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The Squash that Conquered America

Pumpkin Symbolism in the United States

Pumpkin has always played an important role in American culture. Throughout history, it carried a plethora of meanings and connotations. Since European arrival to the New World, the meaning of the squash changed drastically from a product crucial for survival due to its practical features to the one that carries primarily a symbolic meaning. The shift happened by series of small changes with a significant impact of fall holidays: Thanksgiving and Halloween. Thanks to them, the squash began to be associated not only with the seasonal traditions, but with America itself. The pumpkin constantly appears in cultural texts such as poems and graphics, usually as a symbol of the fall or one of the holidays of that part of the year, although some representations depict it as an emblem of the American nation. Its association with the United States is now recognized across the world. At the same time, pumpkin significance extends and evolves into new forms. In modern America, it is not the pumpkin itself that reminds of the fall, but the spice based on a pumpkin pie. Thus, pumpkin becomes a link in a chain of symbolic references.

Key words: pumpkin, squash, gourd, symbol, Halloween, Thanksgiving

Introduction

Without a doubt, pumpkin is one of the most important products that originated in the New World. Not only was it a crucial component of the Native American cuisine, but it also helped the European settlers to survive in the newly established colonies. Nowadays, pumpkin stands out not only as an element of diet, but principally for its complex role in modern culture.

In contemporary America, pumpkin has a vast array of meanings, which only emphasizes its importance. It is often connected with traditions, both the all-American traditions connected with the colonial era and the traditional lifestyle practiced in rural communities. Cindy Ott, a historian and material culture researcher, argues that 'pumpkins have helped communities both survive economically and hang onto a rural sense of place. It is remarkable to hear festival organizers and farmers talk about the pumpkin as an embodiment of their values and as a tool for community building'

(Ott, *Pumpkin. The Curious…* 166). Festivals celebrating pumpkins are popular in the whole country. However, the nation still associates this particular product primarily with New England, where the American affection for it originated (Stavely and Fitzgerald 1). On the other hand, this type of squash is strongly commercialized and, as an important symbol of the fall, plays a crucial role in seasonal marketing campaigns. Every fall an American consumer can purchase a plethora of pumpkin-flavor or pumpkin-spice products including coffee, sweets, and even bread.

The term 'pumpkin' refers to round, orange squashes, yet has no botanical meaning. Botany differentiates winter and summer squashes. The summer ones are softer while the winter ones have hard skin. Summer squashes include, for instance, zucchini or pattypan. Winter squashes are for example pumpkins, acorns, and cushaws (Missouri Botanical Garden). In this paper, the term 'pumpkin' is used interchangeably with 'squash',' since all pumpkins are members of this wider group.

In order to explain the importance of pumpkin to American identity, this paper examines its cultural history in the United States. Today, this squash is associated with two culturally significant holidays, that is, Halloween and Thanksgiving, state fairs with record-breaking gourds, and idealized visions of the fall. For Americans, pumpkin is more than a fruit, it became a symbol. Some of its meanings might be surprising. For instance, in the first half of the 20th century, pumpkin became one of the patriotic representations of the United States (Ott, "*Object Analysis…*" 12). In order to understand its role, one must comprehend complex factors that led this, initially not really outstanding, gourd to become one of the most important American products.

The first section of the paper presents the history of pumpkin and its importance for the birth of the United States. The second part focuses on its cultural impact and its role in two American holidays: Thanksgiving and Halloween. The third section describes ways in which pumpkin represents the spirit of the United States. The last section combines observations from the papers and presents a concise summation of the role of pumpkin in American culture.

Earliest Usage of Pumpkin: A Historical Perspective

Researchers failed to find a wild progenitor of modern-day orange pumpkin, but what they have discovered are seeds from the Mexican state of Oaxaca. The first traces of pumpkin cultivation dates from 10,000 to 8,000 years ago, which suggests that squashes might have been domesticated before corn or beans. Initially, Native Americans used gourds to store food in and grew squashes for seeds. It took a long time before pumpkins came to be the fleshier and sweeter fruit that is cultivated today (Ott, "*Object Analysis…*" 10-11). The first usage of pumpkin in the contemporary territory of the United States dates back to the pre-Columbian era as well, yet its current symbolic meaning evolved after the European colonization and the birth of American culture. Since pumpkins played an important role in the Native cuisine, their meaning was primarily practical.

