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Pardon Your Turkey and Eat Him Too: Antagonism Over Meat-Eating in the Discourse of the Presidential Thanksgiving Turkey Pardoning

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**PARDON YOUR TURKEY AND EAT HIM TOO:
ANTAGONISM OVER MEAT EATING IN THE DISCOURSE OF
THE PRESIDENTIAL PARDONING OF THE THANKSGIVING TURKEY**

Carrie Packwood Freeman & Oana Leventi-Perez

To celebrate the Thanksgiving holiday for at least the last twenty years, the President of the United States has hosted a press conference where he uses his executive powers to pardon the life of a turkey gifted to him from the National Turkey Federation, an agribusiness industry group. Considering the reality that the President (and millions of Americans) will indeed eat a turkey as the traditional centerpiece of their Thanksgiving meal, this utopian spectacle of a life-saving public pardon for one bird reveals an antagonism – a discursive rupture disclosing an opening between the hegemonic advertising rhetoric of the meat industry and the counter-hegemonic vegan rhetoric of animal rights. We wondered what this hypocritical ritual – this animal sacrifice in reverse – implies regarding American attitudes and anxieties about killing nonhuman animals for food.

“Carnism” is the term psychologist Melanie Joy coined to describe the hegemonic, taken-for-granted ideology that implicitly justifies American culture’s choice to eat animals.¹ The two main institutions that legitimize carnism are the government and the media. The government legitimizes the system through legalizing the mass slaughter and consumption of nonhuman animals and limiting their legal status to that of property, while the media “maintain the invisibility of the system and reinforce the justifications for eating meat.”² Justification relies on institutions and the public supporting three myths: “eating meat is normal, natural, and necessary.”³

In examining the legitimizing discourse of these two institutions, we discuss the results of our critical discourse analysis on White House press transcripts of the turkey-pardoning ceremony as well as its news media coverage, starting with President Bush, Sr. in 1989 to Obama in 2010. As the highest elected leader, how does the U.S. President treat the pardoning, turkeys, and the practice of eating animals? And as the watchdog of government and agenda-setters of public policy, how do the news media cover this pardon? Is it largely a whimsical human-interest story or do they view it as a hard news opportunity to investigate factory farming or the ethics of eating animals? How seriously do they take this pardoning ceremony, and how is the turkey and his/her interests represented? What does their discourse reveal about America’s identity as a meat-eating public?

This chapter contributes to an understanding of the rhetoric of food and its connection to power structures by first situating the national turkey pardoning ceremony in context of a review of literature on: Presidential pardons, animal sacrifice, meat's role in celebratory eating, modern animal agribusiness practices and laws; meat industry rhetoric versus vegan rhetoric, and news media coverage of farmed animals.

As authors and vegetarians (eaters of tofu-turkey), our discourse analysis is informed by an animal rights perspective that acknowledges that nonhuman animals are fellow sentient individuals who deserve to be valued inherently rather than instrumentally as tools/property.⁴ Peter Singer described discrimination against sentient nonhumans as an unjust, "speciesist" bias that fails to recognize their natural interest in enjoying life and avoiding suffering.⁵ Animal rights philosophy advocates that humans eat a plant-based (vegan) diet that avoids the domestication, enslavement, exploitation, or killing of animals.⁶ If sentient animals deserve rights, then the legal, institutionalized annual mass slaughter of billions of beings for unnecessary human food is nothing short of criminal – a subject certainly worthy of scholarly scrutiny.

LITERATURE REVIEW

History of the Presidential Pardon:

In the United States, executive clemency is rooted in the pardoning power of the British monarchs.⁷ Given that pardons were considered a personal gift from the monarch, "an act of grace," and were not subject to scrutiny, this power was often used for monetary and political gain.⁸ The U.S. Constitution gives the President the power to "grant reprieves and pardons for offenses against the United States."⁹ The pardon can take several forms: (1) A full pardon allows the offenders to walk away as if they had never been convicted; (2) A partial pardon relieves the offender of some of the consequences of his/her act; (3) Amnesties, which are usually granted to groups of people, imply that the offense will be forgotten; (4) Reprieves postpone the execution of the sentence; and (5) Commutations substitute a lesser for a harsher sentence.¹⁰ One major criticism of the contemporary federal clemency system is that not enough pardons are granted to deserving offenders.¹¹ Crouch argues that, in recent history, Presidents have avoided risk by only granting pardons in cases that pose no political threats, and mostly to "well-vetted offenders who have waited years for a decision, committed nonviolent offenses, or both."¹²

