

# God, Games, and National Glory: Thanksgiving and the Ritual of Sport in America, 1880-1920

Steven W. Pope

University of Maine

Since the late nineteenth century, western nations have invented new symbols and rituals that promote national unity. Flags, pledges of allegiance, national anthems, holidays, and national sporting traditions have been closely linked to the historically-novel innovation of nationalism, and as such, constituted occasions wherein people became conscious of citizenship and national identity. Between the Civil War and the First World War, Thanksgiving and the Fourth of July became important celebrations in which all religions, races, classes, and regions could participate in the dramatization of the values and beliefs of American nationalism.

Sport became the icing on the cake of those nationalistic rituals. Amidst newly-created rituals like banners, fight songs and cheers, and post-game parties, football-playing colleges and universities scheduled their major rival for a Turkey Day game. July the Fourth meant not only parades and patriotic speeches, but also baseball games, track meets, and major boxing matches. Much to their dismay, various contemporary observers expressed concern about what they perceived to be undue frivolity and lack of moral certitude in the popular observances of the hallowed national holidays. As religious and folk liturgies came to be commercially and secularly constructed, sports increasingly took center-stage.

American Presidents since Ulysses Grant have taken Thanksgiving as the appropriate context for proclaiming the goodness of Providence, the bounties of American life, and have affirmed the continuity with the birth of a Christian civilization in the New World. The evolution of a distinctly American game of football began at precisely the same time that Thanksgiving as a national holiday became embedded in American cultural life. Two decades after the first intercollegiate game was played between Rutgers and Princeton, the sporting Thanksgiving tradition had received the muscular Christian stamp of approval. By 1893, a *New York Herald* editor was led to conclude that "Thanksgiving Day is no longer a solemn festival to God for mercies given," but rather a holiday "granted by the State and the nation to see a game of football."

This paper traced the development of the Thanksgiving sporting tradition from its inception until the mid 1920s. Particular emphasis is given to the secularization of a formerly religious holiday, as conceptions and images of the emerging nationalistic ideology surpassed God and the Church in the popular imagination. Analysis is also directed at the geographical diffusion of the Thanksgiving Day football game, which, after the First World War, had become a truly national tradition.