

The Day After Thanksgiving
A De Facto American Holiday?

By

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The Day After Thanksgiving stands as one of the most unusual and revealing observances in the American calendar, an unofficial holiday that behaves like an official one, a blank space on the federal register that nonetheless shapes travel, commerce, labor practices, and cultural expectation throughout the nation. Despite its absence from the U.S. list of federal holidays, the Friday after Thanksgiving has become, through more than a century of evolving customs and policies, one of the most widely observed days off in the country. What began as a pragmatic concession by employers to the realities of family travel and low workplace productivity has transformed into a multilayered, nationally recognized part of the Thanksgiving holiday period. Its connection to Black Friday, now a global shopping event, adds an economic dimension that binds together public behavior, private decision-making, and government operations. To understand why so many people receive the day off, and why governments and businesses continue to reinforce this practice, we must look across federal traditions, state legislation, county-level operational realities, cultural history, and the high-stakes development of Black Friday into a defining feature of modern consumer life.

Thanksgiving itself has long been a major family holiday, rooted in seventeenth-century colonial traditions and formalized as a national observance by President Abraham Lincoln in 1863 during the Civil War. As the holiday grew in national significance during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it tended to draw families from far distances, especially as rail travel expanded. The ritual of gathering for a large meal, attending religious services, and spending time with extended relatives created an expectation of familial togetherness that lent the holiday a degree of cultural weight surpassed only by Christmas. Travel patterns were such that many families would leave home the day before Thanksgiving and return over the weekend, resulting in widespread absenteeism on the Friday after Thanksgiving. Employers, especially those in office-based industries, found that this Friday quickly became characterized by low productivity, limited workflow, and diminished staffing, prompting many to simply allow employees to take the day off or use personal vacation time without resistance. This minor administrative habit evolved into something far more significant as the decades progressed.

By the early twentieth century, the expanded use of automobiles and the development of more reliable roads further increased the mobility of American families, exacerbating the pattern of post-Thanksgiving travel. As schools and universities recognized these realities, they began closing not only on Thanksgiving Day but on the entire weekend, establishing what is now universally understood as a four-day holiday for students. Some institutions even closed early on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, cementing the event as an extended break rather than a single-day observance. Once schools and universities normalized this cycle, parents and employers found themselves swept into the rhythm. When school is closed, parental attendance at work becomes more complex, childcare becomes a concern, and local traffic patterns shift. For many workplaces, giving employees the Friday off became not only a matter of convenience but a logical alignment with the broader functioning of the community.

The federal government, however, remained reluctant to add the day after Thanksgiving to the roster of official federal holidays. Federal holidays require Congressional action, and lawmakers have historically been hesitant to expand the federal holiday calendar due to cost: federal employees receive full paid leave for each federal holiday, and federal agencies must suspend normal operations. Twelve federal holidays already place the United States at the higher end of national paid holiday schedules compared with peer nations, making the addition of new holidays politically cautious. Nonetheless, federal agencies continued to experience the same absenteeism, operational slowdown, and diminished citizen demand as private workplaces. As a result, U.S. presidents occasionally issued executive orders granting early release for federal employees on the Friday after Thanksgiving or encouraging liberal use of annual leave. While this does not constitute a formal federal holiday, it reflects the practical reality that the federal workforce and therefore federal government operations are heavily shaped by community customs surrounding this date.

It is at the state level, however, where the most significant formal recognition of the day emerged. Throughout the mid- and late twentieth century, numerous states enacted legislation or administrative policy designating the Day After Thanksgiving as a state holiday. States such as California, Texas, Florida, Nevada, New Mexico, Georgia, Virginia, Delaware, and others adopted the observance, though often under different names. California recognizes it officially as the “Day After Thanksgiving” within its government holiday schedule, and its designation affects millions of state employees, from administrative workers to university staff, as well as cascading to county institutions that follow state calendars. Nevada calls it “Family Day,” highlighting the familial values associated with the long Thanksgiving weekend. Others adopted it as “Native American Heritage Day” or, in states such as Indiana and West Virginia, applied the date as a

substitute observance for Lincoln's Birthday. These variations demonstrate the flexibility with which states approached the day: the specific label mattered less than the practical effect, providing the Friday as a paid day off and aligning government operations with public expectations.

The state-level decision to close offices on this day is not merely symbolic; it has significant operational and economic implications. In many states, courts close, DMV branches shut down, and administrative offices cease processing applications, permits, benefits, and public records for the entire weekend. Staffing costs play a role, as holiday closures prevent the need for overtime pay or holiday premium pay for non-essential workers. States also recognize that citizen usage of government services collapses on this date: few people renew driver's licenses, file permits, or attend in-person hearings on the Friday after Thanksgiving. Thus, the cost-benefit analysis favors closure. When states began adopting the holiday, counties, and municipalities whose workers often followed state calendars adapted as well. Local government offices, public libraries, county clerk departments, and many court systems effectively shut down, creating a near-national halt to non-essential governmental activity even without federal coordination.

