

President Biden Pardons National Thanksgiving Turkeys

November 20, 2023 **by Dan McCue**



President Joe Biden stands next to Liberty, one of the two national Thanksgiving turkeys, after pardoning them during a ceremony on the South Lawn of the White House in Washington, Monday, Nov. 20, 2023. (Photo by Dan McCue)

WASHINGTON — President Biden on Monday pardoned the latest pair of national turkeys, an annual tradition that marks the unofficial start of the holiday season in Washington, and had a little fun at his own expense, as his birthday happened to coincide with this year's event.

"I just want you to know, it's difficult turning 60," said the president, who actually turned 81 on Monday, as he arrived at the podium for the pardoning ceremony.

"Difficult," he repeated with a broad smile and laughter.

Later, he observed that Monday's ceremony on the South Lawn was actually the 76th anniversary of the event.

"And I want you to know I wasn't there at the first one. I was too young to make it," he said, inspiring more laughter from the crowd.

Among those cheering from their seats were Steve Lykken, chairman of the National Turkey Federation and president of the Jennie-O Turkey Stores, the children and families of White House staff and cabinet members, students from the Washington Eliot-Hine Middle School, and members of the Future Farmers of America and 4-H.

Roaming the grass around the informal stage as the president spoke were Liberty and Bell, this year's pardonees.

Both turkeys were hatched in July in Willmar, Minnesota — Jennie-O's headquarters — and both are male. Lykken said each is about 20 weeks old and weighs somewhere around 42 pounds.

"God,
they're
big," the

president said as they walked into view.

“I’m
used to
chickens
in

President Joe Biden was all smiles as he ushered in the
holiday season at the White House on Monday, Nov. 20,
2023. (Photo by Dan McCue)

Delaware,” Biden said. “We’ve got a \$4 billion industry in
chickens in Delaware, but there’s no chicken that big, man. I’ll
tell you.”

The president went on to mention that he visited a family farm in
Minnesota last month, and talked to the family and their friends
about the pride in small towns and rural communities and their
satisfaction in knowing they can stay part of rural America and
continue to keep their farms.

“It’s because of the investments we’re making,” Biden said.
“We’re restoring hope and opportunity so that family farms can
stay in the family and so that children don’t have to leave home,
if they wish to stay, and can make a living on the farm.”

When a ripple of approval went through the crowd, Biden
acknowledged it by saying, “Look, it matters.

“And thanks to all of the families across America who feed and
fuel our nation and the world,” he said.

“Yeah, the world,” he repeated with emphasis.

Biden then turned to the formal pardoning itself, noting that
despite the turkeys’ Minnesota roots, they were actually named
for the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

“These birds have a new appreciation for the words ‘Let Freedom
Ring,’” the president said, inspiring more laughter.

“I’m told by the National Turkey Federation that they love
Honeycrisp apples, ice hockey and the Mall of America,” Biden

said.

“And, you know, they beat tough odds to get here — the competition. They had to work hard, show patience and be willing to travel over a thousand miles to be here at the White House,” he continued, clearly enjoying the moment and the festive mood of the occasion.

“In some respects being named the national turkeys is even more difficult than getting a ticket to a Taylor Swift concert,” he quipped.

“Look, folks, based on their commitment to being productive members of society as they head to their new home at the University of Minnesota. I hereby pardon Liberty and Bell. Congratulations, birds,” he said as one of the turkey’s was placed on a table next to him.

“That’s a big bird, man,” he said. “I’m impressed.”

Liberty and Bell seemed to take all the attention in stride. After all, they’d been in town since Saturday, staying at the Willard InterContinental hotel near the White House.

On Sunday, the Turkey Federation’s Lykken formally introduced the pair at a press event in the Willard’s newly renovated Crystal Room.

As the turkeys paced back and forth, thrilling photographers and several small children in attendance, Lykken explained Liberty and Bell had made the trip to Washington in a black Cadillac Escalade.

Back home, he said, they enjoyed a life on the farm in which they were protected from weather extremes and predators and free to walk about, eating and drinking at their pleasure.

He went
on to say
that
that's
the same
lifestyle
they'll
enjoy
once
they
move
into
their
new digs
at the

Liberty "grandstanding" during pardon ceremony.
(Photo by Dan McCue)

University of Minnesota's College of Food, Agricultural and
Natural Resources Sciences.