Squashes were dried for winter usage. Native Americans would remove and dry the seeds as well as cutting the fruit itself into pieces to be sun-dried. The variety called 'Indian pumpkin' was especially valued since it kept its nutritious value even

after drying; it only needed to be boiled in water to regain its structure and taste (Niethammer 149-150: 152). With the development of agriculture, beans and corn became other important elements of the Native American cuisine. These three plants were frequently cultivated together in an agricultural method called 'three sisters'' in which each plant contributes and helps the other two grow. Corn offers the beans support. Beans bring nitrogen to the soil while its tangle keeps the plants together. Vines and large leaves of squash protect the other two from raccoons, pests, and the sun (Bockmann 2020). All this consolidated the importance of the sisters to the pre-Columbian diet.

It was believed that the three plants were a gift from gods which should be 'grown together, eaten together and celebrated together' (Bockmann 2020). It is the first sign of the cultural meaning of pumpkin in American history. Its usefulness and significance created a myth based on the conviction that so valuable a plant must be something more than a regular fruit. A few hundred years later, the European settlers learned about this plant as well. It is worth mentioning that Europeans started cultivating pumpkins even before the Mayflower reached the New Land. It was noticed by Keith Stavely and Kathleen Fitzgerald, prominent researchers of New England's cuisine and culture:

> After Columbus's Voyages, pumpkins were brought to Europe, and at some point in the sixteenth century they were introduced into England from France. According to William Harrison, writing in 1577, the cultivation of 'pompions' was part of a general resumption, after a few centuries' hiatus, of vegetable growing in sixteenth-century England, 'not only… among the poor commons,' but also among 'delicate merchants, gentlemen, and the nobility.' The last three groups, Harrison continued, 'made their provision yearly for new seeds out of strange countries, from whence they have them abundantly.' Pumpkins would certainly have qualified at that time as a new seed out of a strange country (Stavely and Fitzgerald 65).

As it is demonstrated, although pumpkins are often described as a traditional New England product, not only did they not originate in that region, but they were cultivated in Europe decades before Squanto taught the Puritan settlers how to grow corn. Nonetheless, the importance of pumpkin in New England rapidly surpassed its less popular use in Europe. The very cradle of America's founding myths and identity happens to be the exact place where the pumpkin's impact on American culture originated.

Plants of the New World soon became a crucial part of colonial cuisine, since their availability and adjustment to the environment made them easier to cultivate than the European vegetables and crops which often grew poorly (Stavely and Fitzgerald 5-9). Pumpkins were among the products cultivated by the Puritan settlers since the very beginning. Edward Johnson who described his life in one of the 17th century colonies in the region, regarded the fruit as a sign of Divine Providence. In his narrative about the history of New England, he wrote: '. . . let no man make a jest at Pumpkins, for with this fruit the Lord was pleased to feed his people to their good content, till Corne and Cattell were increased' (Johnson 85), which indicated that not only Native Americans considered squash a heavenly gift.

Thus, the cultural meaning of pumpkin in America was roughly the same for the Natives and the Puritans. In both cases, it derived from its practical qualities

and extended to religious beliefs. Even though in the early colonial era, pumpkin's significance was mostly based on its role in feeding, this period led to the creation of an utterly different meaning of the squash. It became a symbol of America itself.

All-American Pumpkin Holidays

The symbolic role of the orange squash is inherently connected with two All-American holidays. Thanksgiving and Halloween consolidated pumpkin's position and significance as it became one of their most characteristic features. Since the history of pumpkin in American identity started in New England, the first feast to be described ought to be the holiday that originated in that region.

