The True Story of Thanksgiving

This article (which is an edited transcript from a radio show) is from the "Edifying the Body" section of the Church of God Big Sandy's website (churchofgodbigsandy.com). It was posted for the weekend of November 28, 2026. (Mr. Limbaugh had an annual November tradition to read from his book titled *The True Story of Thanksgiving* that was written in 1993. Mr. Limbaugh died on Feb. 17, 2021.)

By Rush Limbaugh

PALM BEACH, Florida–*The True Story of Thanksgiving* is a tradition on this program. Through the years, I have read from my first book (*The Way Things Ought to Be – Chapter 6: The True Story of Thanksgiving* was written in 1993). Now, there is another book (*Rush Revere and the Brave Pilgrims* is the first book of a children's series) written to help young people get the true stories of America's founding – because so little of America's history is actually correctly taught.

Here's the version you were probably taught: After the Pilgrims arrived across the Atlantic Ocean, the Indians saved them. So, the story of Thanksgiving that is taught is basically how without the Native Americans there wouldn't be a country because the Pilgrims would have died.

That's not at all what happened. It's not even close to what happened, which is why I decided to write about it.

In the children's book version, *Rush Revere and the Brave Pilgrims,* I went into a little bit of detail about the Native Americans, who helped the arriving Pilgrims – particularly a young native by the name of Squanto.

- But the Real Story of Thanksgiving (going back to the very first early days of the Pilgrims arriving at Plymouth Rock) is that socialism failed.

- The story of the Pilgrims begins in the early part of the seventeenth century. The Church of England under King James I was persecuting anyone and everyone who did not recognize the church's absolute civil and spiritual authority – actually, the state.

- Those who challenged ecclesiastical authority and those who believed strongly in freedom of worship were hunted down. This is in England in the 1600s. They were hunted down and imprisoned and sometimes executed for their beliefs.

- So, a group of separatists (people who didn't want any part of this) first fled to Holland. They established a community. They were there for 11 years.

- After 11 years, about 40 of these separatists agreed to make a perilous journey to the New World. They had heard about it. Some new exciting place that hadn't been developed. They knew they would face hardship – hardship like you and I don't know. We don't know the hardship these people endured. We can't. We are way too advanced now. People who lived in the 1600s would not believe life today. Try to explain flight, jet travel. They wouldn't understand it.

- They knew they would be facing hardship. But paramount importance to them was living freely and worshiping God according to the dictates of their own consciences, their own beliefs. That's what they were denied the freedom to do in England.

- On August 1, 1620, the Mayflower set sail.

- There was a total of 102 passengers, including 40 of these separatists – the Pilgrims. There were just 40 of them.

- They were led by a man named William Bradford.

- The Mayflower was not much bigger than a 50-foot boat (with 102 people on it).

On the journey, Bradford set up an agreement (the Mayflower Compact) that established just and equal laws for all 40 members of the Pilgrim community – irrespective of their religious beliefs. It didn't matter what their religious beliefs were. These were the laws they were all agreeing to live by.

Where did the Mayflower Compact come from? The Mayflower Compact derived from the Bible. The Pilgrims were a people completely steeped in the lessons of the Bible (Old and New Testaments). They were devoutly religious people. They looked to the ancient Israelites for much of their example. And, because of the Biblical precedents set forth in Scripture and their faith in God, they never doubted that they would get to the new world. They never doubted that their experiment would work.

- The journey was long.
- It was arduous.
- It was dangerous.

And when the Pilgrims finally landed in New England in November, they found (according to William Bradford's detailed journal) a cold, barren, desolate wilderness. Imagine New England as it exists today as nothing but rocks, forest, undeveloped nature in November and getting colder.

- There were no friends to greet them.
- There was no shelter of any kind.
- It was desolate.
- There were no houses, hotels, or inns.
- This was real hardship.

The sacrifice that they had made for the freedom to worship was just beginning.

Remember, they arrived in November. During that first winter, half of them (including William Bradford's own wife) died of starvation, of sickness, exposure to the elements.

It was an act of survival that you and I cannot possibly relate to or understand. American Special Forces can understand. Military people who've been trained can understand what the Pilgrims dealt with. You and I can't. We've never done anything like that first winter in the New World. They survived it.

Spring finally came. They did meet the Indians (the Native Americans who were there), who did help them in planting corn and fishing for cod. They showed them where the beavers were so the beavers could be skinned for coats, other things. (Animal rights people are not going to like some of this story, but it happened.)