The origin of the Presidential pardoning of turkeys is disputed, as some believe President Truman was the first to pardon a turkey in 1947.¹³ It was not until 1989 that President George H. W. Bush first pardoned the turkeys received for Thanksgiving, initiating an annual tradition.¹⁴ Since then, a turkey and an alternate, chosen in case the first bird is unable to "perform," have been pardoned each year. The alternates are sometimes called "Vice Turkeys."¹⁵ Until 2005, the pardoned turkeys were sent to a working farm in Frying Pan Park in Herndon, VA, "where many died within months."¹⁶ After that, they were sent to one of the Disney resorts. In 2010, as Disneyland started looking for new attractions, Washington's Mount Vernon Estate in Virginia became the turkey's new destination.¹⁷

Factory Farming and Turkeys:

For the 97% of Americans who eat animals,¹⁸ animal products comprise over a quarter of the average American's caloric intake.¹⁹ To satisfy this high demand, the USDA estimates agribusiness kills over nine billion land animals annually, the majority of which are birds.²⁰

Specifically, 250 million turkeys are slaughtered annually, with approximately a fifth of these eaten on Thanksgiving day.²¹ The scale of the slaughter necessitates that modern animal farming employ industrial methods, warehousing animals in “factory farms,” also called “confined animal feeding operations” (CAFOs).²²

A turkey CAFO will house hundreds or thousands of birds, averaging just three square feet of space per individual.²³ Their beaks and toes are painfully clipped off without anesthesia, a cheap manipulation meant to reduce the lethality of aggression caused by the frustratingly dense, unnatural conditions for these social animals. Because they are bred to have abnormally large chests to meet consumer demand for breast meat, turkeys frequently suffer lameness and heart attacks due to obesity. In fact, they can no longer mate naturally, and the artificial insemination process is a rough and stressful sexual violation.²⁴ When deemed optimally profitable, the turkeys are crammed into trucks and transported to the slaughterhouse. The stressful and fast-paced slaughtering process involves them being shackled upside down by their feet, with their heads run through an electric stunning bath before a worker slits their throats. Conscious or not, they are run through the scalding bath and dismembered on a production line.²⁵

No federal laws exist to protect animals while on the farm (only in transport), and the Humane Slaughter Act doesn't cover birds. State anti-cruelty laws often exempt standard agricultural practices, so cruelty prosecutions are rare.²⁶ However, animal protection groups have started passing statewide reforms via the referendum process, which subverts agribusiness lobbyists, to provide animals more space in accordance with public opinion.²⁷

Consumers often wonder if organic or free-range is much better.²⁸ Federal organic standards do not dictate much regarding humane treatment, as it is more about increasing consumer health benefits. But standards do prevent birds from being genetically modified and allow them access to the outdoors, even though they can still be warehoused. This is similar to “free range” categories that don't guarantee that each bird makes it outdoors and don't specify length of time outdoors nor the quality of that experience.²⁹

Animal Sacrifice & Celebratory Meat-Eating:

The food symbolism associated with highly ritualized special events reveals a lot about the society in which it is constructed.³⁰ Historically, the symbolic value of meat consumption was derived from the scarcity of this resource, reserved for the wealthy. In prehistoric society, meat distribution was traditionally associated with “royal” status, thus setting one of the preconditions for social inequality.³¹ Animal sacrifice was a phenomenon of early domesticity, but through widespread domestication, animals gradually lost their spiritual symbolic dimensions and were viewed more instrumentally. Bulliet notes that sacrificial ceremony's decline was ironically marked by an increase in animal slaughter, concluding that “the decline in blood sacrifice does not equate to a rise in the humane treatment of animals.”³²

Historian Kimberly Patton claims the sacrificial animal is considered special from the rest of the flock – a more perfect specimen with a relationship to God.³³ Michael Pollan proposes that the religious rituals related to animal sacrifice reflect humanity's historic discomfort and shame over the killing of animals for food, even when necessary for survival: “Many cultures have offered sacrificial animals to the gods, perhaps as a way to convince themselves it was the gods' appetite that demanded the slaughter, and not their own”³⁴ Humane Society President Wayne Pacelle notes that animal sacrifice represented a “highly personal moral tension” over killing the innocent; the ritualistic ceremony is meant to show remorseful respect and offer atonement, “washing away the taint of violence”³⁵ Malinowski's ethnographies found that, to ease the guilt,

many cultures prefer to believe that animals (whether hunted or sacrificially-killed) offer themselves voluntarily.³⁶

Today, meat eating is rooted in the dominant economic and philosophical systems of capitalism and anthropocentrism. In a world that celebrates consumerism as a given right, and where material and economic growth is deemed essential for human progress, nonhuman animals are mere resources for human use. In her culinary analysis of American culture, Willard concludes “The primary theme is the glory of meat in a capitalist environment: Meat, it’s a good investment for the body, the family, the economy, and the land.”³⁷