The Thanksgiving Day was meant to be a Puritan alternative to Christmas (Nissenbaum 129). Its customs including pumpkin pie originated in the colonial era New England. In fact, it was the most important holiday of the region until the 19th century (Stavely and Fitzgerald 226). On the other hand, Christmas did not achieve its position there until the half of that century. According to the Puritan worldviews, if God wanted the nativity of Jesus to be celebrated, he would surely provide the exact date of it. The Bible, however, lacks any information on when Christ was born and the date of the holiday was chosen by the Church. Thus, puritans, who wanted to separate themselves from the Catholic practices, ceased to celebrate that day. Thanksgiving, however, was promoted as an All-American holiday which could replace Christmas. Thanks to that, it easily became one of the most important days in the region, yet the rest of the United States would rather celebrate the nativity of Christ. For this reason, both events were often compared, which created a kind of internal competition in the country. Citizens of the states that celebrated Thanksgiving would argue with people from other parts of the nation which feast was better. Simultaneously, texts from the 18th century from other regions of the United States described Thanksgiving as a less solemn and much poorer alternative to Christmas (Nissenbaum 81-83: 129). Eventually, as we know, Thanksgiving spread to the rest of the country, not as an alternative to Christmas, however, but as a separate holiday. As it expanded, its symbolic meaning grew as well. In the contemporary United States, Thanksgiving is an important part of national identity, since its origins are inseparable from the American founding myths.

It is certain that early colonists did eat pumpkins (Stavely and Fitzgerald 66). However, the first descriptions of Thanksgiving actually provide no information about squashes. In his memoirs *History of Plymouth Plantation*, one of the pilgrim fathers, William Bradford, noted that Thanksgiving Day was observed with feasting and he listed some basic products eaten that day: the 'Indian corn,' as he called maize, but also foul, wild turkeys, and fish such as cod or bass (Bradford 105). If pumpkins were ever eaten during the first Thanksgiving, they seem not to have been important enough to be included in the list. It is very possible, however, that they were not eaten at all during the holiday.

However, these facts do not stop American schools from teaching 'that eating pumpkin pie at Thanksgiving is a reenactment of the Pilgrims' famous 1621 feast' (Ott, "*Pumpkin. The Curious…*" 5). The feast itself has become a myth, which means that the historic reality of the events is no longer of the first order importance. What

is significant now is not what the Pilgrims actually ate, but what it means for contemporary identity and culture. The role of pumpkin in the social imagination of Americans is strongly connected with Thanksgiving and the first settlers. That is why it often gets simplified to a classic scene of a feast in which a pumpkin pie and a turkey are equally essential. The myth is sustained by numerous texts and illustrations in which the pie is an essential element of the holiday.

In 1844, Lydia Maria Child, the celebrated author of a cookbook *The Frugal American Housewife* (Child 1838), published a Thanksgiving poem *Over the River and Through the Wood*. In the text, Child describes how she remembers her visits in grandparent's house for the holiday. The poem ends with a joyous exclamation: 'Hurrah for the pumpkin-pie!' (Child). It clearly identifies this particular food with Thanksgiving, which is an evidence of its inseparability with the holiday in the mid-19th century. In addition, popularity of the text helped to maintain the connection of the pumpkin pie and the holiday in the following decades.

Another piece of poetry from that time concerning squash is *Pumpkin* by John Greenleaf Whittier. The author compares natural riches of other parts of the world to the Yankee pumpkin (Whittier). In a similar manner like madeleines in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (Proust 63), the pumpkin brings to mind childhood and good old days. The poet asks: 'What calls back the past, like the rich Pumpkin pie?' (Whittier). This verse indicates that not only was the pie common during the fall, but it was also meaningful enough to become a flavor reminiscent of childhood. It is worth noticing that, again, it was the pumpkin pie that was the basic form of serving the squash. Both poems express a connection between the dish and Thanksgiving, which suggests that the pie might have been even more important than the turkey, mentioned neither by Child, nor by Whittier.

As was already stated, Thanksgiving and its customs were strongly connected with the North. It should be borne in mind both Child and Whittier, who described the holiday and pumpkin pie in their poems, were northern abolitionists (Encyclopedia Britannica). Another author from the region who wrote about pumpkins on the Thanksgiving table was Sarah Josepha Hale. In her novel *Northwood; or, Life North and South*, criticizing slavery and praising New England, she often mentions a pumpkin pie while describing the holiday dishes (Hale 89, 291) and adds that it 'occupied the most distinguished niche' (Hale 91). Hale is one of the most important authors connected with that holiday since she openly campaigned for recognizing it as a national holiday in order to unify Americans by providing them with a common symbol. Since the holiday was mostly promoted by the abolitionists, its adaptation in the South was not simple. In fact, this region did not fully embrace the holiday until the Civil War when it was officially proclaimed a national feast (Smith 74-76). The Thanksgiving was initially recognized as specifically northern in origin and thus foreign to the Southerners. Therefore, process of its adaptation was long and complex.

