

Nixon set in motion clash over Christmas

What was Richard Nixon's biggest mistake? Watergate? Not by a long shot. He screwed up even bigger when he signed Executive Order 11582. That's when Christmas became a federal holiday. Retail checkout lines and newspaper op-ed pages haven't been the same since.

Of the 10 federal holidays, Christmas is the only real problem. Given the "Merry Christmas" vs. "Happy Holidays" controversy, it's worth trying to understand why.

It's not because Christmas is controversial. Martin Luther King Jr. was controversial, but he still gets a holiday. Columbus Day is even more controversial, at least among the liberal left. That's the liberals' tough luck.

Nor can we say that Christmas deserves special attention because of its religious origins. Thanksgiving's origins are clearly religious, but no one seems to mind a cheery "Happy Thanksgiving" from a sales clerk. There's something else going on with Christmas.

National holidays are intended to unify us, to express a shared vision of what it means to be an American. Christmas is different because it is divisive.

I'm not speaking here of the holiday's universal message of "Peace on Earth, Good Will Toward Men." If that were all the holiday were about, we wouldn't have a problem.

Christmas is divisive because the holiday was religious in origin but has become secularized. That shift is the subject of intense disagreement among Americans.

We now use the word "Christmas" to mean two completely different things. There's the holiday that affirms the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth, the miracle of his birth and the reality of his resurrection. That's the original meaning of Christmas.

But with the emergence of modernity, religious neutrality and capitalism, we have a second meaning that is just as widely if not more understood.

"Christmas" is the holiday on which people wish peace on earth, give gifts and visit Santa Claus.

Which of these is our national holiday? All our concerns over "Merry Christmas" vs. "Happy Holidays," and "Christmas Vacation" vs. "Winter Vacation" hinge on the answer to this question. Ultimately, it comes down to whether you want to be inclusive or



OPINION
BARRY FAGIN
Contributing columnist

express your faith.

In a country with freedom of religion, if your faith claims to possess the one and only truth, you have to choose between the two.

Seen in this light, it's silly to view "Happy Holidays" in a shopping mall as an attack on Christianity.

Shopkeepers are in the business of attracting as many customers as possible. Given the two wildly different meanings of "Christmas," they'll go for inclusiveness every time.

Christian businesses are of course welcome to have their employees say "Merry Christmas" in its original religious sense and make the private choice of public faith. That's their right, and is exactly how the issue of what to say to customers should be decided in the marketplace. How could anyone argue otherwise?

It's the same with "Christmas Vacation" vs. "Winter Vacation." Trying to replace the former with the latter is not an "attack on Christianity." It is an attempt to favor inclusion over an expression of faith, by replacing something that not everyone experiences or believes (the religious ideas of Christmas) with something that we all share (the season of winter). Going the other way favors the public expression of faith. If everyone believed Christmas was a purely secular holiday, no one would care one way or the other.

So what are we going to do? Until we decide which of the two meanings we want to attach to the word "Christmas," this problem is not going to go away. Which is why we need two different words, and two different holidays to celebrate. One should be public, and the other private.

The national holiday has to be secular — there's no way around that. Nothing else is consistent with the First Amendment's free exercise and establishment clauses. If we want to call it "Christmas," fine, but it has to mean "the holiday with Santa Claus and presents."

If you'd rather put the "Christ" back in "Christmas," that's fine too, but it's got to come off the federal calendar. I just can't see any other solution.

Then, and only then, will we be able to stop fighting about Christmas. Religious or secular, if the holiday is about peace on earth, it's the right thing to do.

Fagin, of Colorado Springs, is a senior fellow at the Independence Institute. His column appears on alternate Thursdays. Readers may e-mail him at barry@faginfamily.net.