

The Psychology of Hating Thanksgiving

Bill Donohue highly recommends this article by Stetson University Professor Christopher J. Ferguson, Ph.D. To read more by him, check out his [Substack](#).

It's the season for Thanksgiving and we can look forward to some members of our glitterati giving thanks by dumping on the holiday itself. We are told that the holiday [celebrates genocide](#) and [news articles](#) repeat the [myth](#) that the first Thanksgiving celebrated a massacre of Native Americans. Most Americans ignore these dreary takes on Thanksgiving, but it's important to understand from where they originate. Particularly as these newer, bleak takes on Thanksgiving both distort history and contribute to societal discord without helping Native Americans.

Promoted by magazine editor Sarah Hale, the modern [Thanksgiving holiday](#) was created by President Lincoln in 1863. The intent was for a day of reconciliation and togetherness during the Civil War. But the day also became associated with a 1621 feast between British Pilgrims and the Wampanoag tribe celebrating their new alliance against other Native American tribes. Though postmodern takes on Thanksgiving emphasize how European colonists would come to violently dominate the Native Americans, this peace treaty would actually [last 50 years](#)—rather impressive for any two disparate cultural groups in close contact for any point and place in human history.

As such, Thanksgiving represents our opportunity to recognize the good in our own lives and in the world. Even the focus on the Wampanoag and Pilgrims acknowledges an ideal, despite a long history of human awfulness, we can sometimes see past it to our common humanity. Why do some, particularly on the

political far left, reject such a vision?

In short, our minds struggle with complexity, and offered a social situation in which criticizing traditional social customs is rewarded, some people will take it. In my latest book, [Catastrophe: The Psychology of How Good People Make Bad Situations Worse](#), I discuss how [emotion](#) and cognitive errors lead us to believe things that aren't true and make bad decisions based on such false beliefs. Several apply to the case of Thanksgiving.

First, we tend to divide people into ingroups (good) and outgroups (bad). Indeed, this seems impossible to escape, even as our society becomes unprecedentedly [less racist and sexist](#), we simply turn to political polarization. Historically, narratives of colonization tended to focus on Manifest Destiny, with Native Americans either invisible or savage bad guys. More recently we've inverted this creating a [Noble Savage mythology](#) in which Native Americans were pure, innocent, egalitarian, peaceful, and more, even though [little evidence](#) supports much of this.

By contrast, modern narratives paint Europeans as racist, genocide perpetrators, the bad guys in our own story. In reality, neither Europeans nor Native Americans were inherently good or bad. Europeans simply enacted historical patterns of violent migration common to all human (and [primate](#)) groups throughout history, including Native Americans. Had Native Americans invented gunpowder and transatlantic boats first, the process would have been reversed. Research indicates we tend to equate [victimhood](#) with superior [morality](#). Instead, we should recognize all human groups are capable of evil, and there's no moral contest to win. By understanding this we can focus on how to improve the behavior of cultural groups.

Misunderstanding is aided along by [confirmation bias](#), a process in which we give credence to evidence that supports

our prior beliefs and ignore or disparage that which conflicts with our beliefs. Thus, progressives tend to obsess over the bad behavior of colonists (which certainly existed), while ignoring that of Native Americans. By contrast, Native American virtues are celebrated whereas European virtues are waved off.

Of course, these beliefs are maintained in a social atmosphere where anti-American and anti-European attitudes are celebrated as a mark of intellectual achievement on the far left. Dissent from such narrow and prejudiced views is punished via ostracism, ridicule, and [shame](#).

That the Wampanoag and Pilgrims managed to maintain a peace treaty for generations is a remarkable historical achievement. Yet 50 years of peace is collapsed in progressive narratives about Thanksgiving and genocide. Of course, we should remain cognizant of the larger context, but Thanksgiving does not stand athwart this.

If progressives wished the general U.S. population to reduce their sympathy toward Native Americans, I couldn't think of a better way than to shame Americans for celebrating a beloved holiday. Hammering wedges between groups increases ethnic discord. Instead, finding commonalities and shared interests as the Wampanoag and Pilgrims once did is the best way forward. Celebrating the ideals highlighted by Thanksgiving and the positive power of both Native American and non-Native American cultures can foster intergroup [cooperation](#).

Let us all come together, Native American and non-Native American and raise a toast to our shared potential. However, we have failed to achieve it in the past, the future still offers us promise. Just as the holiday offered reconciliation between North and South in 1863, perhaps it can bridge divides between Native and non-Native Americans today.