‘Rally Around the Christmas Tree’

The Sentimental Politics of a Civil Religious Holiday

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Introduction: A Brief History of Christmas in America

Today, “poll after poll indicates that Christmas is America’s favorite holiday” (Forbes 13). “Within communities and even for the nation, the celebration [of Christmas] briefly unites a disparate people in rites and impulses that hold almost universal appeal,” Restad writes (Restad viii). Hence, the title of this article transposes the ‘rally around the flag’-effect onto the Christmas holidays—and onto one of its key symbols, the National (Community) Christmas Tree. Not coincidentally, the invention of affect-saturated Christmas traditions in the 19th century flanked the nation-building project of the American republic—a project that in many ways also relied on trees, “the loudest silent figures in America’s complicated history” (Rutkow 9).

And yet, America has quite a checkered history when it comes to celebrating Christmas and cherishing Christmas paraphernalia. Early on, in colonial New England, Puritans outlawed Christmas celebrations. They rejected the holiday as a “Catholic innovation” that “provided too many excuses for licentious behavior” (Forbes 27) and “unholy merriment” (Restad 7), such as drunkenness and rioting or, as it was called then, “frolicking” (Restad 9). American Christmas traditions as we know them today (with tinseled trees, filled stockings, Christmas cards, and Santa Claus) only emerged in the mid-19th century when the formerly rambunctious, carnivalesque holiday was re-imagined as mostly a family-centered affair that primarily took place in the home and no longer in the public sphere. This shift did not happen smoothly; in fact, historian Stephen Nissenbaum has called it *The Battle for Christmas*: Christmas festivities were redirected to the domestic sphere rather than providing an occasion for carousing the streets and creating minor disturbances of the social

order, as had been the case for decades. Yet, there was still much room for the display of public feeling. Not the least, because the literary marketplace, magazine culture, and other venues of circulation had championed the invention of tradition surrounding the Christmas holiday: Writer Washington Irving in his stories created St. Nicholas "as a beloved character, laying the groundwork for the figure we'd eventually embrace as Santa Claus" (Heitman) and Clement Moore's iconic poem "The Night before Christmas" further helped it along (as did Charles Dickens' *Christmas Carol* across the pond). Last but not least, Thomas Nast's iconic illustrations—the artist has been dubbed "the father of Santa Claus"—created a new visual culture which expanded the cultural imaginary around the holiday and furthered its transformation from a purely religious festivity to a civil religious holiday and an overall cultural celebration that was soon to become the prime time of consumption.

With these "fathers of invention," as it were, the creation of "modern" Christmas traditions in 19th-century America was part of the efforts to establish of a civil religious calendar for the nation and to inculcate holiday traditions and similar occasions with a participatory framework to ritualistically evoke a communal feeling for a disparate people. Thus, specific mythical and emotional qualities were credited to the Christmas season nationwide, opening a vast arena for sentimental encodings beyond religious ones, i.e., for civil sentimentalism. The latter constitutes "a communicative code that incorporates and produces individual as well as collective identities and joins them in a meaningful relationship (the citizen as a family member of the nation)" (Paul 2018, 177). The intimate and homely atmosphere of Christmas enables and anticipates the orchestration of a "state fantasy" (Pease 4) that centers on the community/nation as a site of (at least temporary) peaceful togetherness.

In the early 20th century, further rituals were added to the repertoire of Christmas festivities and, once again, a shift occurred in the form of a re-opening: from a private holiday to a publicly shared festivity on which 'the people' would come together to celebrate. One manifestation indicative of this was the introduction of the "community Christmas Tree" which was on display in New York City in 1912, preceded on the West Coast by a 1904 tree in San Diego and a 1909 one in Pasadena, all of them joining together social gathering, Christmas lights, and community building. Other cities and towns followed suit and Christmas came to be celebrated as a civic festival centered, in public as in private spaces, around a tree. Christmas as a public event called for shared local rituals to promote public feeling—and on the level of 'the people' for a national