"You can imagine the wonderful care they're going to get from
students and veterinarians and professors, and so they will
hopefully have a chance, maybe, to go see a hockey game or
spend time with Goldy the gopher," Lykken said.

"Goldy" is the university's mascot.

The tradition of bestowing a holiday bird to the president dates
to 1947 when the National Turkey Federation, which represents
turkey farmers and producers, first presented a National
Thanksgiving Turkey to President Harry Truman.

Back then, however, the turkey was destined to be the first
family's holiday dinner.

But by the late 1980s, things had changed drastically — and for
the better, as far as the turkeys were concerned.

The tradition evolved into an often humorous ceremony in which the birds are pardoned, given a second chance at life after they are spared from ending up on a family's Thanksgiving table.

But for all his levity, Biden concluded on a serious, heartfelt note.

He wanted to talk about “why we have Thanksgiving in the first place.”

“It’s to remind ourselves — and we sometimes forget this — how we have so much to be thankful for as a nation,” Biden said.

“This week, we’ll gather with the people we love and the traditions that each of us have built up in our own families. And we’ll also think about the loved ones we’ve lost — including just yesterday when we lost former First Lady Rosalynn Carter, who walked her own path, inspiring a nation and the world along the way,” the president said.

“And let us remind ourselves that we are blessed to live in the greatest nation on the face of the Earth,” he continued to a surge of applause.

“That’s what I see when I travel America,” Biden said. “I’ve met so many incredible people who do such extraordinary things — including, just yesterday, [the first lady] and I visited the largest naval station in the world, Norfolk Naval Station in Virginia, to serve what they call “Friendsgiving” — a Thanksgiving meal — to a thousand servicemen and their families. We owe them. We owe them big.

“And in the days ahead, as our families and friends travel and come together to celebrate Thanksgiving, we can all give thanks to the gift that is our nation,” the president said.

“And let’s remember: We are the United States of America, and there is nothing — nothing, nothing — I mean this sincerely, nothing beyond our capacity when we work together,” he added. “We’ve never come out of a situation, a bad circumstance, without being better off when we come through it. And this is always who we are as Americans.

“So, Happy Thanksgiving. God bless you all. And may God protect our troops,” the president said.

The turkey pardon and president’s birthday weren’t the only festive events at the White House on Monday. In the afternoon, First Lady Dr. Jill Biden accepted the delivery of an 18.5-foot Fraser fir from Fleetwood, North Carolina, as the official White House Christmas tree.

For those
who like a
little
holiday
trivia, the
first
known
Christmas
tree in the
White
House
was
placed
upstairs
in the
second

Liberty and Bell, shortly after their being pardoned by
President Joe Biden during a ceremony on the South
Lawn of the White House. (Photo by Dan McCue)

floor Oval Room — then used as a family parlor and library — in

1889 during the Benjamin Harrison administration. It was decorated with candles for the Harrison grandchildren.

The first electric lights to be placed on a first family's Christmas tree were used in 1894 during the presidency of Grover Cleveland, three years after electricity was installed in the White House.

The Taft children — Robert, Helen and Charles — placed the first tree in the Blue Room on the State Floor in 1912.

President William Howard Taft and First Lady Helen Taft were away on a trip to Panama, so the tree was a surprise for the seven young Laughlin and Herron cousins, who with their parents, were guests at the White House.

Since the Taft family placed a Christmas tree in the Blue Room in 1912, this custom of placing a tree or multiple trees on the State Floor was sporadically performed by successive first families.

Some families placed a small tree in the Blue Room; many others preferred a large tree or trees in the East Room, as this was where most of the seasonal activities took place.

During the Dwight Eisenhower administration, First Lady Mamie Eisenhower featured a tree in the Blue Room consistently.

First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy continued this tradition and in 1961 selected a theme for the annual Blue Room Christmas tree.

That year, the tree was decorated with objects depicting characters and toys from the “Nutcracker Suite” ballet. This tradition of a themed Blue Room Christmas tree has continued ever since.

Since 1966, the National Christmas Tree Association has held a competition for the official White House Blue Room tree. To

qualify for the national contest, growers must first win their state or regional competitions.

As for Thanksgiving, Lykken said just over 200 million turkeys will be eaten on Thanksgiving.

President Biden will enjoy this during a Thanksgiving dinner with family on Nantucket island in Massachusetts, continuing a long family tradition.

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