

The war on Christmas?

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BY ANTONY DAVIES & JAMES R. HARRIGAN | Saturday, Nov. 26, 2016, 4:00 p.m.

With Thanksgiving concluded, it is time again for the annual War on Christmas. After all, nothing typifies a religious holiday gone secular better than an argument about how the day has become the battlefield for the Last Great Culture War.

But for all the talk about the so-called War on Christmas — clerks who are instructed to say “Happy Holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas,” schools that expunge religious references from celebrations and towns that prohibit manger scenes in public spaces — one fact is conveniently forgotten: The War on Christmas was started by Christians. Puritans to be exact.

It wasn't much of a war at first. Puritans didn't even celebrate Christmas as they arrived in the New World in the early 17th century, just as they had not celebrated the holiday back home. The Sabbath, they believed, was the only day specified in the Bible for special consideration. Worse yet, among the population at large, Christmas had become little more than an excuse for drinking and carryings on of every description. The War on Christmas didn't begin until people decided to celebrate the holiday in earnest, which is when the Puritans decided that no one should be able to celebrate it at all.

To make sure of that, Puritans outlawed the holiday in Massachusetts entirely. And their prohibition had some teeth. As of May 11, 1659, and continuing for 22 years, anyone caught skipping work or otherwise celebrating on Dec. 25 would be fined 5 shillings. Annual per-capita income in New England in 1650 was around 140 shillings, making those 5 shillings almost 4 percent of the average person's annual income.

Of course, in 1650, a good deal of a person's “income” was derived from home production and barter. Still, the Puritan fine for celebrating Christmas probably amounted to the equivalent of \$1,000 today.

That puts our contemporary “Happy Holidays” versus “Merry Christmas” controversy into perspective quite nicely.

With turkey giveaways, holiday sales, and free shipping and wrapping, we have gone the other way. The celebration of Christmas is both encouraged and made less expensive by the market. After the Puritans' influence waned, the United States made the sensible

decision that religion is a matter best left to the private realm. No matter how much people might squawk about the “true meaning of Christmas,” their opinions are, mercifully, unenforceable. It turns out there is no War on Christmas per se. There is, simply, an ongoing attempt to keep private things out of the hands of government, lest government become a tool of established religious interests. Like the Puritans once upon a time.

Though the sides have flipped over time, there is nothing new under the American sun. It's just that now, the religious would prefer that the state acknowledge and partake in the holiday rather than outlaw it entirely.

But asking the state to celebrate the holiday is no less hostile to freedom than is asking the state to prohibit its celebration. Christmas is, after all, a celebration. And the last thing anyone should want is the government showing up at the festivities, one way or the other.

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