tree in order to create a homely feeling shared by all: "The Christmas tree is the focus of a private, cozy milieu. This is the very center of the American Christmas, a festival inextricably bound with the concept of home," writes Patrick McGreevy (33). Home, with its sentimental connotations based on a semantics of family, extends beyond the private sphere on this occasion, and the National Christmas Tree that is lit simultaneously with state trees and "trees in American embassies and legations around the world, in military installations, and on ships at sea" (Tufts 102) can be read as a symbol for the coming-together of a 'national family.' It is along those lines of political rhetoric, that Elizabeth Barnes sees "American culture's preoccupation with familial feeling as the foundation for sympathy, and sympathy as the basis of a democratic republic, [which] ultimately confounds the difference between familial and social bonds" (Barnes xi). It also shows us, how in turn, following Kathleen Stewart, "public specters have grown intimate" and vice versa (Stewart).

The Ceremony of the National Christmas Tree Lighting (NCTL) is a tradition that began about 100 years ago. In 1923, it was President Calvin Coolidge, who first lighted the National Christmas Tree. Ever since, each president has conducted this ceremony outside of the White House with little variation as to its exact place (the Ellipse has been the favored site, but for some years, the tree also stood in Lafayette Park, Sherman Plaza, or Lafayette Plaza); still, each ceremony has reflected—in one way or another—the state of America and its citizenry cast in a sentimental mood.

The idea of Christmas as a national affair is at the center of the Lighting Ceremony and appears as a spectacle of civil sentimentalism involving patriotism, (civil) religion, entertainment, consumerism, and—lately—environmentalism in somewhat unequal measures that also vary across time. In what follows, we will analyze the NCTL as a sentimental event that reiterates Lauren Berlant's indictment of the U.S. as a "sentimental nation" (1997; 2008) and that uses the sentimental code to generate communal feelings in spite of affective (and also cognitive) dissonances.

Three brief case studies are addressed for this purpose: the controversies over the religious nature of Christmas, the instrumentalization of the supposedly non-partisan ritual for political purposes, and finally ecological concerns of sustainability focusing on the tree itself against the backdrop of the seemingly boundless and non-sustainable consumerism in the Christmas season.

Religion or Civil Religion?
The Nativity Scene

The NCTL is a ceremony that is an overly sentimental, yet secular spectacle and a civil religious rather than a religious affair. American sociologist Robert Bellah has famously defined American civil religion as being non-denominational and as inclusive of a plurality of religious notions. He argued that, for instance, the ubiquitous formulas "God Bless America" or "In God We Trust" were not primarily Christian in orientation. Yet, Bellah does not address the sentimental code being used in civil religious practices. It is the concept of American civil sentimentalism that examines participation in national rituals and expressions of public feeling not with a view to their liturgical script, so to speak, but with regard to their affective appeal and outcome (cf. Paul 2021). The modern rise of the melodramatic (i.e., the sentimental) also coincides, as Peter Brooks has pointed out, with a larger secularization narrative highlighting feelings such as empathy or 'fellow feeling' as providing a new moral compass (Brooks).

The NCTL clearly shows that the spirit of Christmas has long ceased to be a purely Christian religious affair. Rather, it is tied to more general, even generic values such as kindness and generosity and conjures up humanitarian idea(l)s such as peace (as evident in the "Pageant of Peace" and the "Pathway of Peace") or social solidarity. Still, even as religion does not figure prominently in the show, its Christian origins have been an issue in the history of the National Christmas Tree ceremony. This controversy has mostly centered on the question whether there should be a nativity scene or not. The nativity scene next to the tree (not the tree itself or other paraphernalia) has been considered that part of the ceremony which renders it 'religious' in a specific sense, that is Christian, rather than civil religious in a more inclusive sense, and this has triggered mixed responses and outright opposition. Two organizations have repeatedly objected to a nativity scene on display during the festivity: the American Civil Liberty Union (ACLU) and the American Jewish Congress. After a few unsuccessful attempts, the ACLU succeeded in 1973 before the U.S. District Court of Appeals, and the scene was deemed as "objectionable to non-Christians" (cf. "History of the National Christmas Tree"; Sauve). In the following year, it was removed or rather displaced to a spot apart from the central area. At the same time, in 1974, public protest ensued with the cancellation of the nativity scene from other parts of the audience. When in 1985, the nativity scene returned for the first time in 11 years, it triggered opposition from the

American Jewish Congress who uttered a complaint in 1987. By that time, a separate White House Menorah Lighting Ceremony had been introduced (cf. Eschner; Hayashi-Smith).