Pro-Meat and Anti-Meat Rhetoric:

“Beef. It’s What’s For Dinner,” was the popular slogan for the American beef industry’s advertising campaign in the early 1990’s. The campaign’s slogan implies that animals exist to be eaten, and mutes carnivorous imagery with the traditional representation of the family dinner.³⁸ And fast food advertising often promotes meat-eating as central to hedonistic heterosexual male bonding in defiance of femininity and social or ecological responsibility.³⁹ This way, both producers and consumers distance themselves from the reality of animal consumption. Mass terms like “meat,” “hamburger,” and “leather” used instead of “dead animal,” “cow,” or “skin” encourage consumers to forget that they are eating or using a dead animal.⁴⁰ According to ecofeminist Carol Adams, this muting is typical for the colloquial speakers’ pleasurable talk of meat. Whether used literally or figuratively, meat is an omnipresent, positively evocative symbol in American culture.

The symbolic values that meat takes can be situated within a broader political-cultural context, and can mirror the entire American belief system.⁴¹ To study the social meanings the American marketplace assigns to meat, Heinz and Lee⁴² applied a Burkean cluster analysis to 50 meat-based texts, which revealed six associational clusters: Product (where the discourse of meat consumption dissociates the product of consumption from the living animal), Food (where meat is established as natural human food, associated with entertainment), Meal (here meat is the one food that makes a meal and is seen as a necessity), Tradition (messages in popular culture establish meat consumption’s traditional place in U.S. life, giving it pious and patriotic connotations), Masculinity (meat-eating is a masculine activity), and, finally, Health (here meat consumption is placed in the context of healthier eating). Overall, this analysis concluded that contemporary culture structures perceptions so that the raising and killing of animals for food becomes a taken-for-granted, natural part of life. Cultural taboos demand the invisibility of meat production and by obscuring the violence, meat products are made more palatable.

Contrarily, in the much less pervasive pro-vegan rhetoric, American animal activists focused on framing problems with meat as: cruelty and suffering; commodification of animals; harm to humans and the environment; and needless killing. Activists primarily blamed factory farming and sometimes advocated for less cruel farming practices, but the most common solution was for consumers to go vegan or reduce animal product consumption.⁴³

Journalistic Coverage of Farmed Animals:

The commercial influence of a pervasive and legalized meat industry is strong, which may account for why speciesism and the ideology of carnism are cultural values that Freeman found national news tends to impose on audiences, naturalizing and legitimizing the exploitation of farmed animals.⁴⁴ This discriminatory perspective is so naturalized that journalists and the public often don’t acknowledge it as a bias. To prevent dissonance, Joy notes people defensively distort reality by internalizing carnism through three cognitive processes: they objectify animals,

de-individualize animals to prevent identification and connection, and dichotomize animals into separate categories, such as edible/inedible.⁴⁵ These cognitive processes are similar to the three framing processes Freeman found the U.S. national media typically use when constructing farmed animals: journalists deny animals individual identities, commodify beings into bodies, and fail to acknowledge animals' emotions and ethical aspects of their predicaments.⁴⁶ Additionally, Joy claims media often legitimize carnism through: omitting strong exposes that challenge agribusiness, prohibiting animal rights perspectives, and diminishing the scope of farmed animal cruelty by portraying it as isolated scandals rather than systemic problems.⁴⁷

METHODOLOGY

As communication scholars, we take a Foucauldian social constructivist stance in noting the fundamental power of communication, namely discourse, to make meaning and construct truth on a topic rather than communication merely reflecting an existing and fixed reality.⁴⁸ In this study we view the government and the media as powerful players actively constructing, participating in, and maintaining a discursive regime of truth defining the meaning of turkeys, Thanksgiving, and carnism within an American cultural context. To examine this, we conducted a critical discourse analysis based on Van Dijk's model, described more as a perspective than a method: "critical discourse studies scholars are typically interested in the way discourse (re)produces social *domination*, that is, the *power abuse* of one group over others."⁴⁹ Here we examined discursive themes, both implicit and explicit, that reveal how meaning is made and ideology is functioning. We deconstructed the implicit hypocrisy of publicly celebrating a pardon of one, named turkey while privately killing millions of other nameless turkeys, as it serves as an antagonism. Laclau and Mouffe define antagonism as a limit to a discourse, which reveals inconsistencies undercutting the legitimacy of the discourse's accepted "truth."⁵⁰

Our sample contained transcripts of Presidential Thanksgiving press conferences from 1989 – 2010 (except for a lack of access to years 1995-96). And the news media sample for the same two decades consisted of 66 stories on the pardoning from major national news organizations: *The Washington Post* (37), *The New York Times* (16), and *NPR* (13), including hard news, features, and editorials/op-eds (excluding letters to the editor).