Although a lot of abolitionist authors mention a pumpkin pie in their texts, it was never a symbol of abolitionism itself. In fact, it represented the regional ideals. For these writers, pumpkin 'completely embodied New England, as opposed to southern, values' since 'eating pumpkin was… a way to affirm New Englanders' identity through attachments to a place, a particular landscape, and the simple virtues of farm life' (Ott, "*Pumpkin. The Curious*…" 83). Thus, its meaning was much larger and

not restricted to the northern attitude towards slavery. Pumpkin was an important element of regional identity, not a part of a political dispute.

Nowadays, Thanksgiving pies, primarily the pumpkin one, still retain their importance. However, substantial as it continues to be, their meaning has decreased in the last century. As Stavely and Fitzgerald noted, 'Although turkey was important to the nineteenth-century Thanksgiving, a case can be made that until the twentieth century, pie was at least as important' (Stavely and Fitzgerald 167). The importance of the pie and its connection to the holiday created a simple, yet extending, relationship: initially Thanksgiving was a symbol of America and pumpkins with the pie made of it were a symbol of the holiday. Subsequently, pumpkins themselves became a symbol of the day and, indirectly, the United States.

It is worth remembering that the earliest versions of the pie originated in Europe, but their final American form differs significantly from the original:

> As for pumpkin pie in particular, in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England 'people of substance' were familiar with a form of pumpkin pie that both followed the medieval tradition of 'rich pies of mixed ingredients' and also bore resemblance to the consumption of apple-stuffed pumpkins typically engaged in by people of lesser substance… after the Revolution, Amelia Simmons's two pumpkin pie recipes became another case in point that her cookbook 'was, in its minor sphere, another declaration of American independence'… The main point here is that Simmons's pumpkin pie was recognizably different from traditional English pumpkin pie and recognizably similar to the pumpkin pie we know today: a pie crust filled with spiced pumpkin custard. (Stavely and Fitzgerald 67-68)

By that means, pumpkin received another symbolic meaning. The pumpkin pie became a visible sign of breaking with the British influence on America. Its new recipe, a brand new idea of serving, was an evidence of a new, unique identity. It might sound farfetched, but in fact the cultural liberation had to proceed in every possible manner. The more common examples are definitely language and literature, however, there is no reason for preventing such changes in the culinary field as well. In practice, these modifications and moving away from English culture were inevitable when America began to develop in its own right.

Pumpkins as symbols of the United States grew more popular in the first half of the 20th century. Cindy Ott indicates that, for Americans, this particular kind of squash was linked with economic standing, which led to the construction of 'an image of a rural way of life that was the basis for popular views of the nation's history and identity' (Ott, "*Object Analysis…*" 12). This was especially important when more and more people moved away from agricultural lifestyle and longed for, at least symbolic, connection with the natural world. Ott claims that combination of 'physical attributes and their historic associations make pumpkins quintessential emblems of agrarian prowess' (Ott, "*Object Analysis…*" 14). As has been indicated, the practical usage became less important over time, whereas the figurative sense widened and expanded. This change may even be clearer after the analysis of the second pumpkin-oriented holiday: Halloween.

In this case, pumpkins are not used as food, but as a decoration. Halloween was certainly not the first example of extended use of this fruit. Vast usage of squash often exceeded the culinary field: 'The Indians made mats out of dried pumpkin strips, and the colonists found non culinary uses for dried pumpkin as well—for example,

as containers for seeds, grain, yarn, and cloth. Nowadays, of course, the main use of pumpkins is to brighten and frighten during Halloween' (Stavely and Fitzgerald 67). Nowadays, Halloween is one of the most popular American holidays. Its connection with pumpkin consolidated associations of the squash with the United States.

The origins of Halloween are very complex since this modern holiday was based on a plethora of traditions, customs, and beliefs (Morton 116) whose meanings or particulars would change when they spread to new places. That is how pumpkin, which certainly could not be a part of medieval European traditions, won an honorable place in the later customs. As it has been already stated, pumpkins were popular in the colonies and later in the independent United States. Their commonness facilitated the exploitation of their qualities in new ways.