It should be noted, however, that nativity scenes (and by abstraction sentimental encodings of family) can serve various functions, also that of political protest. While President Trump was having a NCTL in 2019 to celebrate "the miracle of Christmas" in a rather Christian spirit, across the continent another community would use the nativity scene to protest his border policy of family separation at the very same moment and displayed the holy family in separate cages. The Claremont United Methodist Church (outside Los Angeles) reminded the president (and everyone else in the country) of Christian values as part of the Christmas spirit. Again, this installation may be using religious symbolism at first sight, but it is using the sentimental code around the theme of family separation to protest secular/national politics (Paul 2021, 78–79).

Patriotism & Politics at the National Christmas Tree Lighting

Over the years, the National Christmas Tree has had several locations and the design of the Lighting Ceremony site has evolved into an increasingly patriotic display. Ever since 1954, the National Christmas Tree has been located in President's Park, and more precisely, on the so-called Ellipse ("History of the National Christmas Tree"). As a part of President's Park, the Ellipse is tended to by the National Park Service (NPS) and thus on 'common ground'—despite the location's now questionable fame for Trump's January 6th speech. With the White House and the National Mall close by, the National Christmas Tree is thus located firmly in the heart of the nation's political center. Hosting the ceremony every year, the NPS may also be the reason why the NCTL is usually perceived as a relatively non-partisan ceremony. The NPS, established in 1916, is a civilian agency but the Park Ranger's "work and bodies have been entangled in nationalist practices of claiming, taming, and defining territory and territorial subjects" nevertheless (Pennaz 244). Next to a number of National Parks that exemplify the United States' 'great outdoors,' and are first and foremost entrusted with the conservation of natural spaces, the NPS also manages a host of National Historic Sites, Monuments, and Memorials. It is especially in these places that the NPS is "an agency with a huge responsibility for narrating the intense history of the U.S., and so, for managing the relationship between public memory and national identity" (Ladino xii). Despite the fact that the NPS is

part of the U.S. Department of the Interior ("About Us") and thus subject to political changes in government, it "is not supposed to have a political agenda" (ibid. xiv).[1] As Jennifer Ladino writes, "NPS employees are supposed to practice an ideological and political neutrality intended to ensure democratic access for all visitors" (ibid.). However, she also contends that the NPS "manages affects" on its sites in that it encourages certain feelings and emotions over others (ibid.) in spaces that are by design not neutral.

In President's Park, it is specifically the design of the grounds during the Holiday season that underscores the NCTL Ceremony's importance as a civil religious, even patriotic, practice rather than a ceremony of overt Christianity. The main tree, which can be visited in the Park year-round, is situated on an axis with the White House and is nowadays flanked by 58 smaller trees, which make up the so-called Pathway of Peace. Representing the nation as a whole, these trees are arranged in a circle around the National Tree. One is dedicated to "Senior Citizens," one to "Prisoners of War and soldiers missing in action," and the other 56 trees represent the 50 states and 5 territories as well as the District of Columbia ("History of the National Christmas Tree"). Every tree is furthermore decorated with ornaments designed by school children from the respective state or territory, bringing elements of local patriotism together on the national stage. On occasion, the commemoration of events of national historical importance has been woven into the Christmas festivities, often expressed through Christmas lights in the national colors adorning the tree. Red-white-and-blue lights have, for example, pointed to the U.S. bicentennial in 1975 and the bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution in 1987 ("History of the National Christmas Tree"), and have highlighted feelings of communal suffering in December of 2001: After the incisive attacks of 9/11, the planned color scheme for the Christmas lights had been changed to red-white-and-blue on short notice (ibid.).