We asked the following research questions:

- How seriously is the pardoning ceremony taken and what view of turkeys does that imply? To what extent does the government or journalism consider the turkey's perspective versus an anthropocentric perspective?
- What does the discourse reveal about the function or purpose of the President pardoning a turkey's life on Thanksgiving?
- How does the government and journalism construct America's identity as a meat-eating public? To what extent do they challenge versus support carnism?

FINDINGS

Press Conference Presidential Discourse:

White House press conferences generally discussed a turkey's life not in terms of a right to life but in terms of Presidents mercifully choosing to spare him from his destined purpose of ending up on the dinner table (what Obama in 2009 called a "terrible and delicious fate"), for a future where he can now enjoy a "life of leisure."⁵¹ Most Presidents mentioned "life," focusing on the bird "living out" his years, days, or life at a park. While Presidents throughout the 1990s focused on the turkey living *years*, as of 2000 Presidents always said *days*, perhaps as a way to imply, rather than openly acknowledge what some journalists and activists reported, that a modern turkey's unnatural body cannot live years.⁵² Use of the word "retirement" by all Presidents implied the turkey's *job* is to be food, and, having been relieved of this work, he is free to enjoy his "golden years"⁵³ Clinton emotively described the birds' future as "happy" while G.W. Bush often focused on it as safe and comfortable.

The only acknowledged threat to the pardoned turkeys' safety was the Presidents' dogs (Ranger, Barney, and Bo). This common prediction, while playful, implies nonhuman animals are less self-disciplined than humans when it comes to predation. Being implicitly rational and in control, men choose to "spare" the birds, an act Presidents sometimes characterized with humane terms such as "compassion" or "mercy." However, in his first ceremony, Obama played into masculine meat-eating stereotypes when he joked that the only thing that saved Courage the turkey was his wife and daughter's intervention because "I was planning to eat this sucker."

No President ever mentions vegetarianism or implied he or others should not eat turkeys, as the ceremony glorifies the agribusiness industry and honors the National Turkey Federation executives. In 2009 Obama mentioned he would "take two of their less fortunate brethren [turkeys]" to feed the homeless and said he didn't blame other Presidents for eating their turkeys because "that's a good looking bird." It's assumed that Presidents will be eating a non-pardoned turkey, yet the only President who openly admitted this was Clinton in 1999 saying "before I feast on one of the 45 million turkeys...." While many Presidents lauded this same national statistic of annual turkey consumption, in 1992 a National Turkey Federation executive instead quantified turkeys by total body *weight*, not lives lost, boasting farmers "produce five billion pounds of ready-to-cook turkey meat annually." These millions of birds may be "produced," "served," or "consumed," but were never said to be "killed," "dead," or "slaughtered." Pardoned birds would be spared simply from ending up on the "dinner table," not explicitly from slaughterhouses or the knife. In fact, turkey deaths were sometimes euphemized as a voluntary "sacrifice" on their part⁵⁴ or an "irreplaceable contribution" to our Thanksgiving.⁵⁵

Often their deaths were made light of, as almost every Presidential ceremony joked about the pardoning. For example, in three ceremonies G.W. Bush used the same "neck-and-neck" pun (presumably referring to the ringing or eating of a bird's neck) to describe the tight race to name the birds in the online contest. In 2007, he said Vice President Chaney wanted to name the turkeys Lunch and Dinner, and in 2003 and 2005, he joked about them not wanting to go to "Frying Pan Park." His puns were timely for the election year in 2004, naming a fictional political group "Barnyard Animals for Truth" and a fake documentary "Fahrenheit 375 Degrees at 10 Minutes Per Pound." Presidents liked to play off the dual meaning of the word "turkey," by referencing its derogatory connotation as a description for inept or foolish men – namely politicians. For example Clinton said 1997 marks the 50th year "we give one more turkey in Washington a second chance" and that, in 1999, the agricultural state of Minnesota was no match

for DC when it comes to producing turkeys. These self-deprecating insults toward politicians reveal humans' derogatory beliefs about turkeys' mental capabilities (as well as elected officials').

Obama was the only President to mock the pardoning ceremony as beneath the dignity of the President, implicitly belittling the birds' lives. In 2010 he said sarcastically that it was "one of the most important duties that I carry out... as the leader of the most powerful nation on Earth. Today I have the awesome responsibility of granting a Presidential pardon to a pair of turkeys" and, the previous year, he joked "There are certain days that remind me of why I ran for this office—and then, there are moments like this – where I pardon a turkey and send it [sic] to Disneyland." He was reluctant to pardon them that year and said he had to do it before he changed his mind, even noting how the 45 pound (pardoned) birds could "feed a lot of folks."