There were many different plants connected with Halloween. Early Halloween parties featured not only pumpkin but also corn (Morton 66). However, hardly anyone would connect this day with maize today. In order to understand pumpkin's success, one must acknowledge that it was achieved not only by its natural properties, but also thanks to symbolic meanings that date hundreds years before Europeans arrived in America.

Pumpkins became strongly identified with Halloween because of jack-o'-lanterns. The original Irish folk character called 'jack-o'-lantern' was not connected with squashes: he was a calamitous soul forced to wander the netherworld (Ott, "*Pumpkin. The Curious*…" 76-77). The custom of making lanterns, which later gained the name of the folk character, originated in Europe, where Celtic people would carve turnips and other root vegetables with grotesque faces and put inside wooden embers, coal or candles to ward off evil spirits. When the tradition reached America, scarce turnips were substituted with common pumpkins (Merriam-Webster). Thus, the change occurred for practical reasons and was caused by the popularity of this type of plant in America. Furthermore, the pumpkin had all necessary physical features for being adapted to a lantern. Arguably, it was even better than its European counterparts: it was tough, suitable for carving and big enough to put a candle inside.

In the abovementioned poem *Pumpkin* by John Greenleaf Whittier, the author does refer directly only to Thanksgiving, yet his descriptions strongly suggest the popularity of Halloween-pumpkin-oriented traditions as well: 'When wild, ugly faces we carved in its skin, / Glaring out through the dark with a candle within!' (Whittier). It means that the tradition of making jack-o'-lanterns out of pumpkins was so popular in the first half of the 19th century that it became one of the tokens of Yankee childhood. Whittier does not specify, though, whether the custom was strictly a Halloween one or a more general seasonal practice in the fall.

Connections between carved pumpkins and supernatural events strengthened even more after the publication of *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* by Washington Irving. When Ichabod Crane, the main character of the story, disappears after meeting the Headless Horseman, only his hat is found: and it lies next to a shattered pumpkin (Irving 177). On the other hand, before the climax of the story, pumpkins represented the rusticity of the countryside of New York's Hudson River valley, where the action was set (Ott, "*Pumpkin. The Curious*…" 76). Crane's presumed death was strongly connected with the squash (its supernatural meaning), but at the same time, pumpkin was a symbol of prosperity and the countryside (which is consistent with the claims from the above).

Preternatural connotations of the pumpkin were based on various occurrences such as unexplained events. The term 'jack-o'-lantern' was also another name for the will-o'-the-wisp, a natural phenomenon believed to be supernatural (Ott, "*Pumpkin. The Curious…*" 77). American jack-o'-lanterns was a combination of various customs and myths: a folk character wandering in the netherworld, mysterious swamp fires, and Celtic traditions of carving turnip. The carved pumpkin denoting Halloween is filled with meanings. As the holiday itself, the lantern is based on many different customs and has a complex origin. Nowadays, it is one of the most recognizable Halloween symbols. At the same time, the holiday itself is commonly connected with America, which indirectly makes jack-o'-lanterns another symbol of the United States.

Thus, these two holidays have helped to make the orange squash world-famous in a very specific American context and the pumpkin became a symbol of the United States not only for Americans but for the world.

Pumpkin and the National Spirit

Cindy Ott claims that 'what the orange field pumpkin lost in practical usage and economic value, it gained in symbolic power' (Ott, "*Object Analysis…*" 12). It is certain that nowadays pumpkin's primary role is not based on its flavor or ubiquity but on its meaning. When pumpkin became inseparable with two great American holidays, its significance was consolidated. Thanksgiving and Halloween were initially celebrated only in America and their spread to the worldwide mass culture is fairly recent. Although predecessors of Halloween existed in Europe, the final form of the holiday as we know it from the popular culture was shaped in the United States (Morton 116). Since both of the holidays had a strong American identity, its symbol became the sign of America itself.

In the first half of the 20th century pumpkin was used in a patriotic context:

> During the two world wars, American artists parlayed the pumpkin into a patriotic symbol of the home front, adding another layer of meaning to the vegetable. A Thanksgiving postcard published around the time of World War I depicts an oversized golden pumpkin with the words "Peace and Prosperity" written across it. The pumpkin embodies the simple things in life that are found in the classic American dream, such as the rewards of hard work in a land of opportunity, and therefore serves to invigorate the war effort. The image illustrates Americans' embrace of this bountiful natural specimen as an icon of cultural values. The giant pumpkin's plainness yet goodness, its naturalness yet sturdiness, come to stand for American culture itself (Ott, "*Object Analysis…*" 12).