The design of the grounds on which the Lighting Ceremony takes place—with the display of the 58 trees in President's Park, representing all the domains of a U.S. Empire across the globe—can thus be read as the representation of a national family, inspiring not only patriotic feelings but

1 In the final chapter of her book *Memorials Matter* Jennifer Ladino also examines the so-called Alt-NPS—a branch of the Park Service that formed "in response to the climate-denying Trump administration's attempts to silence the agency" (262). This "rogue" branch of the NPS used mostly social media for "provocative and overtly political" (ibid.) messaging that stood in opposition to the agency's official policies.

also sentimental feelings of belonging. As Penne Restad writes, even though originally viewed as a Christian (catholic) symbol, Christmas trees in a specifically U.S. American tradition "did greater service as an icon of family" (64) than a symbol of religious affiliation and worship. The National Christmas Tree as an icon for a national family thus becomes a symbol of civil sentimentalism. As Heike Paul has written elsewhere, civil sentimentalism is often expressed in "a rhetoric of affective familial attachment to the national community [. . .] connecting the private world of feeling to the public world of social and political communication" (2018, 166–68). As she has demonstrated, civil sentimentalism "gains [special] currency in times of 'national' crises" because it can offer "a kind of ontological security" through its rhetoric and symbolism of familial bonds and attachments (ibid.). As the following case study will demonstrate, the Tree Lighting Ceremony's civil sentimentality has shone especially bright in years in which the ceremony was overshadowed by political and historical developments on the world stage.

Lighting ceremonies in which the actual Christmas celebration receded into the background of political displays of feeling in times of crisis have happened time and again—often, as already mentioned, with trees tellingly adorned in the national colors. In 1941, for example, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill attended the Lighting Ceremony on the White House grounds as the first foreign national in history. A mere two weeks after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Churchill even gave a short speech in which he asked that "for one night only, each home throughout the English-speaking world should be a brightly-lighted island of happiness and peace" ("Winston Churchill"). In 2001, only months after the 9/11 attacks, President George W. Bush and the First Lady were assisted in lighting the National Tree by two children who had lost their fathers in the attack on the Pentagon ("U.S. Holiday Tree Dedicated to 9/11"). The civil sentimental importance of the Lighting Ceremony, however, appears as especially salient when examining the years of the Iran Hostage crisis. As in the earlier example about the U.S. border in the 21st century, the ceremonies in 1979 and 1980 were marked by narratives of captivity, separation, and family reunion. In both years, the National Christmas Tree remained mostly unlit—the ceremony, however, took place nevertheless, underscoring the importance of the ritual despite lacking its actual purpose. Without actually switching on the lights of the National Christmas Tree, the Lighting Ceremony became a display of communal national suffering and familial attachment to the nation.

During the 1979 ceremony, President Jimmy Carter made the following remarks:

> Christmas means a lot of things. It means love. It means warmth. [...] It means family. It means joy. It means light. But everyone this Christmas will not be experiencing those deep feelings. At this moment there are 50 Americans who don't have freedom, who don't have joy, and who don't have warmth, who don't have their families with them. And there are 50 American families in this Nation who also will not experience all the joys and the light and the happiness of Christmas. (Carter)

Carter's speech led up to Amy Carter, the President's daughter, flipping the switch to light the smaller trees. However, only 50 of the 57 trees were lit and symbolized not the 50 states that year but the 50 hostages held captive in the U.S. embassy in Tehran. The rest of the lights, especially those of the National Christmas Tree, were supposed to be switched on once the hostages returned home ("History of the National Christmas Tree"). Mirroring the unlit trees in the living rooms of the hostage's families, the Christmas tree in President's Park remained mostly dark for two years. In 1980, with the hostage's relatives present in the audience, the main tree was lit for only 417 seconds (ibid.)—one second for each day the hostages had been in captivity—and as a symbol for the national family's shared suffering. The fact that as one of his last acts in office and on the day of Ronald Reagan's inauguration, on January 21, 1981, Jimmy Carter had the lights of the tree turned on—after the holiday season—when it became clear that the hostages were freed, speaks to the civil religious importance of the ritual that can even be decoupled from the holiday for which it stands. The lighting of the National Tree also provided closure for Carter's presidency and an election campaign that had been overshadowed by the Hostage Situation.