This illuminates another theme –anthropocentrism – where all Presidents prioritized human interests. Saving the birds' lives was silly and sweet, but military troops protecting *human* lives was serious and a source of pride to be grateful for each Thanksgiving. No jokes were made when discussing military personnel, needy families, or patriotic Americans at every ceremony. Many Presidents talked about being grateful for our freedom and sense of justice. In 2002 G.W. Bush said "We remember those in other lands who suffer under oppression, who long for freedom. And we pray that they might one day live in a world at peace and in a free society." There is no mention of the ironic fact that millions of American turkeys (and billions of other farmed animals) languish in America's factory farms and suffer under a legal oppression, not having freedom over their own bodies or lives. When Presidents frequently laud the American public for its generosity, good heart, and compassion, they are clearly thinking about the way Americans are supposed to treat fellow *humans*, as it would not be a fair or applicable commentary on how Americans treat nonhuman beings.

Turkeys themselves are not officially or seriously given a voice or an advocate at the Thanksgiving ceremony. While the President welcomes and thanks National Turkey Federation executives and turkey farmers who present him with the turkey gifts, he doesn't officially invite any animal protection organizations nor publicly accept gifts of produce or plant-based meats. The ceremony is an agribusiness marketing opportunity where Presidents proudly recognize the top turkey-producing states and individual farmers who raised the Presidential birds. While the birds often do vocalize at some point, their gobbling tends to produce laughter and jokes where the President mocks the idea that the turkeys understand what is happening and have something to say. Almost every ceremony transcript reveals a joke about the turkeys being nervous guests because they don't yet know they are getting a life-saving pardon. Presumably, this is funny so long as it is ridiculous to think a turkey has awareness, rationality, and any ability to purposefully communicate.

In a few cases Presidents do acknowledge the subject status of the birds such as when G.W. Bush directed his welcome at Biscuit himself in 2004. And in 2002 he said he was looking forward to having a conversation with Katie (first female bird pardoned). Yet he got her gender wrong prior to this, and like many Presidents, often used the objectifying pronoun "it" to describe birds of any gender. George Bush, Sr. tended to correctly say "he." While Presidents often described the birds in objectifying terms regarding looks/size, occasionally they are described by personality, such as G.W. Bush saying Stars was "friendly" in 2003. But the most unique and least objectifying comment in support of turkeys was made by Clinton in 1999:

One of the most interesting things I've discovered in the seven years we've done this is that turkeys really do have personalities, very different ones. And most all of them have been quite welcoming to the President and to the children who want to pet them. On occasion, they're as independent as the rest of Americans. So, Harry, you got your Pardon.

Journalism Discourse:

Out of the 66 news stories examined, we categorized 55 as feature stories, 7 as hard news, and 4 as editorials. The vast majority of the feature stories (42) assumed a solely anthropocentric stance, often morphing into human-interest stories about Thanksgiving traditions or the pardoning record of Presidents. By rendering the birds as edible products, most news stories failed to expose the harsh realities of factory farming nor challenged the mainstream ideology of carnism by legitimizing less cruel modes of consumption, such as vegetarianism. Among the feature stories, 13 contained some less anthropocentric commentary that acknowledged the subject status of the birds, exposed their objectification, or attempted to give them a voice by offering animal rights activist perspectives.

Most of the news stories revolved around humans and their values, anthropocentrism being a dominant theme reflected in both feature stories and editorials. Furthermore, while most features discussed the Thanksgiving holiday, its historical importance and associated traditions, consumption of turkey meat was presented as a natural, undisputable part of the celebration. By reinforcing the assumption that turkeys belong on the dinner table, journalists negated the subject status of the bird and perpetuated their conceptualization as products, thus legitimizing the need for factory farming. Following the naturalization of carnism, associations between turkeys and food were trivialized – deprived of any dramatic connotations. For example, in a *Washington Post* feature story, Roig-Franzia⁵⁶ equated turkeys with “pounds of potentially mouth-watering deliciousness,” *Washington Post*'s Heim⁵⁷ described the birds as “deliciously departed” and *NPR*'s Michelle Norris⁵⁸ called the President's introduction at the pardoning ceremony “an important culinary announcement.”