Pumpkin expressed American values. As in the past, it was connected with nature and rural life, but also with a reward for hard honest efforts.

Ott argues that Americans feel nostalgic for some contact with nature. That leads to the desire of farming, not so much out of a necessity but as a leisure activity. Longing for a simple self-sustainable lifestyle leads to a hidden desire to cultivate the land. This eagerness had to be adapted to modern circumstances since 'full-time pumpkin farming is both impractical and probably inconceivable to most participants'. Ott claims that it was easier to plant just one but special pumpkin. This was

the background of the giant pumpkins phenomenon praised at fairs (Ott, "*Object Analysis…*" 14). This relatively new practice of American culture celebrates pumpkin in a novel way which corresponds with the traditional meaning of squash.

In his key work *The Machine in the Garden*, historian and philosopher Leo Marx stated that since the very beginning, American culture favored pastoralism and agriculture, which were disrupted by technological development. The introduction of the metaphorical machine to the fields poses a problem that has to be solved in order to preserve the character of the nation (Marx 6-7, 236, 343, 365). Observations of Ott and Marx share a common theme: a new challenge for America is to reconcile the agricultural spirit of the nation to modern circumstances.

Maintenance of farming in suburbs in the form of cultivating giant pumpkins is nothing other than a way of keeping in touch with the former, pristine national ideals. Although contemporary America is nothing like its former self, the myths and values planted in the minds of its people by history, literature and marking agricultural heritage in other ways could not disappear. Modern Americans have grown up surrounded by stories about ordinary people who overcame adversities and found their own places in an uncharted land. Whether these heroes were pilgrims arriving in Plymouth or pioneers taming the West, their stories always shared common themes such as coming to a new territory, fighting the odds, and transforming inhospitable surroundings into thriving settlements. Settlers would make an impact on the land without losing their connection to nature.

It follows that American founding myths were essentially linked with nature, both in its primal and tamed forms. When modern society lost this connection, it concurrently forfeited a part of its identity. Thus, modern giant pumpkin cultivation for a less practical purpose than feeding the family became for many a way to return to the roots, a search of lost identity, and an expression of the longing for the past. In this case, the pumpkin was only a tool of a greater symbolic operation. However, as was already stated, the choice of this particular fruit was not random. Easy to plant and cultivate, pumpkin has long symbolized American values. In this instance, it received, however, a new meaning, connected with and outgrowing from the previous ones. Again, its accessibility was a key to its success.

Summary: Modern Pumpkin Symbolism

Pumpkin went a long way from a simple, common produce to a representation of the American nation. Over history, its meaning in America extended from the sign of God's providence and abundance, through symbolism of two holidays and a way to return to nature to finally a combination of national values. Pumpkin played an important role in the history of American culture thanks to its characteristics, but also because of its New World origin. For the settlers, squash was as new as the land itself. The symbolic role of the pumpkin has been rising simultaneously with national identity, at times helping in building it.

The squash is not only identified with the whole country, but it is also an official symbol of particular states. In 2006, New Hampshire appointed it as its state fruit (The General Court of New Hampshire). It is also the state squash of Texas since 2013 (Texas State Library and Archives Commission). The pumpkin pie, on the other

hand, is the official state pie of Illinois (State Symbols USA). These are clear signs of standardized attachment to this particular squash.

Nowadays, new forms of pumpkin appreciation lead the way. One of the most important is the popularity of pumpkin spice, which is often added to coffee. The idea is to imitate the taste of a pumpkin pie and so the spice is based on the condiments added to this iconic food. With time 'the spice found use in seasonal dishes beyond pumpkin pie, cementing its association with fall' (Cox). Now it is not so much the pumpkin itself as the spices that remind a classic pumpkin-related dish that symbolize the fall. The new symbolism is indirect, yet clear and undeniable.

In this way, the cultural meaning of pumpkin in the United States keeps evolving. Its significance changes, but does not disappear. New cultural contexts create further possibilities of development. Some features, though, have remained: pumpkin still signifies the fall, two all-American holidays, and the national spirit.

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