This sentimental beyond the protocol-management of a national crisis and its dénouement can be considered an early instance of what Elisabeth Anker would later come to call the "melodramatic political discourse" in American politics in her book *Orgies of Feeling*.[2] "Melodrama confers virtue upon innocent

2 Anker focuses specifically on the post-9/11 United States and the political discourse negotiating the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing 'global war on terror.' She writes: "melodramatic political discourse casts politics, policies, and practices of citizenship within a moral economy that identifies the nation state as a virtuous and innocent victim of villainous action. It locates goodness in the suffering of the nation, evil in its antago-

people who unjustly suffer from dominating power," Anker writes with regard to 9/11, and argues that through the deployment of melodramatic political discourse, "all Americans suffer from the attack, and thus all share in the nation's virtue" (5). In the years of the Iran Hostage Crisis, the political melodrama was staged around the National Christmas Tree and commemorated U.S. citizens suffering simply for being Americans at an embassy abroad. Rallying around the tree, their plight and sacrifice was shared by those at home, and the NCTL Ceremony became part of the "National Symbolic" (Berlant 1991, 4–5) in an unprecedented way.

The People's Tree

As we have shown, the tree is implicated in the recurring ritual in many ways—it inspires patriotic feelings in its original home state(s), at the same time as it figures as "every American's Christmas tree" (Tufts 103). For a festival "inextricably bound to the concept of home" (McGreevy 33), the Christmas tree serves as "the focus of a cozy, private milieu" (ibid.), and, as a display of Christmas lights and the locus of gift-giving it functions as the icon of what Nissenbaum and Tracy have called "the principal festival of consumer capitalism" (quoted in Horsley 32). It is the (national) tree itself, however, not so much the custom of abundant decorations and gift-giving, through which changing cultural and environmental values—also in light of the culture war(s)—can be understood.

As Eric Rutkow demonstrates in his monograph *American Canopy: Trees, Forests, and the Making of a Nation*, trees have functioned as both the literal resource the nation was made of and as symbols of historical commemoration and even pride.

> Americans started as a people frightened of the woods, transitioned into a nation that consumed these woods for profit—along the way turning the tree into a lifeless, deracinated object—and finally arrived at the present point. Today [...] most of us share a sense that to destroy trees is to destroy part of ourselves. (Rutkow 7)

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nists, and heroism in sovereign acts of war and global control coded as expressions of virtue" (2).

Even before upcoming environmental concerns for the nation's forests in the 19th century, trees served as figures and locations of commemoration. In 1765 a group of protesters against the British Stamp Act, including Paul Revere and Samuel Adams, termed an elm tree in Boston "The Tree of Liberty" (Rutkow 34–35)—the tree was both a witness to the protests and a significant meeting point.[3] At the Ground Zero Memorial in New York City, the so-called Survivor Tree stands as a "symbolic living relic" (Heath-Kelly 64) of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Here, the tree is "both a figurative representation of the individuals lost, and a collective simulation of resilience and recovery" (ibid.) through which it becomes involved in a national project of meaning making. Often specific trees are picked as symbols or icons of commemoration because of their lifespan—that more often than not exceeds that of humans by hundreds of years—and the events they bore witness to—as the Survivor Tree or the Boston Liberty Tree, for example.[4]

It is this temporal dimension paired with a growing interest in sustainability that made calls for "a living monument" as the National Christmas Tree a viable option—despite a burgeoning American Christmas Tree industry and its entanglement in the ritual of the NCTL. In the early 20th century—even before the first National Christmas Tree was lit by Calvin Coolidge in 1923—President Theodore Roosevelt was rumored to have refused to have a White House Christmas tree for environmental reasons. As Presidential historian Gleaves Whitney writes, "TR didn't believe in cutting down conifers for decoration," a stance which mirrors the President's interest in protecting 'natural' or wild spaces. Later, however, Roosevelt was—according to the legend—convinced by his friend and conservationist Gifford Pinchot, first director of the U.S. Forest Service, that "selectively cutting down trees helped forests thrive" (ibid.).[5]

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3 Today a plaque still reminds Bostonians and visitors of the elm tree that was cut down in 1775 by British soldiers because it "gave the rebels so much inspiration" (Rutkow 39).

