

Presidents’ Day: The Commemoration of What?

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“Nature yields nothing without ceremony,” said Ernst Cassirer. A society’s deepest layers are revealed by rituals, performed in times and places invested with meaning. But when these meanings are lost, what happens to the ceremonies? As the national past, in particular, loses significance, how are its great holidays, its ceremonies of memory, transformed? A consideration of America’s Presidents’ Day helps to refine the models we use to answer these questions.

Two sociological models orient the analysis of national holidays. The “conflict model” ties ritual observance to an elite’s quest to maintain power; it construes holidays as social control devices, inducing individuals to transfer emotional attachment from local groups, communities, and regions to the state and its demands for obedience and sacrifice. The “consensus model,” on the other hand, presumes that elites identify with the masses and share their values. Emile Durkheim’s classic statement of this view holds that

There can be no society which does not feel the need of upholding and reaffirming at regular intervals the collective sentiments and the collective ideas which make its unity and personality. Now this moral remaking cannot be achieved except by the means of reunions, assemblies and meetings, where the individuals, being closely united to one another, reaffirm in common their common sentiments...

Many holidays embody both conflict and consensus, but for some, neither model seems to apply. It is questionable whether Presidents’ Day, America’s most peculiar and confusing holiday, upholds collective sentiment of any kind. It is still more doubtful whether its function is really to sustain the hegemony of a dominant class. The case of Presidents’ Day suggests the need for a third model that encompasses the “abortive rituals” that the other two fail to capture.

Abortive rituals are those which have lost their capacity to instruct and to inspire. The adjective “abortive” is synonymous with “fruitless,” “unsuccessful,” “imperfectly formed or developed.” Presidents’ Day is abortive in this respect, but when juxtaposed with other practices, including the establishment of presidential libraries, Presidents’ Day tells a great deal about the presidency’s changing place in American memory and about the erosion of that memory.
Up through World War II, newspaper editors recognized the two major presidential holidays, Washington’s Birthday and Lincoln’s Birthday, by placing their images on their front page and providing articles indicating where business, trade, civic, and religious organizations would meet to celebrate the day. In many communities, the two holidays were occasions for family visits, basketball games, movies, and special community events. In 1932, the *Chicago Tribune* addressed Washington’s relevance with a cartoon, “Inspiration” [Figure 12], representing Uncle Sam and a young man, both with their hats respectfully removed, viewing a painting of George Washington and his men at Valley Forge. The image suggests that the great man’s life was more than just a story to recall; it was a way of experiencing the great trials of the present (in this case, the Depression) in terms of the greater trials of the past.

Picture frame companies commonly offered to cover the local newspaper’s color picture of Washington in glass and insert it into a handsome frame for home display. Decorating one’s home with images of public figures was widespread during and before the 1930s. Print distributors sold many such images. Through these pictures, people drew upon the symbols of their nation, oriented themselves in time, and found meaning and identification. February was the month in which Washington and Lincoln came alive.

Throughout World War II, Washington and Lincoln remained vital frames of reference for interpreting experience. In one of the Office of War Information’s early posters, distributed on Washington’s Birthday, contemporary soldiers in modern battle dress, armed with modern weapons, parade at Valley Forge (the low point of the Revolution) before the ranks of Washington’s bedraggled soldiers [Figure 13]. The scene made sense of early losses in the war by defining them as momentary episodes in a longer, transcendent narrative. The accompanying caption, “Americans will always fight for liberty,” reiterates the point as it emphasizes national continuity. In another illustration, a war bond advertisement, silhouetted profiles of Washington, Lincoln, and Thomas Jefferson are set against a background of bombers flying off on a mission. The title, “From Every Mountain Side Let Freedom Ring,” formulates the mission’s ultimate purpose [Figure 14].

As Washington images keyed a present war to the Revolution, Lincoln images keyed it to the Civil War. In February 1942, nine weeks after Pearl Harbor, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* depicted Lincoln with an encouraging hand on the shoulder of a despondent Uncle Sam, cringing at the latest war news [Figure 15]. War bond promotions made the point even more graphically. The *Inquirer*’s Sunday supplement of February 7, 1943, shows a soldier in battle gear, lying face up, dead. Elevated above the fallen soldier is Daniel Chester French’s statue of Lincoln. Lincoln looks
down upon the soldier, and both are illuminated by the same mysterious light. An excerpt from Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address sets the tone: “That We Here Highly Resolve That These Dead Shall Not Have Died in Vain.”

