THANKSGIVING
ITS TRUE HISTORY

by Julia White

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As history teaches us, the greatest conflicts and the bloodiest wars throughout time have been waged because of belief systems and boundaries. We can trace this from the Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition through Hitler to the "ethnic cleansing" now going on around the world. This mentality does not tolerate differing political, social and religious beliefs, and it does not hesitate to seize another's land and property if it suits a purpose.

It was the custom in European countries to mark the boundaries of land with fences ranging from palisades to low rock walls. Once word spread throughout Europe and Spain about this wonderful land called The Americas, which was wild, untamed and unclaimed, this new territory became a safe haven for outlaws, prisoners, exiles, and the radical element of politics, social structure and religious practices - the violent and the non-conformists.

Even though the first explorers and early settlers had been warned about the heathen savages found in the "New World", they found the First Peoples of this land curious about these strange people, and more than willing to teach them how to survive and live well in their new surroundings. The flow of people into this country was slow in the beginning and, even though there was the occasional hothead among the newcomers, life was generally a peaceful co-existence for almost 150 years.

However, as the trickle of settlers turned into a steady river, the atmosphere began to change. In 1614, a band of English explorers had landed in the vicinity of Massachusetts Bay. When they returned home, they took with them Native slaves they had captured, and left smallpox behind. By the time the Puritan pilgrims sailed the Mayflower into southern Massachusetts Bay, entire nations of New England Natives were already extinct, having been totally exterminated by smallpox.

The Puritans were religious radicals being driven into exile out of England. Since their story is well known, I will not repeat it here. They settled and built a colony which they called the "Plymouth Plantation", near the ruins of a former Native village of the Pawtuxet Nation. Only one Pawtuxet had survived, a man named Squanto, who had spent time as a slave to the English. Since he understood the language and customs of the Puritans, he taught them to use the corn growing wild from the abandoned fields of the village, taught them to fish, and about the foods, herbs and fruits of this land. Squanto also negotiated a peace treaty between the Puritans and the Wampanoag Nation, a very large Native nation which totally surrounded the new Plymouth Plantation. Because of Squanto's efforts, the Puritans enjoyed almost 15 years of peaceful harmony with the surrounding Natives, and they prospered.

At the end of their first year, the Puritans held a great feast following the harvest of food from their
new farming efforts. The feast honored Squanto and their friends, the Wampanoags. The feast was followed by 3 days of “thanksgiving” celebrating their good fortune. This feast produced the image of the first Thanksgiving that we all grew up with as children. However, things were doomed to change.

Until approximately 1629, there were only about 300 Puritans living in widely scattered settlements around New England. As word leaked back to England about their peaceful and prosperous life, more Puritans arrived by the boatloads. As the numbers of Puritans grew, the question of ownership of the land became a major issue. The Puritans came from the belief of individual needs and prosperity, and had no concept of tribal living or group sharing. It was clear that these heathen savages had no claim on the land because it had never been subdued, cultivated and farmed in the European manner, and there were no fences or other boundaries marked. The land was clearly "public domain", and there for the taking. This attitude met with great resistance from the original Puritans who held their Native benefactors in high regard. These first Puritan settlers were summarily excommunicated and expelled from the church.

With Bible passages in their hands to justify their every move, the Puritans began their march inland from the seaside communities. Joined by British settlers, they seized land, took the strong and young Natives as slaves to work the land, and killed the rest. When they reached the Connecticut Valley around 1633, they met a different type of force. The Pequot Nation, very large and very powerful, had never entered into the peace treaty negotiated by Squanto as had other New England Native nations. When 2 slave raiders were killed by resisting Natives, the Puritans demanded that the killers be turned over. The Pequot refused. What followed was the Pequot War, the bloodiest of the Native wars in the northeast.

An army of over 200 settlers was formed, joined by over 1,000 Narragansett warriors. Because of the lack of fighting experience, and the vast numbers of the fierce Pequot warriors, Commander John Mason elected not to stage an open battle. Instead, the Pequot were attacked, one village at a time, in the hours before dawn. Each village was set on fire with its sleeping Natives burned alive. Women and children over 14 were captured to be sold as slaves; other survivors were massacred. The Natives were sold into slavery in The West Indies, the Azures, Spain, Algiers and England; everywhere the Puritan merchants traded. The slave trade was so lucrative that boatloads of 500 at a time left the harbors of New England.

In 1641, the Dutch governor of Manhattan offered the first scalp bounty; a common practice in many European countries. This was broadened by the Puritans to include a bounty for Natives fit to be sold for slavery. The Dutch and Puritans joined forces to exterminate all Natives from New England, and village after village fell. Following an especially successful raid against the Pequot in what is now Stamford, Connecticut, the churches of Manhattan announced a day of “thanksgiving” to celebrate victory over the heathen savages. This was the 2nd Thanksgiving. During the feasting, the hacked off heads of Natives were kicked through the streets of Manhattan like soccer balls.

The killing took on a frenzy, with days of thanksgiving being held after each successful massacre. Even the friendly Wampanoag did not escape. Their chief was beheaded, and his head placed on a pole in Plymouth, Massachusetts — where it remained for 24 years. Each town held thanksgiving days to celebrate their own victories over the Natives until it became clear that there needed to be an order to these special occasions. It was George Washington who finally brought a system and a schedule to thanksgiving when he declared one day to be celebrated across the nation as Thanksgiving Day.

It was Abraham Lincoln who decreed Thanksgiving Day to be a legal national holiday during the Civil
War -- on the same day and at the same time he was ordering troops to march against the Sioux in Minnesota.

In our society, it is not uncommon for our modern celebrations to have arisen from black and evil beginnings. Over the centuries, Thanksgiving has become a special day to join with loved ones in an offering of thanks for our blessings. Some give of their time to help with the homeless and the hungry. It is now a day of giving, and of honor, and of true thanksgiving. I do not mean to diminish that.

In your Thanksgivings to come, I would ask that you offer a silent prayer for the spirits of those who were sacrificed so long ago. You and I did not commit these atrocities, and we are certainly not responsible for the behavior of our ancestors be they red, white, black or yellow.

However, we are charged with the responsibility of learning our true history, and of having the courage to behave with honor and dignity toward our fellow man. Remember......if the lessons of history are not learned, they will surely repeat themselves. The todays and tomorrows of history are ours to shape. Shape them carefully.

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