Pictures featuring the turkey surrounded by smiling, proud industry representatives rendered the association of the bird with a trophy obvious: the National Turkey Federation offers their largest, best looking product to the Chief of State as proof of their ability to successfully manipulate the breed, a practice some journalists call the future of the industry. The fact that this celebrated exchange takes place at a time when millions of turkeys are inhumanly slaughtered remains largely unacknowledged; instead, caught in the marketing vibe, several feature stories celebrate the National Turkey Federation and Butterball, cite their representatives, and praise their ability to feed the hungry nation, all while recognizing the fact that birds are raised for meat (not longevity) as a given.

In several instances, the turkey pardoning ceremony served as a pretext for human interest stories. The Presidential pardoning of *humans*, for example, is discussed in five feature stories and three editorials where the turkey pardoning is used as an opportunity to critique the Presidents' misuse of his pardoning powers by sparing poultry instead of deserving humans. For example, in a *Washington Post* editorial, Gill expressed hopes that clemency scores will favor humans in the future,⁵⁹ and in a *New York Times* editorial, Lardner⁶⁰ briefly mentioned the turkey pardoning before launching a critique of Obama's pardoning record, as does *NPR*'s host Kelly.⁶¹ The ethical concerns voiced in these human interest stories do not extend to nonhuman animals.

The life-sparing ceremony for turkeys is considered a mere diversion from the more important, controversial matters, which always involve human subjects.

Additional examples abound of turkey pardoning stories morphing into human interest stories. Haygood⁶² used the pardoning of Katie, the first female turkey, as an opportunity to list famous women's achievements in history, while Walker chose to focus on the video tours offered by the White House, which happened to include a webcast of Bush's "playful" encounter with Katie.⁶³ Whether the stories entertain by telling us how Martha Stewart celebrates Thanksgiving or inform by explaining how the holiday is observed abroad, most fail to give turkeys a voice and acknowledge them as sentient beings with rights and emotions.

A few of the journalists attempted to revert to a less anthropocentric perspective and use the "bird world" as a point of reference, but the validity of this perspective was usually discredited by humorous remarks.⁶⁴ For example, in a *Washington Post* feature story, Tucker explained that "in the short, happy life of your farm-raised turkey, the end is a terrible thing to contemplate" and the fact that they are eaten is sad (for them).⁶⁵ Journalists poked fun at the turkeys for disregarding human conventions by gobbling back at the President and by having "accidents." At the same time, stories made fun of how the Presidential turkeys are treated to upscale human experiences. As birds soil hotel rooms and tables, officials feel the need to excuse this uncivilized, taboo behavior. For example, as the turkeys carelessly proceeded to relieve themselves in the private airport cabin of "Turkey One," the captain reassured us that "Everybody poops."⁶⁶

Several articles described the unfolding of the ceremony, including the preparations and aftermath. Most descriptions focused on appearances: if the birds looked good and acted docile, the event was considered a success. Turkey breeding and the selection of the pardonable turkeys were also discussed, with little or no mention of the horrible lives most birds endure in CAFOs. Furthermore, some journalists followed the birds after the ceremony and reported on how they were transported in a police-escorted motorcade and travelled to their destination with representatives of the National Turkey Federation in a first-class airplane cabin. But few noted the turkeys stress at being kept in kennels, shuffled through busy airports, barked at by dogs, ironically stored in hotel kitchens, and sometimes even drugged.

While some journalists consider the pardoning ceremony to be royal treatment and others see it as a display of excess, a handful of articles sympathetically described the turkeys as unwilling, terrified participants. The bird's extreme weight, trimmed beak, large size, white color, and lameness were most often used to illustrate his/her unnatural appearance and behavior. In a *Washington Post* story, Tucker described "real" turkeys in opposition to commercially bred turkeys in order to expose the negative consequences of the human manipulation of the birds' bodies.⁶⁷ Tucker explained that, unlike wild turkeys, commercial birds are rendered unable to fly and reproduce on their own, while their lifespan is dramatically shortened.

Few articles acknowledge that the pardoning ceremony serves as a diversion from the realities of factory farming. In this respect, emphasis falls on the pardon as staged performance, with the President and the turkey acting out predetermined, manicured roles. While the President uses this opportunity to show a lighter playful side to the public, make turkey jokes, and tie in references to patriotism and current political events, the turkey is washed, fluffed, perfumed (and even drugged on occasion), so as to look pleasing and remain placid while being shuffled around on stage like a prop. Theatrical references abound: the "star"⁶⁸ turkey "performs"⁶⁹ and has a White House "gig,"⁷⁰ the alternate turkey is the "understudy,"⁷¹ and the public witnesses a "bit of holiday theater."⁷²

Some stories critique this performance, noting the lack of substance in this sugar-coated display of holiday benevolence. A few stories gave critical details, such as the fact that pardoned turkeys are often production birds used for breeding who would not have been slaughtered anyway, most of them die shortly after the ceremony because of in-bred physical ailments, and the President also receives other (frozen) turkeys which he consumes. Some stories also provided statistics on the millions of turkeys consumed in the United States. These insights defined the pardoning as an isolated incident, the purpose and validity of which remain questionable – one that does not reflect/affect the fate of all the other commercially-bred turkeys.