At the county and municipal level, the influence of the Day After Thanksgiving is felt in both administrative operations and local behavior. Counties often function as the primary provider of court services, public safety, transportation planning, public health outreach, and records management. When the day after Thanksgiving became a state holiday in many places, counties naturally aligned themselves with state schedules to maintain consistency for employees and the public. The ripple effect ensures that entire regions, sometimes whole states experience reduced local government operations on that date. Local courts move hearings to the following week, county offices stop accepting filings, social services programs shift to weekend hours, and public libraries either close or operate on modified schedules. For county governments, the expectation of low public use and reduced staffing availability makes the day a logical closure date. Like their state and federal counterparts, county administrators recognized that the rhythms of community activity made the Friday after Thanksgiving increasingly impractical as a standard workday.

Overlaying all this administrative and cultural history is the meteoric rise of Black Friday, which transformed the day after Thanksgiving into a defining event in American consumer culture. The term "Black Friday" originated in Philadelphia in the 1950s and 1960s, where police officers used it to describe the overwhelming congestion and chaos that occurred downtown the day after Thanksgiving as residents and suburbanites flooded the city to shop. Initially, the term had negative connotations. Retailers disliked their association with disorder, but as the shopping crowds grew and holiday sales proved highly

profitable, businesses began embracing the opportunity. By the 1970s, retailers attempted to rebrand the name by suggesting that the day marked the point in the year when their sales moved from the “red” (loss) to the “black” (profit). Although this explanation was more folklore than fact, it became widely accepted and widely repeated, giving Black Friday a positive commercial narrative.

As suburban shopping malls proliferated in the 1970s and 1980s and national retail chains expanded, the day after Thanksgiving became the unofficial kickoff of the Christmas shopping season. Retailers launched early-morning doorbuster sales designed to draw customers in large numbers. Newspapers published special advertising inserts, and television stations promoted shopping events as part of the holiday season tradition. By the 1990s, Black Friday had become the single largest shopping day of the year in the United States, commanding a level of commercial attention unmatched by any other retail period. The growing importance of Black Friday reinforced the trend of giving the day off to workers in non-retail industries, as families increasingly structured their holiday weekend around shopping, travel, and leisure rather than work.

The twenty-first century brought even more dramatic changes to the relationship between Black Friday and the Day After Thanksgiving. With the expansion of e-commerce and the emergence of Cyber Monday in the mid-2000s, the Thanksgiving shopping period extended from a single day to a full weekend and eventually into a week-long series of promotions. Retailers now begin sales on Thanksgiving night, the Monday before Thanksgiving, or even earlier in November, creating a sustained commercial period centered on the holiday. Yet Black Friday retains its cultural identity as a major shopping event, even if it no longer stands alone. For millions of Americans, particularly those not working in retail, the day off remains a cherished part of the Thanksgiving weekend a time for rest, family activities, travel, and personal traditions.

The cultural power of Black Friday also intersects with labor practices. For retail workers, the day is not a holiday but one of the most demanding shifts of the year. Retailers staff heavily, open early, and extend hours late into the night. This creates a contrasting experience wherein much of the nation is on vacation while retail employees face the most intense labor day on their calendar. The tension between leisure and labor illustrates how the Day After Thanksgiving functions as a holiday for some industries while serving as a peak operational period for others. Despite this, the broader national slowdown in government and non-retail business activity contributes to the perception of the date as a shared cultural observance.

Taken together, the Day After Thanksgiving occupies a distinct and complicated place in American life. It is not a federal holiday, yet it behaves as one. It is not uniformly

recognized by all fifty states, yet its influence is felt nationally. It is a day of rest for many, a day of intense work for others, and a day of commercial significance that shapes the rhythms of the American economy. Federal agencies acknowledge the day's effect through flexible leave policies; states codify it through formal holiday recognition; counties close offices in alignment with state calendars; businesses use it as a morale and productivity tool; schools reinforce it through academic scheduling; and families rely on it as a rare extended period of togetherness.

The Day After Thanksgiving demonstrates that not all major observances need federal blessing to shape a nation's behavior. Through cultural reinforcement, administrative necessity, and economic evolution, it has become one of the clearest examples of how tradition can function with the practical impact of law. The combination of extended family rituals, widespread travel needs, state-level administrative decisions, and the powerful commercial rise of Black Friday has cemented the Friday after Thanksgiving as a de facto holiday, embedded in the American calendar whether formally recognized or not. As long as Thanksgiving remains one of the nation's most cherished family celebrations and as long as Black Friday continues to operate as a landmark of consumer culture, the Day After Thanksgiving will carry lasting significance, shaping public behavior, government operations, and economic activity in a uniquely American fashion.