4 The Survivor Tree literally survived the attacks on the World Trade Center and was subsequently cared for by the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation, before it was planted at the Ground Zero Memorial in 2010 ("The Survivor Tree").

5 Roosevelt and Pinchot's close relationship was significant for the institutionalization of "conservationist ideas […] in the form of the Forest Service and the Bureau of Reclamation" (Mertig 61). Professional, conservationist forestry in the U.S. has its roots in the two men's time in office. Today, the forest service also manages Christmas tree sales from public lands and national forests, and is thus part of a very successful American Christmas tree industry; moreover, the National Christmas Tree is selected in one of the National Forests each year ("USDA Forest Service"). The White House Christmas tree,

The Roosevelt White House supposedly had a cut Christmas tree on display every year after that. Environmental concerns, however, resurfaced multiple times. The rise of the modern U.S. environmental movement in the 1970s, for example, led to the introduction of the first living National Christmas Tree in 1973 through President Nixon. After that first living tree withered in 1976 and was replaced with a new tree the following year, most National Trees were living, replanted, trees ("History of the National Christmas Tree"). In the 1990s, during the Clinton/Gore administration, environmental groups started a letter campaign, calling on the President to "spare the National Christmas Tree" ("Dear Mr. President" 15) in analogy to the tradition of pardoning a Thanksgiving turkey. Requesting "an end to felling a sacrificial national tree," the letter campaign sought to raise awareness to unsustainable logging practices in the National Forests managed by the Forest Service (ibid.). In recent years, with a growing number of people using artificial trees (Morales), a debate about the sustainability of cut trees has arisen once more; with trees now perceived as agents in ameliorating the effects of climate change, the practice of cutting trees as decoration is frowned upon by a growing number of people.[6] Nevertheless, the tradition and civil sentimental ritual of the NCTL Ceremony as well as the iconicity of national trees is thriving in 2025, with several hundred thousand people following the Forest Service Rangers of the Tongass National Forest in Alaska in selecting this year's Christmas tree for the U.S. Capitol (also referred to as "The People's Tree"; USDA Forest Service) on social media.

Conclusion

In recent years it can be observed that in an in many respects politically polarized America the NCTL may have long been the last bastion of non-partisanship as people come together for a Christmas celebration in what Kathleen Loock in a similar context has termed the spirit of "seasonal conservatism." Yet,

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however, is usually sponsored by the National Christmas Tree Association ("The White House Christmas Tree").

6 The question whether artificial trees or real trees are more sustainable as Christmas trees is a hotly debated one. Often, the way in which the real trees are produced makes the difference; while trees from organic farms have a lower footprint and are grown environmentally friendly, tree farms that rely on pesticides, for example, do not produce a more sustainable and environmentally friendly alternative to the artificial tree that is often plastic and thus made from fossil fuels (see, for example, Godin).

the first Trump Presidency has shown that the culture wars and partisan divisions have also reached the NCTL Ceremony, which can be seen in the program of the Pageant of Peace: The star-studded Obama years, with performances by Common, BB King, Mariah Carey, Tom Hanks, Reese Witherspoon, or Crosby, Stills and Nash, to name a few, were followed by years in which reality TV star and singer Jessie James Decker, Christian rock musician Colton Dixon, and the Tucson Arizona Boys Chorus were among the most prominent performers. And yet, despite his tendencies to break with protocol and tradition, even Donald Trump has so far observed the NCTL every year during his first time in office, albeit a bit less ceremoniously and even introducing a countdown to the flipping of the switch that lights the tree as if it were a rocket launch.

In spite of variations in the ceremony, public protest around the ceremony, and crisis-driven delays, the tradition of the NCTL itself continues to be very much alive and honored. The tree is a symbol and a site of sentimental performance, the negotiation of (changing) national values and, possibly, the ever so fleeting manifestation of a consensus that seems to have disappeared from much of everyday life in America.

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