The U.S. Senate voted to set Thanksgiving as the fourth Thursday in November on Dec. 9, 1941, two days after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. You'd think they would have had more important things to talk about.

Not Nov. 26, as George Washington had it or the last Thursday in the month as Lincoln had it, but November's fourth Thursday—as Franklin Delano Roosevelt had it.

FDR's 1939 turkey-themed presidential proclamation making this so, and its back story, are the topic of University of Washington Information School professor Joe Janes' latest installment in his Documents that Changed the World podcast series.

In the podcasts, Janes explores the origin and often evolving meaning of historical documents both famous and less known. UW Today presents these occasionally, and all of the podcasts are available online at the Information School [website](#).

Janes said he knew only vaguely of a FDR-Thanksgiving connection. "When I started digging, what began as a cute little story about picking a day for Thanksgiving—which had been set for 70 years by default though was largely random before then—wound up being much more divisive."

FDR's move brought support, criticism and confusion. "Today, we'd call this a wedge issue," Janes said. "Familiar territory for us now, though the lines weren't nearly so clearly well-defined then. Can you imagine what would happen if the current president decided, unilaterally, to move a holiday? Ye gods."

As Janes describes in the podcast, more changes were to follow FDR's proclamation before Congress cleared up the matter, arguing all the way.

One politician decided to honor the commander in chief by calling the designated day "Franksgiving."

The controversy is briefly spoofed in the 1942 film "Holiday Inn" starring Bing Crosby and Fred Astaire, when a cartoon turkey is seen bouncing with confusion between Thursdays on a calendar.

And really, maybe America needed an innocent diversion right about then.

"All this was going on in the shadow of the impending war everybody knew was coming, and questions about FDR's intentions in the 1940 elections," Janes said.

"It was something to squabble about that seemed safer and more tractable than a world on the brink of madness."

Provided by University of Washington

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