Valentine’s Day was also celebrated in February during the Depression and the war, but it was modest, with no consumer frenzy. There was
also Negro History Week, but few whites knew anything about it. Today, the pattern has changed: the February 1988 cover of *The New Yorker* shows Washington and Lincoln exchanging Valentine cards, a sign that their commemoration is no longer as important [Figure 16]. In schools, too, Washington and Lincoln occupy a diminished place. Black History Month, successor to Negro History Week, receives as much attention.⁴
Major newspapers often do not mention Washington’s or Lincoln’s birthday.

America’s greatest presidents will be remembered in future decades, but the tone and texture of their remembrance will remain attenuated.
Figure 15. Cartoon from *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, February 12, 1942. Reproduction courtesy of the Abraham Lincoln Museum and Library, Lincoln Memorial University, Harrogate, Tennessee.
The 1968 Uniform Holiday Act reveals the muting of that tone and the vagueness of that texture. It articulates Americans’ diminished belief in Washington and Lincoln’s greatness. What is the Uniform Holiday Act, and how did it originate? Why was it passed in 1968, rather than earlier or later? What has been its impact?

Representative Samuel Stratton of New York had tried throughout the 1960s to create long weekends by having all national holidays, including July 4 and Thanksgiving, fall on a Monday. In 1967, his idea caught on. Congress enthusiastically enacted the Monday holiday bill because it promised (1) to create jobs in the travel industry; (2) to increase local tax revenue through tourism; (3) to cut absenteeism by preventing workers from adding days to midweek holidays; (4) to end costly midweek shutdowns and start-ups for businesses, and (5) to expand the do-it-yourself home repair industry. Scores of organizations supported the bill, including the American Hotel and Motel Association, American Petroleum Institute, National Association of Manufacturers, and the National Retail Federation. No hegemonic force drove this bill; labor unions also favored it, including the AFL-CIO, American Federation of Government Employees, and National Association of Letter Carriers.

Patriotic organizations opposed the bill because they felt moving holidays would diminish their significance. Churches were concerned that it would cut Sunday attendance. The strongest opposition came from those who believed more long weekends would increase the number of automobile accidents. To counter this, Representative Robert McClory ordered a study of five holidays since 1947 that showed lower accident rates on long weekends than on weekdays. Employee preference surveys overwhelmingly preferred long weekends. Paradoxically, Louis Harris’s 1968 survey showed a clear majority opposing a change in the holiday dates.

By mid-1967, there were twelve different holiday bills in Congress, but representatives could not agree on which holidays would be assigned new dates. The tie-up concerned Thanksgiving, July 4, and the transforming of Washington’s Birthday into Presidents’ Day. Once these issues were resolved and a new federal holiday added (Columbus Day, which thirty-four states already celebrated), the Uniform Holiday Bill passed 350–27 in the House and by a voice vote in the Senate.

The original draft of the bill proposed changing Memorial Day, July 4th, Columbus Day, Veterans Day, and Thanksgiving to the nearest Monday; Washington’s Birthday would be replaced by Presidents’ Day. The House rejected changing July 4, Presidents’ Day, and Thanksgiving (because it would interrupt the pre-Christmas retail cycle, which begins on the day after Thanksgiving and runs through the weekend). Congress did change the observance of Washington’s Birthday from February 22 to the
third Monday of the month. Memorial Day, Veterans Day, and Columbus Day became federal holidays observed on Mondays.

The Christian Science Monitor spoke for a majority of Americans when it said that date-switching weakens the holidays’ “intrinsic meaning.” The bill prevailed, however, and The Uniform Holiday Act, so-named in the hope that the states would follow the federal example, was signed into law by Lyndon Johnson on June 28, 1968, and went into effect in 1971.

In the bicentennial year 1976, journalist Sean O’Gara wrote about George Washington’s diminished place in the new holiday calendar: “This subtle disparaging of Washington as the father figure supreme of our country . . . is a blatant indication that the actions of our forefathers and the lessons of the past are insignificant in today’s America.” O’Gara recalled bitterly,

In 1942, when our nation was endangered, we reached down into our well of national heroes and resurrected them selfishly and possessively, because we needed them, and we used them shamelessly to buoy our hopes in that time of travail; now, with danger apparently passed, we are discarding them by relegating them to secondary memory.