The protests staged by animal rights groups during the ceremony provided a context for inclusion of stories about animal abuse in several instances, where words like “slaughter” and “decapitation” balance the benign and happy rhetoric featured in the ceremony.⁷³ Feature stories sometimes focused in closely to profile a single activist, such as Karen Davis of United Poultry Concerns, a vegan activist, and children’s author Lisa Suhai, who advocated for a pig pardon. While these stories were useful in outlining the differences between the lives of rescued turkeys and those abused by industry, they tended to emphasize the hardships associated with adopting turkeys and serve as a deterrent, emphasizing that “it is not like adopting a kitten or a puppy.”⁷⁴ Furthermore, as an alternative that could challenge the hegemonic conceptualization of humans as meat-eaters, vegetarianism is rarely mentioned in the news discourse on “Turkey Day.” It is mentioned mostly in the stories featuring animal rights activists.

CONCLUSION

What does the discourse reveal about the function or purpose of the President pardoning a turkey’s life on Thanksgiving? Given that someone can be officially pardoned only if he/she committed a federal crime, the reasoning behind a ceremony pardoning an innocent turkey deserves examination. The “crime” that warrants a death sentence for millions of birds must be their status as nonhumans – exploitable and “delicious.” But how would being nonhuman represent a crime against the United States? Perhaps the legalized enslavement and slaughter of millions of individuals belies the myth that America provides “liberty and justice for all.” But this guilt-inducing antagonism that calls American integrity into question is hardly treasonous. So the White House doesn’t apply a criminal frame to the pardoning and instead employs a retirement frame. Presidents are granting the birds a reprieve from their “job” of serving humans, so they can retire to a life of leisure. This does admit that birds want to live and experience happiness, but the meaningfulness of their lives is belittled by the retirement frame. It connotes an emptiness and lack of utility, as if the birds have nothing to do or to be outside serving humans.

The fact that the Presidents avoid violent rhetoric when talking about turkeys on Thanksgiving, and even in some cases euphemistically insinuate the birds willingly make the “ultimate sacrifice” to be a celebratory meal, implies some guilt and discomfort with the unseen massacre. The pardon then fits within an animal sacrifice framework of atonement and a need to cleanse one’s guilt. Yet we are calling it an “animal sacrifice in reverse,” as the President openly saves two turkeys while legally sanctioning the closed-door killing of millions of others. This demonstrates Bulliet’s⁷⁵ point that domesticated societies might avoid animal sacrifice, but they kill less ceremoniously in greater quantities.

It is actually the National Turkey Federation who is offering the sacrifice, as they are the ones who really need forgiveness. They offer up their best specimens as a gift, not for the gods,

but for the ruler – the head of the State that grants their business permission to function, largely unregulated. Yet his pardon can be seen as a *rejection* of their sacrificial gift, at least in a largely symbolic sense. The President's pardon embodies the ruling species' discomfort with accepting its self-appointed dominance over other animals – a poignant yet hollow attempt to construct humanity's rule as benevolent and earn its title as the “humane” species.

How seriously is the pardoning ceremony taken and what view of turkeys does that imply? The White House understands the hypocritical and nonsensical nature of the pardon, as evidenced by the way the ceremony is trivialized and mocked through levity. It is a staged performance, with the turkey as the comic star with the silly stage name.⁷⁶ This theatrical frame symbolizes its inauthenticity as well as its entertainment purpose. Although they try to disguise the innate commercialism of this PR event by highlighting agriculture's economic impact, ultimately it serves as an advertising opportunity for the turkey industry and the American brand. Therefore it must be made pleasant and entertaining – a mood befitting the consumptive spirit of the holiday. Thanksgiving is about gratitude, and criticism has no place at the table. So the turkey industry is as safe here as the pardoned bird. Journalists often mirror the playful tone, using whimsical pun-filled headlines; as they poke fun at the President, the turkey, and officials, they stimulate their audiences' appetite for festivity as well as food.

To what extent does the government or journalism consider the turkey's perspective versus an anthropocentric perspective? The discourse reinforces the human/animal dichotomy, such that putting turkeys in a human context is a humorous anthropomorphism. The birds flout human conventions by interrupting the President and defecating openly. Emphasizing the birds' lack of humanity enables the discourse to privilege the lives, needs, desires and luxuries of humans as paramount over the interests of nonhumans. The discourse implicitly acknowledges the birds' sentience and *desire* to live, but not their *right* to live. The pardon demonstrates humanity's power to be merciful to animals when it chooses. But it is a hollow and hypocritical gesture, as the government, and the news media for the most part, fail to acknowledge or criticize the everyday cruelties humans impose on millions of nonhumans.

