

# Have a Merry Winter

## Holiday Observance Paper 2015

December 21, 2015

I'm sure you all remember where you were on that glorious day in 2014 when the war ended. It's one of those moments seared into our collective memory. It will stay with us forever.

"It's over. We won." Bill O'Reilly, the Fox News host declared. "We won the war." For many, Bill O'Reilly is, of course, regarded as Christianity's General Patton in this war on Christmas. It was highly appropriate, therefore, for him to declare victory.

"It isn't a mythical war on Christmas," *The O'Reilly Factor* host assured a grateful nation, "It's real, and we just won. I might have just fulfilled my last obligation on earth," joked O'Reilly in his victory speech during an appearance on NBC's *Late Night with Seth Meyers*.

Bill announced that a recent Pew Survey found that 72% of Americans said Christian symbols like the nativity scene should be allowed on government property. According to the poll, 44% supported the public displays whether or not symbols of other faiths were included. The data was good enough for Bill to declare victory.

Some, of course, were suspicious of this unexpected victory declaration. If the war on Christmas were over—said Ben Dimiero on the progressive watchdog website *Media Matters*—someone forgot to tell O'Reilly's colleagues at *Fox Nation*, who continued to warn their viewers the following morning of the ongoing war on Christmas.

In fact, every year, it seems, we know the holiday season is upon us as the temperatures dip and we begin to hear a steady drumbeat emanating from the broadcast studios of Fox News launching their annual “war on Christmas” campaign.

But let’s not give Bill and his colleagues at Fox more credit than they deserve for inventing this war. Although Fox News, residing atop what Jon Stewart refers to as “Bullshit Mountain,” began their campaign in 2004, the war on Christmas has a long, rich history.

The modern-day “war on Christmas” can be traced to 1959, when groups affiliated with the John Birch Society released a pamphlet titled, *There goes Christmas*, where they warned that communists had launched a plot to “take Christ out of Christmas,” replacing Christmas decorations with, yes ... you knew this was coming ... United Nations iconography. The society assured us this was a small piece of a larger push to stamp out religion completely and cede our national sovereignty to the United Nations. They urged a boycott of retailers who displayed “inappropriate decorations.”

Before the modern era, Christmas controversies were led by Christians against other Christians. In 1647 the Puritan-led English Parliament banned the celebration of Christmas, replacing it with a day of fasting. Christmas was a “popish festival with no biblical justification.” It was deemed a time of wasteful and immoral behavior. Protests followed as pro-Christmas riots broke out across England. The restoration of King Charles II in 1660 ended the ban.

Closer to home, Christmas was banned in Massachusetts for 22 years from 1659 until 1681, when King James II appointed an Anglican governor to the colony, who then ruled by decree that Christmas could be celebrated.

George Washington famously crossed the Delaware River on Christmas night, 1776, surprising Hessian soldiers garrisoned at Trenton, who were presumably sleeping

off a very Germanic Christmas celebration. The Continental forces did not celebrate Christmas.

But enough of history, allow me to make this paper a bit more personal as I bring a confession concerning my troubled role in this war on Christmas to my literary brethren. I stand before you contrite and humbled but grateful for the forgiveness I find so abundant in this clubhouse. I trust that forgiveness will be granted to me tonight.

As I reveal my sad tale, let's recall that moment last year when Bill O'Reilly declared victory over the dark forces waging war on Christmas. As the nation rejoiced, I sat there silent, trapped in my own conflicted thoughts, for I knew the awful truth. I was in fact a fellow traveler, part of a fifth column supporting the enemies of Christmas. Through my brand-consulting work, I yearly mobilized my clients to resist marketing to the narrow construct of the Christmas holiday.

I thought I was following the most American of holiday traditions, taking the nativity of Jesus—a humble story of birth and hope—and turning it into an opportunity to sell stuff. I advised my clients to broaden their brand's commercial appeal and the length of their selling season by simply celebrating winter. Christmas? No way, I said, let's sell winter!

Coors Winterfest Beer, I suggested, could be sold during the entire ski season. Coors Christmas Beer would be out of date on December 26.

I gave the same advice to Archway Cookies. I recommended that they use Currier & Ives' winter scenes on packages decorated in seasonal red and green colors. These cookies too could be sold for a longer period of time.

Even P&G's beloved Pringles brand took my advice with snowmen and fir trees found on Pringles canisters for months.

If that wasn't bad enough, I then went public and proudly boasted of my genius in the pages of *The Wall Street Journal* in an article titled, "More Marketers Wish You a Merry Winter." I bragged to the reporter that my counsel extended the revenue associated with holiday sales well into the New Year. Little did I realize that 20 years later, this logic would place me on the wrong side of Bill's war on Christmas.

I should have known better. Shortly after the article was published in 1996, the British journal *Design Week* published a satirical column based on my comments from *The Wall Street Journal*. From the British perspective, they saw me as an example of American political correctness gone mad. The headline read, "US gets uptight over Christmas." Suddenly I was a spokesman for the entire country! "LPK's Kathman designs mega inoffensive festive packaging intending to be nonsectarian and develop broader consumer appeal," they sneered. "Too much Christmas in packaging can hurt sales warns Kathman," they giggled.

Then they added unnecessarily, "So from now on, Christmas cards should sport a chronically challenged guardian figure aloft in an environmentally friendly form of transportation towed by four-legged Scandinavian mammals ... or then again, perhaps not."

I've lived in England. I know there is no greater pleasure offered the British than when they mock contemporary American culture. I gave them exactly what they crave.

My consulting days are coming to a close. I am no longer at risk of getting caught in the crossfire of pop-culture wars. For this, I give thanks this holiday season.

In our consumer-oriented society, the commingling of religion and commerce will continue. Leigh Eric Schmidt, in his book titled *Consumer Rites* (spelled R.I.T.E.S.), assures us that Christmas will remain our annual "

grand festival of consumption.”

To bring this rambling paper to a close, I take you now to a reliable place of comfort and repose during the tumultuous holiday season—a pub. Specifically, in this case, a pub in Dublin, Ireland, named Russells. In an effort to declare a truce ending the season’s cultural hostilities, they placed a chalkboard sign at their entrance, which presents a thought I would like to leave you with tonight.

“Russells would like to wish all those of a religious disposition and those of us with a rational scientific nature, the warmest of wishes this holiday season. Remember, we’re all in the cock-eyed caravan called life together.”

And in that spirit, I wish you all a merry winter.