But even at this, even with this degree of assistance from the Indians (the Native Americans), there wasn't any prosperity yet. They had the Mayflower Compact. They had these laws they were living by, and there was no prosperity. And I wonder why.

Now, this is important to understand here, folks, because this is where modern American history lessons end – the stories of the Indians teaching the Pilgrims how to eat, how to fish, and how to skin beavers ends.

The feel-good story (of the Indians helping the Pilgrims) doesn't even get close to the true story.

- Thanksgiving is actually explained in some textbooks as a holiday for which the Pilgrims gave thanks to the Indians for saving their lives. (Every good deed by the Indians was helpful.)

- But Thanksgiving was a devout expression of gratitude by the Pilgrims to God for their survival.

Now, here's the part that has been omitted.

The Pilgrims had merchant sponsors in London and in Holland (because they didn't have the money to do this trip on their own). The merchant sponsors demanded that everything that the Pilgrims produced in the New World would go into a common store (a single bank, if you will). And that each member of the Pilgrim community was entitled to one share. So, everybody had an equal share of whatever was in that bank.

All of the land they cleared and all of the houses they built belonged to that bank (to the community as well). And they were going to distribute it equally, because they were going to be fair. All of the land that they cleared and houses they built belonged to everybody.

- Belonged to the community.
- Belonged to the bank, belonged to the common store.
- Nobody owned anything.
- They just had an equal share in it.
- It was a commune.

Giving everybody a single share of stock in the common store (in the common bank) was not working. This was costly and destructive. It was collectivism. It was socialism. That first winter had taken a lot of lives. The manpower was greatly reduced. So, William Bradford (the governor of the Pilgrim community) decided to take bold action.

Collectivism. It was as costly and destructive to the Pilgrims as it is and has been to anybody who has ever tried it. So, Bradford decided to scrub it. He threw it out.

- He assigned a plot of land to each family.
- The land was now owned by the individual – not by the bank (the common store).
- They could work it, manage it however they wanted to.
- If they just wanted to sit on it, they could.
- If they wanted to grow corn (or whatever on it), they could
- If they wanted to develop it, they could.
- If they wanted to build on it, they could do that.
- If they wanted to turn it into a quasi-business, they could do whatever they wanted.
- He turned loose the power of the capitalist marketplace.

Long before Karl Marx was even born, the Pilgrims had discovered and experimented with what could only be described as socialism. And they found that it didn't work. Now, it wasn't called that then. But that's exactly what it was.

Everybody was given an equal share. You know what happened? Nobody did anything. There was no incentive. Nothing worked. Nothing happened.

What Bradford and his community found was that the most creative and industrious people had no incentive to work any harder than anyone else, unless they could utilize the power of personal motivation! But while most of the rest of the world has been experimenting with socialism for well over a hundred years – trying to refine it, perfect it, and re-invent it – the Pilgrims decided early on to scrap it permanently.

What Bradford wrote about this social experiment should be in every schoolchild's history lesson. If it were taught, we might prevent much needless suffering – if the true story of Thanksgiving had been taught for years and years and years.

So, William Bradford, after putting everybody in a common store (the Mayflower Compact), it didn't work. There was no prosperity. There was no creativity because there was no incentive.

Here's what Bradford wrote about the failure: "For this community (so far as it was) was found to breed much confusion and discontent. This community was found to breed much confusion and discontent and retard much employment that would have been to their benefit and comfort."

In other words, nobody worked. The way they set it up, killed and discouraged work. There was no need.

Bradford wrote: "For young men that were most able and fit for labor and service sat around and did nothing. They should spend their time and strength to work for other men's wives and children without being paid for it? Why should they do that?"

So, they didn't. That was thought to be injustice.

The Pilgrims found that people could not be expected to do their best work without some incentive. So, what did Bradford's community try next?

- They unharnessed the power of good old free enterprise.
- They invoked capitalism – the principle of private property.
- Every family was assigned its own plot of land.
- Each family could do with it whatever they wanted to do.

Bradford wrote: "This had very good success for it made all hands industrious, so as much more corn was planted than otherwise would have been."

So when profit was introduced (when the opportunity to prosper was introduced), it went gangbuster. That, my friends, is the essence of the True Story of Thanksgiving.

Now, this is where it gets really good, folks, if you're laboring under the misconception that I was, as I was taught in school.

The Pilgrims established a commune, essentially. Forerunner of the communes we saw in the sixties and seventies out in California. They had their own organic vegetables, by the way. (The Pilgrims, forerunners of organic vegetables. What else could there be? There was no such thing as processed anything back then.)

