

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

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PRESENTS

WORDS ^{on} PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

November

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THE HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL TURKEY PARDONING CEREMONY

BY DAN RUBIN

Tomorrow, 45 million turkeys will make the ultimate sacrifice for America's feast. But not this one. I'm granting this turkey a permanent reprieve. After many years in the coop, he's on his way to a farm in Virginia to bask in the sun, collect his hard-earned pension, and enjoy his golden years. And that's one less turkey in Washington. (*Laughter*) Happy Thanksgiving. (*Applause*)

—President William Jefferson Clinton,
National Turkey Pardoning Ceremony, The Rose Garden,
November 26, 1997

Major newspapers have reported for years that the tradition of pardoning turkeys began with President Truman in 1947. This is inaccurate. The staff at the Harry S. Truman Library & Museum can find “no documents, speeches, newspaper clippings, photographs, or other contemporary records in [their] holdings which refer to Truman pardoning a turkey that he received as a gift in 1947, or at any other time during his presidency.” The library does



President Harry S. Truman receiving a Thanksgiving turkey from members of the Poultry and Egg National Board and other representatives of the turkey industry, outside the White House, November 16, 1949 (Harry S. Truman Library & Museum)

acknowledge that “various groups presented turkeys to President Truman, often during the Christmas season instead of at Thanksgiving,” and, though *November's* fictional National Association of Turkey and Turkey By-Products Manufacturers was obviously not one of these groups, the National Turkey Federation and the Poultry and Egg National Board were the organizations most frequently involved. The library staff admits, however, that Truman made clear that “the turkeys he received were destined for the family dinner table.” Archivist Tammy Kelly goes



President Richard M. Nixon at Turkey presentation, November 18, 1969 (photo by Oliver F. Atkins, White House Photo Office Collection / Richard Nixon Library / National Archives at College Park)

so far as to suggest, “The Trumans were not animal people.”

Likewise, the turkeys seen in photo ops with presidents Dwight Eisenhower, Gerald Ford, and Richard Nixon could also expect a culinary fate. Nixon once declared, “I can’t use this bird. Look at those eyes,” but there is no mention that the bird was spared. President Carter, says archivist Dave Stanhope, “never did any of the trimmings around Thanksgiving,” but in 1977 Vice President Mondale

“accepted a live 51-pound Thanksgiving turkey . . . destined for the White House dinner table,” according to the *New York Times*.

During the National Turkey Pardoning Ceremony of 1997, after continuing the erroneous myth that Truman participated in this charitable tradition, President Clinton told an alternate origin story, that of Tad Lincoln and his pet turkey, Jack:

President Truman was the first president to pardon a turkey. But in some ways, the tradition actually began 83 years earlier when President Lincoln received a turkey for Christmas holiday. His son, Tad, grew so attached to the turkey that he named him “Jack,” and President Lincoln had no choice but to give Jack the full run of the White House.

Jack was here, actually, for some monumental events. On Election Day in 1864, when Mr. Lincoln was running for reelection, a special polling place was actually set up right here on the grounds of the White House so that the soldiers could vote. Well, Jack the turkey actually strutted in front of some of the would-be voters and broke in line. Lincoln asked his son, “Why is your turkey at the polls? Does he vote?” Without hesitation, Tad said, “He’s not old enough yet.”

George W. Bush retold this story at the ceremony of 2001. It may be true or it may be folklore, but even if he did succumb to the pleas of his son, Lincoln did not pardon Jack the turkey in his official capacity as president.

Like Lincoln, President Kennedy casually spared a 55-pound tom turkey on November 19, 1963, just days before his own assassination. The bird had been given to the president with a sign around its neck that read, “Good Eatin’ Mr. President.” Kennedy saw the turkey and said, “We’ll just let this one grow. It’s our Thanksgiving present to him,” which reporters cleverly translated into an official presidential “pardon.” After Kennedy suggested that he might keep the bird, the turkey was apparently returned to its farm home to serve as a stud.

The first president to use the word “pardon” in regard to a gifted turkey was Ronald Reagan in 1987, but the sincerity of this comment is questionable, as it was primarily used to deflect queries about the Iran-Contra affair and the potential pardoning of Lt. Col. Oliver North and former National Security Adviser John Poindexter:



TOP President John F. Kennedy at turkey presentation, 1963 (John F. Kennedy Presidential Library & Museum)



BOTTOM President Gerald R. Ford at turkey presentation, 1975 (Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library & Museum)

REPORTER: What’s going to happen to that turkey?

DIRECTOR OF PUBLIC RELATIONS MS. RANGE: He’s going to a pet farm.

