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With Thanksgiving Approaching, Remember the Mayflower Compact

by

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Now that the bitterly contentious midterm elections are in the rearview mirror, and as Thanksgiving, a uniquely American holiday, fast approaches, it is fitting to focus on the Mayflower Compact.

The foundational document helped lay the groundwork for the American democratic experiment. It is especially relevant as America's yearlong 250th birthday celebration draws to a close.

When it set sail from Plymouth, England, on Sept. 16, 1620, the Mayflower's original destination was near the mouth of the Hudson River. Yet when rough seas blew the ship off course and the voyagers landed near what is now Plymouth, Massachusetts, the Pilgrims understood that they were in territory beyond the authority granted by the English Crown.

Hence, the need for an agreement to govern their affairs. That agreement, which we now call the Mayflower Compact and which they called a "covenant," was signed by 41 of the Mayflower's male passengers.

The compact, signed on Nov. 11, 1620, almost 156 years before the Declaration of Independence, 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.

It continues, "to enacte, constitute, and frame shuch 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 have retained the original spelling here, but the meaning should be clear.

Although the Mayflower Compact is simple, it is nevertheless foundational as a declaration of self-government. The seekers of a new life in the New World combined, freely, in a covenantal "civil body politic," agreeing to submit to "just and equal" laws.

That the compact is in some sense a forerunner of the Declaration of Independence should be obvious. The Declaration's prime self-evident "Truths" are these: "That all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

The Declaration's assertion that government derives its powers from the "consent of the governed" — that is, from the mutual agreement of those who enter the political community — echoes the Pilgrims' entry, for the general good of the community, into a covenantal "civil body politic."

The Declaration's assertion, however imperfectly realized at the time, that "all men are created equal," mirrors the compact's commitment to enact "just and equal laws."

The compact was by no means intended to be a full-blown plan of government. Neither was the Declaration. That plan would await the Constitution of 1787. Still, the compact, short as it was, asserted vital precepts upon which the future American republic would be built.

In light of the principles established on the Mayflower in November 1620, the compact is an important part of the still-unfolding American experiment in democratic self-governance.

During this semiquincentennial year celebrating America's independence, our politics — not for the first time in our history — are roiled by deep philosophical divisions over the country's direction. The continuation or deepening of these divisions, with strident extremes on both ends of the political spectrum hollowing out the center, could presage America's decline.

Yet I remain optimistic about our future as the "shining city upon a hill" that President Reagan, harking back to Puritan leader John Winthrop's 1630 sermon, invoked during his Farewell Address.

Consider this from James Madison's Federalist No. 14, published in November 1787, urging the Constitution's ratification in the face of fierce Anti-Federalist opposition: "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."

So, as America's 250th birthday celebration draws to a close and Thanksgiving approaches, recall the Mayflower Compact's covenant binding the Pilgrims together in a self-governing "civil body politick." Recall also the Declaration's claim that government's just powers must be derived from the "consent of the governed."

Finally, reflect on Madison's invocation of the "cords of affection" that he claimed, in 1787, had already knit Americans together into what the Constitution calls "We the People."

If you engage in such reflection, in the spirit of one determined to help sustain America's democratic experiment, I submit that you too may have reason to be optimistic about America's future.

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