- It was not the Indians that brought them to prosperity. It's not said to insult anybody.
- The Indians assisted in their arrival undeniable.
- But what led to prosperity for these original settlers was the common store failed.
- Socialism didn't work.
- It's when they introduced what turns out to be capitalism.

They didn't have the name for it, but when they turned loose individual incentive – keep what you produce, sell what you don't need – it went crazy.

This is not something they were taught – it was self-experience. It was not the Indians.

None of this is said to put anybody down. Don't misunderstand.

The Indians did a lot of things that helped them, which I'll get to in just a second, but it was their (the Pilgrims') own industriousness.

They set up trading posts and exchanged goods with the Indians. They sold stuff to them, and those profits allowed them to pay off their debts to the merchants (their sponsors in London and in Holland), and you know what?

The success of that colony (after they had abandoned socialism and tried what was essentially capitalism) spread throughout the Old World of this massive amount of prosperity that was there for the taking in the New World.

And guess what happened? The New World was flooded with new arrivals.

The success and prosperity of the Plymouth settlement attracted more Europeans and began what came to be known as the "Great Puritan Migration."

And all it took was prosperity and the word spreading across the Atlantic Ocean of how there was prosperity and it was there for the taking. All you had to do was get there and give it a shot.

The lesson is – The True Story of Thanksgiving is – that William Bradford and his Pilgrim community were thanking God for the blessings on their community after the first miserable winter of a documented failure brought on by their attempt at fairness and equality, which was socialism.

It didn't work.

Only when they abandoned it, did it work – and I need to say it again, because I don't want people to misunderstand ang get noses out of joint. The Native Americans (the indigenous people) were of considerable assistance. They were friendly when the Pilgrims arrived. But they had little, if anything, to do with the prosperity that occurred.

Because that was the result of Bradford and the Pilgrim leadership deciding to change their structure (the Mayflower Compact). Now, Indians assisted, naturally. I can't deny it. I mean, they taught them how to fish and this kind of thing that they didn't know how to do, and that led them to be productive, undeniably so.

But it was the Pilgrim community itself which experienced this massive prosperity. The word of which spread all the way back to the Old World – Europe across the Atlantic Ocean.

Now, I mentioned earlier that *The Federalist* has a story on all this, and in it they describe much of what we did in the second book that dealt with this, the children's book, *Rush Revere and the Brave Pilgrims.* That book goes into great detail about how the Indians did provide assistance and what kind of assistance it was, how valuable it was and how crucial it was.

In *Rush Revere and the Brave Pilgrims,* we focus on a Native American by the name of Squanto. Now, as I told you: During the first winter of 1620, only 44 out of the original 102 Pilgrims survived. They had an elected governor by the name of John Carver. It was an Indian by the name of Squanto who came to their rescue. (This is, as I say, explored in great detail in *Rush Revere and the Brave Pilgrims*).

Squanto was no ordinary native. Early settlers in 1610 captured him and sold him into slavery. A group of Catholic friars freed him and brought him to England, where he learned to speak English. In 1618, serving as an interpreter on an English ship, he was brought back to the New World.

It was Squanto, who is a famous Native American in his own right in the Pilgrim story. It was Squanto who taught the Pilgrims how to plant and fish and how to skin beavers. It was Squanto who brokered a peace treaty between the Pilgrims and other Indian tribes.

There was more than one tribe of Indians. It was not copacetic. It was not friendly and at one with nature. It was not anything like the multiculturalists would have you believe. There were squabbles. There were power struggles. Turf battles. It was human.

Everybody (including the Indians and the Pilgrims) was scrambling for power, for survival. Survivability was the name of the game. And it was not guaranteed.

- Many of the Pilgrims literally believed that God had sent Squanto to save them. And the Pilgrims believed that without Squanto they never would have survived or thrived.

- And they experienced a tremendous harvest in 1621. That's the big gathering which is taught in the history books – the native Indians and the Pilgrims joined together for a huge feast, which is the foundational story of the Thanksgiving story that's taught in public schools. (It did happen, but it's so much more than that.)

And I love taking the opportunity every year to explain the truth. This is so great that the story is spreading.

The Federalist said: "One of the most important legacies of early settlers is that they experimented with socialism in the 1620s, and it did not work. Private property rights and personal responsibility (two pillars of a free market economy) saved the Plymouth colony from extinction and laid the economic foundation for a free and prosperous nation that we all enjoy today."

And that is exactly right. And that is The True Story of Thanksgiving. And that has been what should have been shared with you every Thanksgiving all these years.