

WEEK IN REVIEW

The Pilgrims Were ... Socialists?

By KATE ZERNIKE NOV. 20, 2010

Ah, Thanksgiving. A celebration regardless of creed; a time for all Americans to come together after a divisive election year.

But why take a holiday from argument? In these fractious times, even the meaning of Thanksgiving is subject to political debate.

Forget what you learned about the first Thanksgiving being a celebration of a bountiful harvest, or an expression of gratitude to the Indians who helped the Pilgrims through those harsh first months in an unfamiliar land. In the Tea Party view of the holiday, the first settlers were actually early socialists. They realized the error of their collectivist ways and embraced capitalism, producing a bumper year, upon which they decided that it was only right to celebrate the glory of the free market and private property.

Historians quibble with this interpretation. But the story, related by libertarians and conservatives for years, has taken on new life over the last year among Tea Party audiences, who revere early American history, and hunger for any argument against what they believe is the big-government takeover of the United States.

It has made Thanksgiving another proxy in the debate over health care and entitlement spending, and placed it alongside the New Deal and the Constitution on the platter of historical items picked apart by competing narratives.

There are other debates about Thanksgiving — whether the first was in Jamestown, Va., or Plymouth, Mass.; whether it was intended as a religious holiday or not. But broadly, the version passed on to generations of American schoolchildren holds that the settlers who had arrived in the New World on the Mayflower in 1620 were celebrating the next year's good harvest, sharing in the bounty with Squanto and their other Indian friends, who had taught them how to hunt and farm on new terrain.

All very kumbaya, say Tea Party historians, but missing the economics lesson within.

In one common telling, the pilgrims who came to Plymouth established a communal system, where all had to pool whatever they hunted or grew on their lands. Because they could not reap the fruits of their labors, no one had any incentive to work, and the system failed — confusion, thievery and famine ensued.

Finally, the governor of the colony, William Bradford, abolished this system and gave each household a parcel of land. With private property to call their own, the Pilgrims were suddenly very industrious and found themselves with more corn than they knew what to do with. So they invited the Indians over to celebrate. (In some other versions, the first Thanksgiving is not a feast but a brief respite from famine. But the moral is always the same: socialism doesn't work.) The same commune-to-capitalism, famine-to-feast story is told of Jamestown, the first English settlement, in 1607. Dick Armey, the former House majority leader and Texas congressman who has become a Tea Party promoter, related it as a cautionary tale in a speech to the National Press Club earlier this year.

Rush Limbaugh repeats the Thanksgiving story of Plymouth every year, reading it from a chapter in one of his books titled “Dead White Guys, or What Your History Books Never Told You.” (Some details change; one year, he had the Pilgrims growing organic vegetables.)

The version is also taught in a one-day course called “The Making of America,” which became popular with Tea Party groups across the country after Glenn Beck recommended the work of its author, W. Cleon Skousen, who died in 2006. Tea Party blogs have reposted “The Great Thanksgiving Hoax” from a Web site celebrating the work of the libertarian economist Ludwig von Mises, a favorite of Ron Paul devotees. The post concludes: “Thus the real reason for Thanksgiving, deleted from the official story, is: Socialism does not work; the one and only source of abundance is free markets, and we thank God we live in a country where we can have them.”

Leave aside the question of whether this country is on the march to socialism (conservatives say yes, and blame the Democrats). What does the record say?

Historians say that the settlers in Plymouth, and their supporters in England, did indeed agree to hold their property in common — William Bradford, the governor, referred to it in his writings as the “common course.” But the plan was in the interest of realizing a profit sooner, and was only intended for the short term; historians say the Pilgrims were more like shareholders in an early corporation than subjects of socialism.

“It was directed ultimately to private profit,” said Richard Pickering, a historian of early America and the deputy director of Plimoth Plantation, a museum devoted to keeping the Pilgrims’ story alive.

The arrangement did not produce famine. If it had, Bradford would not have declared the three days of sport and feasting in 1621 that became known as the first Thanksgiving. “The celebration would never have happened if the harvest was going to be less than enough to get them by,” Mr. Pickering said. “They would have saved it and rationed it to get by.”

The competing versions of the story note Bradford’s writings about “confusion and discontent” and accusations of “laziness” among the colonists. But Mr. Pickering said this grumbling had more to do with the fact that the Plymouth colony was bringing together settlers from all over England, at a time when most people never moved more than 10 miles from home. They spoke different dialects and had different methods of farming, and looked upon each other with great wariness.

“One man’s laziness is another man’s industry, based on the agricultural methods they’ve learned as young people,” he said.

Bradford did get rid of the common course — but it was in 1623, after the first Thanksgiving, and not because the system wasn’t working. The Pilgrims just didn’t like it. In the accounts of colonists, Mr. Pickering said, “there was griping and groaning.”

“Bachelors didn’t want to feed the wives of married men, and women don’t want to do the laundry of the bachelors,” he said.

The real reason agriculture became more profitable over the years, Mr. Pickering said, is that the Pilgrims were getting better at farming crops like corn that had been unknown to them in England.

As for Jamestown, there was famine. But historians dispute the characterization of the colony as a collectivist society. “To call it socialism is wildly inaccurate,” said Karen Ordahl Kupperman, a historian at New York University and the author of “The Jamestown Project.” “It was a contracted company, and everybody worked for the company. I mean, is Halliburton a socialist scheme?”

The widespread deaths resulted mostly from malaria. Tree ring studies suggest that the settlement was also plagued by drought.

But the biggest problem, Professor Kupperman said, was the lack of planning. The Virginia settlers came to the New World thinking that they could find gold or a route to

the Pacific Ocean via the Chesapeake Bay, and make a quick buck by setting up a trading station like others were establishing in the East Indies.

“It was just wishful thinking,” she said, “a failure to recognize that these things are really, really difficult.”

The Tea Party’s take on Thanksgiving may have its roots in the cold war.

Samuel Eliot Morison, the admiral and historian who edited Bradford’s “Of Plymouth Plantation,” titled the chapter about Bradford ending the common course “Indian Conspiracy; Communism; Gorges.”

But it is important to note that he was writing in 1952, amid great American suspicion of the Soviets. “The challenges of the cold war and dealing with Russia are reflected in the text,” Mr. Pickering said.

Likewise, Cleon Skousen, the author of the “Making of America” textbook, was an anticommunist crusader in the 1960s. (His term for Jamestown was not socialism but “secular communism.”)

“What’s going on today is a tradition of conservative thought about that early community structure,” Mr. Pickering said.

William Hogeland, the author of “Inventing American History,” agreed. “Across the political spectrum, there’s a tendency to grab a hold of some historical incident and yoke it to a current agenda,” he said. “It doesn’t always mean there’s no connection, but often things are presented as historical first, rather than as part of the agenda first.”

And indeed, many can play this game.

Professor Kupperman, for instance, said the Jamestown story reminded her mostly of the Iraq war.

“It was kind of like the idea that the Iraqis would greet us with flowers,” she said.

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