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The Mayflower Compact and Why It Matters

by

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Around this particular Thanksgiving holiday, especially in the midst of our current travails, we should take a moment to recall that this is the 400th anniversary of the Mayflower voyage, the founding of Plymouth Colony, and the signing, on November 11, 1620, of the [Mayflower Compact](#).

The Mayflower Compact, brief as it is, is worthy of more attention than it has thus far received on this 400th anniversary, during a year in which so much attention has been focused on America's supposed ills rather than the ideas and ideals embodied in the nation's foundational principles.

The Mayflower's original destination was near the mouth of the Hudson River. But when rough seas blew the ship off-course and the voyagers landed at what is now Plymouth, they understood they were in territory beyond the authority that they had been granted. Hence

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the need for an agreement – which we now call the Mayflower Compact and which they called a "covenant," to govern their affairs.

The covenant was signed by all 41 of the male passengers aboard the Mayflower before they departed the ship. Less than half of the 102 passengers were members of the English separatist group (the Puritans) that earlier had fled to Leyden in the Netherlands in search of religious freedom. It was only later that the entire group became known as Pilgrims.

The agreement declares the Pilgrims' purpose "to covenant & combine ourselves together into a civill body politick, for our better ordering, & preservation & furtherance of the ends" of planting a colony. And it continues, "to enacte, constitute, and frame such just & equall lawes, ordinances, Acts, constitutions, & offices, from time to time, as shall be thought most meete & convenient for the generall good of the Colonie: unto which we promise all submission and obedience."

I've retained the original spelling here, but the meaning should be clear.

The Compact is simple but nevertheless foundational as a declaration of self-government. Those New World arrivals combining together in a "civil body politic" agree to submit to the rule of law under "just and equal" laws. Not merely any laws.

It was by no means a full-blown plan of government. That would await the drafting and ratification of the Constitution of 1787. But it was a grounding upon which future advances in self-government would be built. And in light of the principles established in November 1620 on the Mayflower, the Compact is an important part of the American story.

Fully half of the Mayflower's Pilgrims died of disease and starvation in their first winter in the New World. So, there was reason enough for those who survived to assemble in the autumn of 1621 for a feast of "Thanksgiving" with the Pokanoket Wampanoags, who had shared advice on planting and harvesting.

The year 2020 will always be associated with this pandemic, which has caused so much suffering. But in America, as always, we have much for which to be grateful during this Thanksgiving season. The prospect of a highly effective vaccine developed in record time, along with the quickening availability of more proven therapeutics, is reason enough to be hopeful and to be thankful.

The Mayflower Compact's 400th anniversary should be cause for celebrating an agreement articulating what became fundamental American principles – rule by consent of the governed under just and equal laws.

And perhaps too, in the spirit of the present season, it is worth reflecting upon the words of James Madison in *Federalist* No. 14, published on November 30, 1787: "Harken not to the unnatural voice which tells you that the people of America, knit together as they are by so many cords of affection, can no longer live together as members of the same family."

It is never the wrong time, but especially now at a time of obviously deep divisions in what the Mayflower Compact called the "civil body politic," it is well to remember a remarkable part of the early American story that provides a grounding for nurturing what Madison called our "many cords of affection."

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