

Thanksgiving Dinner Speech. For the Middle East & Eastern Europe leadership team during our annual family retreat. November 1999.

We can give thanks for Thanksgiving dinner to the English and the Dutch, among others. As you well know, when the Pilgrim fathers first celebrated Thanksgiving it was after they had been in America for a year. It was 1621. We are celebrating it at 1943¹, but this is still OK.

Actually, right away, it is necessary to make some corrections to the common account for the sake of accuracy. In the first place, as everyone in the 90s would realise, it wasn't just the Pilgrim fathers. It was also the Pilgrim mothers. And Pilgrim children too, since Peregrine White has been born almost as the Mayflower dropped anchor. In fact the two events, the dropping of the anchor and the delivery of the babe coincided almost perfectly in time. So much so that the father of the babe Peregrine, banished as usual to the waiting room, had to be revived after he mistook the cry "Anchors Aweigh" for an announcement from the midwife.

We should also note the creative genius of the Pilgrim fathers (we should not blame the mothers for this). The name for this first-born of the new colony is Peregrine. Peregrine means foreign traveller or alien. So we have here the first example of the "illegal alien" in America. And the beginning of a long tradition.

But back to the colony. It had all begun rather badly. Firstly, Cate Blanchett, an Australian, was Queen of England and since no-one in England had heard of Australia at that time she had to go by the pseudonym Elizabeth the First. This was perhaps a lesser example of creative genius since most people in England in those days did not have numbers for surnames. Still, Elizabeth the First it was and it inspired many town surveyors to name streets after her. Such as 1st Avenue, Washington DC, 1st street, San Dimas, Highway 1 in Australia and Erstegasse in Vienna.

Cate Blanchett, or Elizabeth the First, later to become Queen of Australia disliked complexity. She found it difficult to understand that her Protestant church was itself divided into even smaller protesting groups. One of the small groups was called Puritans which would have been a good name in the Greenpeace era, but less saleable in the 17th century. Worse, the Puritans were split in a dozen different ways with one group calling themselves the Brownists, presumably because all the good names like yahoo.com had already been snatched up.

Feeling the unfriendly persecution of the State, such as imprisonment, starvation and beatings, the Brownists left for the Netherlands largely because they had no idea about the Dutch. They had heard that some French Protestants had also holed up there, and thought they might find friends. Instead they found Dutch and French people who refused to hand over their land for English settlement and insisted that the foreigners should go home toutes suites.

America seemed the only solution, since they knew even less about it except that it was generally in the opposite direction. The Brownists purchased a boat named the Speedwell. Unfortunately, it's greatest attribute was its name since the only direction in which it sped well

¹ The time this speech was delivered.

was towards the bottom of the ocean. A second vessel was secured. The Mayflower, named after a flower which, you may be surprised to learn, blooms in May (except in Australia where it blooms in November but is still called the Mayflower except by those who voted against the Queen.)

History records that the expedition was not entirely religious in nature. Certain commercial assurances were given on the usual principles of micro-enterprise development, namely, in return for the cost of their boat hire, they were to return to their financiers almost all of their produce from America for the next six years. Again, another fine tradition was established.

The boat had 102 passengers, most of them not Puritans which might account for the impurity of their navigation because they ended up arriving pretty much on time but very much off course. Still, it was North America for sure, so after sitting on the boat for a month, they decided to go and claim a bit for themselves. First, of course, they had to give the place a name since the native Americans who had been living there for a few millenniums had apparently never done this. So, summoning up all the creativity and ingenuity capable of 15th century colonists they decided that, since they had set out from Plymouth in England, they should call this New Plymouth. Since I was, some centuries later to be born, in New South Wales, this never seemed particularly odd to me, but we can be reasonably certain that Mr Massasoit and the other members of the Wampanoag family who had been watching this strange ocean-going tree with the curtains on the roof for about a month, you can be reasonably certain they thought New Plymouth a pretty exotic name indeed.

Fortunately, the Wampanoag family did not have the benefit of a European education like the Dutch and French with whom the Puritans had earlier negotiated, so they signed a treaty of peace, welcoming the foreigners ashore and then generally getting as far away as their noses advised them.

Meanwhile the Pilgrim fathers got together (again we cannot blame the women) and signed the Mayflower compact. This was in fact a small face powder receptacle belonging to one of the Pilgrim mothers and to this day science has been unable to explain how all 41 of the men got their names on the lid. In signing this compact, the men agreed to become a “civil bloody politic” thus beginning another great American tradition of bloody-minded politics.

Better things were to come however. Most of them survived the winter and the summer brought a hardly adequate harvest – especially since most of it was supposed to be shipped back to MED headquarters in Old Plymouth. At the end of the first year, the Pilgrim chaps invited Massasoit and a few of his Wampanoag family to dinner to commiserate. There was so little food about that the Wampanoag family were relieved to discover their names were not on the menu. So great was their comfort that they celebrated their fellowship as neighbours and agreed to live in peace forever.

Two years later, when bad harvest finally turned into good ones, they actually changed from prayer and fasting to proper thanksgiving, and the Thanksgiving dinner was truly born. Later, in New York State and then under the leadership of Abraham Lincoln the tradition grew more official. In Canada they did it too, but got confused about the date.

However, there was an ominous sequel to these happy events. Massasoit was succeeded by his son, Wamsutta. He continued the peace with the settlers. And they with him. However in

1675, Wamsutta was succeeded by his brother who, despite having a good English name, led an uprising to fight for justice against the settlers who were, by now, occupying more and more territory. In this act of righteous leadership, another great tradition had been established. The name of this champion of indigenous rights was Philip.