The bill’s supporters, however, denied that it denigrated America’s heroes. After all, holiday dates were largely arbitrary. On the Julian calendar in use in 1732, Washington’s birthday was February 11 (rather than February 22, when the old holiday was observed); Memorial Day had no historical link with its day of observance; Veterans Day covered all wars and need not be coupled with the November 11 World War I Armistice. Several days elapsed before all delegates signed the Declaration of Independence, so there was no reason to be sentimental about July Fourth. The historical basis for a Thursday Thanksgiving was equally flimsy.

Supporters argued that it “is not the precise calendar date, but rather that we should have adequate time and opportunity to pause and recall the life and works of our first president.” But if Monday holidays were advantageous, then why should not Christmas also be made a Monday holiday? Some holidays are clearly too solemn to be changed, despite their arbitrariness. Those suspicious of the reformers asked why the supposed benefit of Monday holidays was not recognized until the late 1960s? Convenience has a price; one put up with the inconvenience of midweek holidays because of the moral cost of doing otherwise. Prior to 1950, Congress never thought of changing Washington’s Birthday. Tampering with the date disturbs something vital, located in a past to which all Americans are connected and with which all define themselves. Abolishing Washington’s Birthday disorients its remaining celebrants and
mutes the events that made Washington worth remembering in the first place. If the holiday schedule no longer distinguishes Washington from Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, or Benjamin Harrison, then it is a commemoration of everything and nothing. It is precisely this confusion that makes Presidents’ Day symptomatic of our age, in which, according to postmodernist Frederic Jameson, fragmentation, confusion, and a sense of being lost are the defining pathologies.\textsuperscript{17}

A lack of a clearly articulated meaning of Presidents’ Day is evidence of this confusion.\textsuperscript{18} Between June 1968 and February 1971, government agencies printed new calendars and revised work schedules. Many, but not all, businesses did the same; the Uniform Holiday Act is a federal law, applying only to federal and District of Columbia employees. States adjusted their holiday calendars to the federal system, but they selected from the federal menu as they saw fit. Many states have adopted it (twenty-three by 2004). When it was first debated in Congress, however, no one was certain what “Presidents’ Day” even referred to. Some believed it was a tribute to all presidents; others assumed that it merged Lincoln’s and Washington’s Birthday, a view reinforced by the choice of the third rather than fourth Monday in February, which guarantees that the holiday would never fall on Lincoln’s or Washington’s original birth date. President Nixon thought he settled the matter in 1971, with an executive order enacting the 1968 congressional legislation. The Uniform Holiday legislation plainly recognizes George Washington’s Birthday, not Presidents’ Day.

However, the Uniform Holiday Act continues to mean different things in different regions and to different groups within each state. In the West (where the Revolutionary War and the Civil War are less significant for regional identity), Presidents’ Day is recognized by eleven out of thirteen states; only three out of seventeen East Coast states do so. Of nine former Confederate and Southern-border states, only three recognize Presidents’ Day. Southern representatives cast twenty-three of the twenty-seven votes opposing the bill, the other four were cast by Midwestern Republicans.

There is a great deal of inconsistency. Illinois observes Lincoln’s and Washington’s Birthday in addition to Presidents’ Day. Arizona names the third Monday of February “Lincoln/Washington/Presidents’ Day”. Texas officially observes Presidents’ Day, but does so “in honor of George Washington.” California observes Presidents’ Day and, in alternate years, Abraham Lincoln’s Birthday. There are other ambiguities. The United States Postal Service officially declares Washington’s Birthday as its employee holiday but refers to it locally as Presidents’ Day. In many states, including those which do not officially recognize Presidents’ Day, banks
close on what they recognize as Presidents’ Day. National and local news media often follow their lead. Thus, even in states where Presidents’ Day is not recognized, most residents probably believe they observe it.

Washington’s Birthday (the federal holiday) is no less ambiguous on state calendars. The original holiday was February 22, but Georgia observes it on December 27 in order to give its employees more days off at Christmas. In New York, not all government units get the day off. In New Jersey, Washington is honored every other year. In Alabama, his birthday is shared with Thomas Jefferson; in Arkansas, with civil rights activist Daisy Bates. Utah observes Washington-Lincoln Day. Like Presidents’ Day, Washington’s Birthday has become elastic in meaning.

