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Times In American History To Be Thankful

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MAYFIELD, Ky. - On this Thanksgiving our formal prayers will almost certainly include a reference about "living in a free country." Indeed, we have much to be thankful for in this regard. Nevertheless, we often fail to recognize the Almighty's hand in American history. We have been impacted by God's special hand in promoting American exceptionalism. The American experience has been unique, and while we make no claims about God's future blessings on the United States, we can see His intervention at various junctures in our past to both ensure His will and promote blessings for the American people.

In fact, it is hard to choose just five junctures in American history for which Americans should be thankful, and many Christian historians of American history will certainly disagree about my choices. Yet, these junctures both molded the American experience and have given us long-term blessings. We can be very thankful that the Almighty was present in all these junctures.

1. The founding and settlement of the American colonies by religious dissenters.

America's early social, political, economic, moral and religious roots owe much to the founding of many American colonies by religious dissenters. The dissenters themselves

often disagreed with each other about many issues, but collectively they established the American Christian worldview that has persisted to our own era and helped mold the American character. This is especially true of the early American groups like the Pilgrims, Puritans, Pietists, Quakers and Baptists.

A partial list of the contributions of these religious dissenters to the American character would include: a recognition that God plays a central role in our lives; the relationship of faith to the exercise of government (The Mayflower Compact); a view that earthly society should reflect as much as possible an example for the rest of the world (Puritan John Winthrop's "City on a Hill"); the Puritan (or Protestant) work ethic; an economic consensus that God blesses thoughtful non-exploitive investment, saving, and business growth; a charitable concern for fellow citizens as a means of also worshipping God; a sense of duty and service to both God and fellow citizens; the promotion of temperance in daily living that avoids both extreme self-denial and self-indulgence and is good for both the individual and society; and the advocacy of religious liberty and the separation of church and state (for which Baptists played a very unique role).

While Christians in the United States today still hold to these principles, even non-Christians in America have been influenced by the legacy of the early American religious dissenters. Our gratitude for their influence is certainly worth remembering during this season of Thanksgiving.

2. The American Revolution and constitutional guarantees of freedom.

God's blessings for the American people had their origins in the creation of the republic. The United States began because of a long revolution. In 1776 it was not always clear that a country without a sovereign could succeed. Nevertheless, the determination of American military men and the help of the French played a decisive part in ensuring God's will for the independence of the American nation.

Yet, independence without a viable government with converse guarantees for the rights of its citizens would have been an unfulfilled experiment. In 1787 the country's survival was ensured by the creation of the American Constitution and a later addition of a Bill of Rights. Steering a middle path between a strong monarchy and radical democracy, the Constitution championed divided government, checks and balances, and a means for the people to make changes in the government when new conditions arose. Furthermore, individual Americans were protected in their desire for free expression, freedom of religion, the right to bear arms, the right to a trial of a jury of their peers, and a host of other guarantees enshrined in the Bill of Rights. When our countrymen thank God for the

privilege of being American, it is usually an aspect of this juncture in American history that they have in mind.

3. The preservation of the American state and the Civil War.

The American experiment and God's plans for the American nation could have been disrupted by the potential division of the country through the civil conflict of the early 1860s. Divided by lifestyle, economics, differing views of the role of government and the institution of slavery, the United States endured a brutal four-year war that took more than 600,000 lives. Abraham Lincoln's vision to eradicate a "house divided" by slavery was ultimately upheld by the North's victory in the Civil War. Although my own ancestors in the border state of Kentucky were generally pro-Confederate, and I was named for one of Lincoln's political opponents, even we Southerners recognize that the U.S. could not have been the "city on the hill" for the rest of the world without ending the institution of slavery and remaining a united entity.

The upgrade in industrial expansion in the 19th century, continued westward expansion, and the growing respect for the U.S. in world diplomatic circles would not have been accomplished without the Union victory in the Civil War.

4. The defeat of the Axis powers in World War II.

In the early 1940s 14 million men and 2 million women served in the American armed forces and thwarted the attempt by the Axis powers to impose their ideology on the rest of the world. Strongly supported by the American people at home, American military personnel carried out the Lord's will to defeat Hitler, Mussolini and their Japanese allies. The hard-pressed Allies would not have been able to defeat the Axis powers without the immense contribution of American military personnel and the incredible output of American industrial strength. Even Hitler was stunned by the monthly reports of tanks, planes, ships and artillery rolling off American assembly lines.

Something should be said here for the "greatest generation" that contributed to the defeat of the Axis powers. The young American men and women who had accomplished this feat had not enjoyed all of America's promise and benefits. They were a generation that grew up during the Great Depression. They only knew hard times, and the America of prosperity had not been their experience. Conversely, they still loved their country, and they carried with them a sense of duty that was rooted in the values of the religious dissenters who came to these shores in the 17th and 18th centuries. Furthermore, their sense of duty did not end in 1945. For the next 40 years their sense of service was

destined to produce yet another important juncture in American history for which we are thankful. The U.S. victory in the Second World War would engender additional blessings for the American people.

5. The great economic expansion of the late 20th century.

The "greatest generation" in 1945 had only known depression and war, but that soon changed. Beginning in the 1940s they married and had children (the "baby boom"); found good-paying jobs in industry, commerce and service sectors of the economy; pioneered the move to the rapidly growing suburban ring around our big cities; and provided the tax revenues to win the Cold War and fund America's growing welfare state. Successive generations of Americans also enjoyed the postwar prosperity established by the "greatest generation."

The economic expansion of the latter half of the 20th century was remarkable and unprecedented. By the early 21st century, the U.S. would produce an \$11 trillion dollar economy -- almost three times that of its nearest rival -- China. This entailed the greatest economic expansion in world history. The Almighty allowed Americans to experience His beneficence after years of depression and war. This economic expansion certainly experienced fluctuations in the 20th century, and yes, a dark underside always existed (wealth disparities, the genesis of a welfare state that looked unsustainable, a growing dependence on credit, a changing world economy by the late 20th century, etc.). But by any standard, Americans were greatly blessed in the latter half of the 20th century.

For those adult Americans today with full-time jobs, some features of the great economic expansion still continue. Even in the troubled economy of the early 21st century, most Americans enjoy a lifestyle that is still desired by most of the world's people. Our sense of gratitude to the Almighty for our relative prosperity should exist alongside our obligation to help other less fortunate peoples.

All in all, we Americans have much for which to be thankful, and we should be reminded of how the Lord blessed our nation at various points in our history. We pray that on this Thanksgiving, the blessings of God will continue.

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