REPORTER: Mr. President, are you going to pardon North and . . . ?

PRESIDENT REAGAN: So, you can say happy Thanksgiving right in front of him, and it doesn’t matter. (*Laughter*)

REPORTER: Mr. President, are you going to pardon North and Poindexter, sir?

PRESIDENT REAGAN: If they’d given me a different answer on Charlie [the turkey] and his future, I would have pardoned him. (*Laughter*)



TOP President Ronald Reagan at turkey presentation, 1984 (Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum)

BOTTOM President George H. W. Bush at the first official National Turkey Pardoning Ceremony, 1989 (George H. W. Bush Presidential Library & Museum)



It would seem that Charlie was heading to the petting zoo regardless of Reagan's off-the-cuff pardon. This is because, like many other photogenic turkeys, Charlie was too big for the oven. Bob Johnson, owner of Pet Farm Park in Virginia, where Charlie was intended to enjoy his remaining postpardon days, recalls that, when he received Charlie, the bird was so fat he couldn't even walk. Charlie died before Christmas.

The turkeys presented at the White House are always males, always of breeding age (six to twelve months), and always weigh an average of 50 pounds, whereas birds for consumption are slaughtered at about four months and 30 pounds. According to Julie DeYoung, the spokesperson of the National Turkey Federation, "I don't think anybody says this out loud, but we joke about how each year's chairman tries to top

the previous year's chairman by bringing a bigger and bigger turkey, much older than the turkey you would buy in the store to eat and the turkey that is served."

Of course, just because they are too big to end up on a Thanksgiving table does not mean all large turkeys live out their lives in peace at Johnson's Pet Farm Park. After they fulfill their duties as breeders, birds of this size, DeYoung explains, "are processed for what are called canner packs—that is, they are going into soups or stews, things that are already cooked where the tenderness of the meat isn't quite as important. And also . . . pet food and other by-products, animal feed."

It is from this undignified end that George H. W. Bush saved a turkey he christened "Big and Stupid" in the first National Turkey Pardoning Ceremony in 1989:

Two hundred years ago, George Washington signed the original proclamation for a day of thanksgiving: a day of thanks for the bounty we enjoy and, above all, for the blessings of freedom. . . . And this year, especially, as that yearning for freedom inspires millions around the world, giving thanks for the freedoms we enjoy takes on a special meaning.

That brings me to another traditional moment involving our special guest over here today—the guy in the cage there, who seems understandably nervous. It is my great privilege to receive the traditional Thanksgiving turkey. Millie [Bush's dog] has been put upstairs, looking wistfully out of the window, I'm sure. But let me assure you, and this fine tom turkey, that he will not end up on anyone's dinner table, not this guy—he's granted a presidential pardon as of right now—[he will] live out his days on a children's farm not far from here.

Two turkeys—the National Turkey and the Alternate National Turkey—have received presidential pardons every November since. According to DeYoung, there are two purposes for the pardoning ceremony: “to lead as a kick-off to the Thanksgiving holiday and provide an opportunity for the president to present a holiday message to the nation, and obviously from our perspective it's to raise the visibility of the turkey industry and its contributions to the American economy, to the role that the turkey industry and all the agriculture play in feeding the American public.”

After presumably enjoying their 15 minutes of fame, the pardoned turkeys live out their natural lives—which typically last less than a year for these oversized, illness-prone, commercially raised livestock—in petting zoos or on farms. First, however, they are flown to Disneyland, where they serve as honorary grand marshals in the Thanksgiving Day parade.

SOURCES Associated Press, “Truman's Yule Turkey Is 47-Pound Champion,” *The New York Times*, December 16, 1947; Associated Press, “Kennedy Spares the Life of 55-Pound Gift Turkey,” *The New York Times*, November 20, 1963; Karen Davis, *More Than a Meal: The Turkey in History, Myth, Ritual, and Reality* (Brooklyn, NY: Lantern Books, 2001); Julie DeYoung, “The Truth behind the Pardoning Ceremony,” February 27, 1998; Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum, “Did Truman Pardon a Turkey?” <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/trivia/turkey.htm>; Monica Hesse, “Turkey Pardons: The Stuffing of Historic Legend,” *The Washington Post*, November 21, 2007; Barbara and David P. Mikkelson, “The Ungobbled Gobbler,” <http://www.snopes.com/holidays/thanksgiving/pardon.asp>; “The Annual Pardoning of the Thanksgiving Turkey,” The White House: President George W. Bush, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/holiday/thanksgiving/photoessay/>.