

Turkey Pardons

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Last week, President Trump pardoned Drumstick, a 36-pound turkey. What's the legal basis for the annual ritual of a president pardoning a turkey? When did the tradition start? And what becomes of the birds post-pardon? This post gives you authoritative information about turkey pardons.

Legal basis. There isn't any. Article II, section 2 of the [Constitution](#) grants the president the "Power to grant Reprieves and Pardons for Offences against the United States." Being a turkey isn't a federal crime, so there is nothing to pardon, legally speaking.

Origins. I have reviewed multiple accounts of the history of the tradition, including those available through [the White House Historical Association](#), [Snopes](#), and [Legal Business Edge](#). Synthesizing those sources, it seems that Abraham Lincoln may have spared the life of a Thanksgiving turkey based on the entreaty of his young son. More recently, John F. Kennedy announced that he would not eat a turkey presented to him by the California Turkey Advisory Board, but neither he nor Lincoln used the word "pardon." In fact, the first formal pardon was granted by President George H.W. Bush, who stated that the White House turkey was "granted a presidential pardon as of right now, allowing him to live out his days on a farm not far from here." Since then, the president has pardoned at least one turkey each fall.

Post-pardon life. The Atlantic covers the care and maintenance of presidential turkeys [here](#). Before the ceremony, the selected birds are flown to Washington on a private plane dubbed "Turkey One," then are escorted to "a private, sawdust-lined room at the historic Willard InterContinental Hotel." After the pardon, the birds are taken to a variety of luxurious accommodations. Some have gone to "Morven Park, a Virginia historical site and lush estate belonging to the state's former governor," where they "roam Turkey Hill," a half-acre turkey habitat. According to Virginia Tech, the pardoned birds from the last two years have gone to Blacksburg to live at "Gobbler's Rest," where they gladly receive visitors. Unfortunately, because the birds are bred for rapid growth and heavy breasts, they tend to suffer from health problems as adults and often live a year or less after being pardoned.

Photographic evidence. A collection of photographs of presidents pardoning turkeys is available [here](#) courtesy of Business Insider. The picture of President George W. Bush, in particular, is a classic.