The public quickly became accustomed to the long Presidents’ Day weekend. But opponents have sought to repeal the law since the 1970s. President Gerald Ford restored Veterans’ Day to its original date. Numerous legislative attempts have been made to restore Washington’s Birthday, too.\textsuperscript{19}

A general cultural erosion sustains Presidents’ Day, however. There is still an American community of memory, but it is an abstraction. This community celebrates itself by listing dates to be observed, but not embraced. These abortive holidays stand for little and inspire little. In an essay from 2001, entitled “Shrinking Lincoln,” Paul Greenberg notes,

Presidents’ Day. That’s what happens to the mythic after it has been safely shrunk and bubble-wrapped. If you do manage to unwrap it, there’s nothing inside. . . . Each generation makes its own accounting with the past; ours just tends to be blank at the moment.\textsuperscript{20}

But it is a mistake to blame the Uniform Holiday Act for this blankness. The act was a symptom of a legacy whose clarity had already diminished. By 1968, the holidays were largely empty.

Why did Presidents’ Day appear when it did? Why was it conceived in 1959, put forward in Congress during the early 1960s, then debated and passed in 1968? Why not during the 1930s or the 1970s? Clearly, Presidents’ Day could not replace Washington’s Birthday until the latter had already lost most of its significance, which happened as the relevance of all presidents eroded. Presidents’ Day is thus part of the diminution of the “recommitment holidays” that once extolled the nation’s heroes. Holidays like July Fourth and Memorial Day, whose purpose is to preserve shared beliefs, have declined as the relevance of “tension management” holidays like New Year’s Day, Halloween, and Valentine’s Day has grown.\textsuperscript{21} Practices that once linked an individual to the nation have atrophied, and holidays of recommitment are no longer experienced as
such. Once observed with ritual and enthusiasm, they are now merely rest days.

Since World War II, the United States has faced many conflicts, but none has produced a comparable sense of mission. Diminution of national purpose, however, should not be mistaken for a disappearance of nationalist sentiment. Patriotic displays are ubiquitous. Yet recent manifestations of nationalism are no longer strongly tied to past events. True, there was talk of Pearl Harbor after 9/11, and analogies were drawn between Saddam Hussein and Hitler, but few took them literally. Today, nationalism is largely present-oriented; it has little need for the past.

The declining prestige of traditional hero-presidents is a primary precondition of Presidents' Day. It is an aspect of American nationalism’s deteriorating time frame. From 1956 to 1999, the popularity of Lincoln, Roosevelt, Washington, and Eisenhower fell sharply (see Appendix). Recent presidents, mainly Reagan and Clinton, absorbed most of this lost popularity. The greatest change occurred between 1956 and 1975, corresponding with the genesis of the Uniform Holiday Act. The year the law was signed (1968) was the peak of American civil unrest and criticism of American institutions. Annual citation counts in newspapers and the Congressional Record are not as direct a measure of presidential prestige as polls, but they locate the context of its decline more precisely. In the 1960s, citations of both Washington and Lincoln abruptly fell. Furthermore, visits to sites associated with Washington and Lincoln leveled off after the 1960s, even as the population grew enormously. Textbook representations of the presidents are yet another measure of the changing public view. One study found that, whereas most presidents had an unambiguously positive rating in the 1940s and 1950s, this rating fell sharply by the 1980s. George Washington’s rating declined the most.23

Several satiric pictorial representations also furnish insight into our generation’s receptivity to the emptiness of Presidents’ Day. After Congress abolished the traditional presidential holidays, popular art played much more freely with presidential images. A 1994 cover of Scientific American is typical [Figure 17]. Abraham Lincoln walks arm in arm with Marilyn Monroe. The designer, modifying old photographs to illustrate the power of digital forgery, makes Lincoln appear prudish and stuffy beside the vivacious Marilyn. Numerous other pop-culture advertisements pun on Lincoln and Washington to promote trashy movies for teens (“four score and seven beers ago . . .”) and other commercial kitsch. Such images are a far cry from the inspirational references of the 1930s and 1940s. Today, great presidents are often merely a vehicle for commercial promotions or a vulgar glorification of materialism and permissiveness, which goes hand in hand with the abortiveness of Presidents’ Day.
Early twentieth-century Americans may have imagined Washington and Lincoln as men more perfect than they were and revered them more than they deserved. In contrast, so many alternative frameworks exist today that one can no longer believe in an absolute truth. Late twentieth-century man, “The Last Man,” as Francis Fukuyama calls him, “knows better than to risk his life for a cause, because he recognizes that history was full of pointless battles in which men fought over whether they should be Christian or Muslim, Protestant or Catholic, German or French.” How, then, can he take seriously the commemoration of these events? The contemporaneity of the past has been lost, and the new commemorative rituals are the last thing we can expect to restore it. Holidays no longer mediate present and past, and their mediating func-