How do the government and journalism construct America's identity as a meat-eating public? To what extent does the discourse challenge carnism? As Joy notes, when media maintain the invisibility of animal suffering, it perpetuates the view of American carnism as “normal, natural, and necessary.”⁷⁷ Meat was indeed portrayed as normal and natural (with some journalistic critique of unnatural modern farming), but its status as necessary is a gray area. Needy families were in need of a donated holiday turkey to satisfy their hunger, yet the presence of animal rights activists in some stories reminded the public that humans don't *need* animal-based foods. But holiday feasting isn't about merely meeting needs; it is about celebrating abundance and indulgence, as symbolized by meat at the table.

The discourse also fits Heinz & Lee's⁷⁸ social meanings of meat as a traditional, healthy main meal, presided over by men. The one exception may be meat as product, as the live turkey's public presence shatters the comfortable distance Americans tend to put between the animal and his/her flesh. This connection with an individual, named bird probably explains the necessity for the pardon, as both the President and the public don't want to meet their meat.

Other examples of a discursive challenge to carnism include when President Clinton⁷⁹ acknowledged that the birds each have different personalities. He even counted them *as*

Americans, saying they are just as independent. And a few journalists did criticize the hypocrisy of the event, noting the President eats a turkey anyway and the pardoned turkeys don't live long. Animal rights activists generally served as the only prod for journalism to construct a more critical frame and foreground factory farming and, in some cases, its antidote, vegetarianism.

Yet, despite these exceptions, the discourse generally conveyed that the President pardoning a Thanksgiving turkey is as traditional, joyful, and natural as Americans eating one. This maintains the hegemony of a carnistic culture, thereby avoiding spoiling America's appetite or its humane identity.

NOTES

¹ Melanie Joy, *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows: An Introduction to Carnism*. San Francisco: Conari Press, 2010. 29-30.

² *Ibid.*, 103.

³ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁴ Gary Francione, *Rain Without Thunder: The Ideology of the Animal Rights Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996), 4. And Tom Regan, *The Case for Animal Rights* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), 235-243.

⁵ Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation*. (London: Random House, 1990), 6.

⁶ Regan, *Case for Animal Rights*, 331-351. Francione, *Rain Without Thunder*, 109-202.

⁷ Jonathan Menitove, "The Problematic Presidential Pardon: A Proposal for Reforming Federal Clemency," *Harvard Law & Policy Review* 3 no.2 (2009): 449.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 449.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 447, Article II, Section 2, Clause I of Constitution.

¹⁰ Kathleen Dean Moore, *Pardons: Justice, Mercy, and the Public Interest* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 5.

¹¹ Menitove, *Problematic Presidential Pardon*, 453. And Jeffrey Crouch, *The Presidential Pardon Power* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 147.

¹² Crouch, *Presidential Pardon Power*, 2

¹³ "Truman Trivia," Truman Library and Museum, www.trumanlibrary.org. But library staff can find no records of Truman pardoning a turkey.

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¹⁵ Manuel Roig-Franzia, "Thankfully, Bush Never Had an Ax to Grind," *Washington Post*, Nov. 27, 2008, www.washingtonpost.com

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- ²³ "Factory poultry production." *Farm Sanctuary*. <http://www.farmsanctuary.org/issues/factoryfarming/poultry/>
- ²⁴ Singer & Mason, *Ethics of What We Eat*, 28.
- ²⁵ Factory Poultry Production, *Farm Sanctuary*.
- ²⁶ Paige Tomaselli and Meredith Niles, "Changing the Law." *CAFO Reader*. Editor: Imhoff (Watershed Media, 2010) 317-319.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 319.
- ²⁸ "Agency Reports," USDA, www.usda.gov. 88% of Americans eat turkey on Thanksgiving, but only 1% of these turkeys are organically raised.
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- ⁴² Heinz and Lee, "Down to the Meat."
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- ⁴⁶ Freeman, *Little Piggy Went to Press*, 13.
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⁷⁶ Themes for names usually related to Food (Pumpkin & Pecan, Apple & Cider, Biscuits & Gravy), Patriotism (May & Flower, Liberty & Freedom, Stars & Stripes) or Humor (Flyer & Fryer).

⁷⁷ Joy, *Why We Love Dogs*, 96.

⁷⁸ Heinz and Lee, *Down to the Meat*, 86.

⁷⁹ Clinton went vegan in 2010.