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Thanksgiving 2024: Cords of Affection

by

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Thanksgiving is a time when family and friends gather to enjoy a festive meal, watch a football game, share life cycle memories, and renew – or sometimes repair – bonds of affection.

With today's political divisions running deep, we're told that many traditional Thanksgiving gatherings among family and friends are discordant, even imperiled, because of dissension and distrust regarding matters of politics. I hope these reports are exaggerated. It would be a shame if they were not.

On this Thanksgiving, as always, I am grateful for the blessings bestowed upon my family and friends and for the joyous occasions we share together. And I'm grateful for their support during the inevitable times of sadness that we all experience in our lives.

But here, on this Thanksgiving, especially after a contentious election season that sharpened the discord and discontent that exists in our body politic, I want to consider briefly the bonds that ought to nurture and sustain the American republican experiment. I have in mind, for present

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purposes now, three seminal moments in our nation's history that produced sentiments that, upon reflection, could reinvigorate the communal American spirit.

First, the [Mayflower Compact](#), signed on November 11, 1620. 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 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 the male passengers aboard the Mayflower.

The Compact declares the Pilgrims' purpose "to covenant & combine ourselves together into a *civil 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 Mayflower Compact is simple, but nevertheless foundational as a declaration of self-government – the seekers of the New World combining in a covenantal "*civil body politic*," agreeing to submit to "just and equal" laws.

Second, to James Madison's [Federalist No. 14](#), published on November 30, 1787. In urging ratification of the Constitution in the face of the strident anti-Federalist opposition, Madison wrote this: "Hearken 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; can no longer continue the mutual guardians of their mutual happiness; can no longer be fellow citizens of one great respectable and flourishing empire."

Finally, now to 1861, with America on the verge of Civil War, and Abraham Lincoln's [First Inaugural Address](#). In his last-ditch effort to save the Union without war, Lincoln said this: "We are not enemies, but friends. We must not be enemies. Though passion may have strained it must not break our bonds of affection. The *mystic chords of memory*, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature."

The sheer eloquence of Lincoln's words didn't save the Union in 1861. But his words do forever provoke sentiments that possess the power to help preserve it.

The Mayflower Compact's covenant binding together the Pilgrims in a self-governing "civil body politic."

James Madison's invocation of the "cords of affection" that already knit together the colonists in urging ratification of the Constitution.

And Abraham Lincoln's appeal to the "mystic chords of memory" in pleading for the Union's preservation.

These sentiments were never intended to appeal to distinct identity groups, particular ethnicities, or narrow elitist elements within our body politic. But as the Mayflower Compact has it, to the entire covenantal civil body politic. Indeed, they appeal to the formation of communal attachments that bind individuals to the institutions of our civil government, and to our system of government under our Constitution.

Perhaps this Thanksgiving will be an occasion not only to deepen the cords of affection and mystic chords of memory among family and friends, but also among our fellow citizens.

* Randolph J. May is President of the Free State Foundation, a free market-oriented think tank in Rockville, MD. The views expressed in this *Perspectives* do not necessarily reflect the views of others on the staff of the Free State Foundation or those affiliated with it. *Thanksgiving 2024: Cords of Affection* was published in *The Washington Times* on November 28, 2024.