Figure 17. Front cover, Scientific American, February 1994. Courtesy of Jack Harris.
tion has not been replaced. Americans have lost sight of themselves as historical beings; they forget they have inherited, not created, the most valuable of their possessions. Postmodern America’s historical knowledge grows with its archives, but its continuity with the past declines.

This loss of historical continuity is evident in the triviality and confusion of Presidents’ Day. Gustav Mahler once said, “History must preserve the fire, not the ashes, of the past.” If history is fire, then Presidents’ Day is cold rain. Those earlier generations of Americans looked up to are now smaller men. Paradoxically, they are now better known. Today, anyone can access thousands of history web sites by computer. No previous generation has enjoyed such effortless access to so much information, yet no generation has identified with the past less closely.

For Freud, identification is the expression of an emotional tie with another person. The sociologist Talcott Parsons later defined it as “the process by which a person comes to be inducted . . . into a collectivity . . . in accord with [its] pattern of values.” Identification with the past differs from mere knowledge; it implies an internalization of tradition in the individual’s moral consciousness. Commemorative events, like holidays, lend themselves to identification more readily than does history. But such events, according to Pierre Nora, are screens hiding the fact that archives alone preserve the past: the “new vocation is to record,” not to celebrate; to delegate to the archive, not the holiday, the responsibility of remembering. Yet archives cannot do everything. They are storehouses for selected information, but they cannot create an emotional attachment to that information. Such is the function of commemoration.

Presidents’ Day makes more sense as an “abortive commemoration” than as a product of conflict or consensus. Whether holidays are tools for the control of the masses by the elite, or instead an expression of their unity, their impact—a moral transformation—cannot be accomplished, as Durkheim says, “except by means of reunions, assemblies, and meetings” which reaffirm what participants have in common. Presidents’ Day inspires few such reunions, assemblies, and meetings. Indeed, many Americans are unaware of the holiday until they find their bank closed or mail undelivered. Holidays cannot become “cultural performances” or “public events” unless people somehow participate. To say that a holiday is alive is to say that it transforms and elevates its participants and strengthens them morally and socially. Not until they can relate this day to their own lives and interests will it make sense to celebrate it. Presidents’ Day is not the only holiday that now fails to put individuals in touch with their national traditions. Whether we can expect, as Durkheim did, that warmer, effervescent holidays will return in the future is a question that time will answer.
Appendix

Percentage of Respondents Designating Selected Presidents as “One of America’s Three Greatest Presidents”*

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Notes

6. Discussion of the Uniform Holiday Act is found in the *Congressional Record* from January 1967 through June 1968. More discussion followed, especially after it took effect in 1971.
8. Ibid., April 3, 1968, 8923.
9. At the same time, Monday holidays were being considered in eight different states.
13. Ibid., July 1, 1968, 19438.
15. The theme of the arbitrariness of dates appears repeatedly. For one of the earlier discussions, see *Congressional Record*, Appendix, February 20, 1967, A739.
18 *Chase’s Calendar of Events*, the authority on American holidays, defines Presidents’ Day thus:

Presidents’ Day observes the birthdays of George Washington (February 22) and Abraham Lincoln (February 12). With the adoption of the Monday Holiday Law . . some of the specific significance of the event was lost and added impetus was given to the popular description of that holiday as Presidents’ Day. Present usage often regards Presidents’ Day as a day to honor all former presidents of the United States, although the federal holiday is still Washington’s Birthday.

This confusing entry assigns two meanings to the day. Washington’s Birthday is observed as Presidents’ Day, which honors all presidents. On the other hand, Presidents’ Day honors Washington and Lincoln. See *Chase’s Calendar of Events*, 2003 (Chicago, 2003), 138.


23 Lerner, Nagai, and Rothman, *Molding the Good Citizen*, 145–9. The downgrading of presidents largely reflects the way their policies affected women, African Americans, and other minorities. Lincoln’s positive textbook rating through the 1980s is consistent with this bias.


