

Reflections upon the National Anthem – Part I – History, Justification and Themes

The following is the first part of a reflection upon our National Anthem. Almost all Americans know the first verse of the Star Spangled Banner (although even that knowledge sometimes seems to be fading.) However, very few people know all four verses of the patriotic hymn, or understand the history, symbolism and poetic beauty behind it. This article will discuss the overall background of the song, reasons for its adoption as our National Anthem, and its overall themes. Part II of this discussion will draw out the subtle beauty of each of its four verses.

A. History of the Star Spangled Banner

In 1814, Francis Scott Key was a 35 year old married lawyer and poet in Georgetown. He was the son of patriotic couple, with his father having served in the Continental Army and later as a judge, and his family having helped finance the local American military. Francis Scott Key was also a devout Christian who prayed with his household at least twice a day and composed hymns for his local church. He and his wife eventually had 11 children. And in 1818 he joined the American Biblical Society, which was dedicated to Biblical literacy and Christian social reforms including the abolition of slavery. (Imagine what Planned Parenthood and the ACLU would say now about his bringing religion into the public sphere.) He calmly defended his faith against attacks and, in insights relevant to this day, argued that people refuse to believe in Christianity because there are some difficulties in understanding the doctrines of the faith, but will easily believe in unproven worldly solutions, such as faith that one more advancement in technology, government, or economics will finally solve our deepest problems. As he wrote to his friend John Randolph of Virginia:

I don't believe there are any new objections to be discovered to the truth of Christianity, though there may be some art in presenting old ones in a new dress. My faith has been greatly confirmed by the infidel writers I have read. Men may argue ingeniously against our faith, as indeed they may against anything - - but what can they say in defense of their own. I would carry the war into their own territories, I would ask them what they believe -- if they said they believed anything, [and] I think that they might be shown to be more full of difficulties and liable to infinitely greater objections than the system they oppose and they were credulous and unreasonable for believing it.

He would again write in later years, “Nothing but Christianity will give you the victory. Until a man believes in his heart that Jesus Christ is his Lord and Master... his course through life will be neither safe nor pleasant. My only regret is that I was so long blinded by my pleasures, my vices and pursuits, and the examples of others that I was kept from seeing, admiring, and adoring the marvelous light of the gospel.” And again, speaking of patriotism he said, “The patriot who feels himself in the service of God, who acknowledges Him in all his ways, has the promise of Almighty direction, and will find His Word in his greatest darkness.”

The day when Francis Scott Key first penned those words we sing today was an example of the promise of God shining on in this darkness. Although Francis Scott Key was initially against going to war with Great Britain, he joined the Washington militia to defend his native land, in addition to continuing his duties as a lawyer and his devotion as a Christian. By August of 1814, the British had defeated Napoleon and were now able to devote greater resources toward the war in America. Their plan was to win the War of 1812 by launching invasions of America both along the East Coast and from Canada in the north. General Robert Ross was in charge of the eastern invasion and sailed his fleet up the Chesapeake Bay to invade Washington and then land further north and capture more towns. The British hoped that such an invasion would prepare the way for an attack from the north and the two advances could easily force this new republic into submission. At first, Gen. Ross succeeded in a dramatic fashion, capturing Washington D.C. on August 24 and Alexandria shortly thereafter. Baltimore was his next target and the rest of the northeast coast after that. However, a land invasion of Baltimore had been beaten back, and so the British decided to attack the city by sea; and to conduct this attack, the British Navy had to get past Fort McHenry. After an initial frontal attack on the fort failed, the British tried to blast the defenders into submission, taking advantage of their longer and more powerful artillery.

When this main bombardment began at on the dismal morning of September 13, 1814, Francis Scott Key was onboard a sloop behind the British fleet. He had recently arranged for the release of some prisoners including his friend Dr. William Beanes, a prominent physician who had been seized by the British because he assisted in the arrest of several drunken British soldiers for abusing civilians. Because Francis Scott Key had heard some of the British naval planning, Gen. Ross ordered that he and two other Americans be kept with the British Navy until after the planned capture of Baltimore. The 1000 man defense of the fort was led by Major George Armistead, who flew the fort's "storm flag," an American flag made of very durable material, throughout the day and night. As long as that flag flew over the fort, everyone knew that the defenders were still there, that the fort had not fallen, and that invasion of Baltimore and other cities could not proceed. Over the next day and night, which were marked by colossal downpours, the British ships shelled the fort with over a cannonball per minute and attempted a sneak attack at nightfall. But the defenders held on, damaging the British navy and continuing to fly the storm flag. Starting a little before dawn on September 14, the British naval commander, Admiral Cochrane decided that the fort and Baltimore would not fall without heavy British casualties. And so he gradually stopped the bombardment and, at 7:30 a.m. ordered the fleet to begin retreating.

Francis Scott Key did not know of this decision, however. When the bombardment began ending, he did not know whether the British were giving up the attempt, or whether they had forced to fort into submission. And when, as the sky was clearing in the morning, he saw the fort taking down the storm flag, he did not know whether that fact signaled American surrender or victory in beating back the invasion. However, a few minutes later, the fort raised its enormous 30 by 42 foot American flag, giving a clear sign that the invasion had been defeated. Inspired with the joy and glory at the spectacular victory, he began to compose a poem "The Defense of Fort McHenry,"

while he was still in British custody and knew that those words may trigger danger for him if he were caught praising the American defense. But as he would write later, he sensed that those words came to him from a source above and must be expressed. It is the words of that poem that we now sing as our National Anthem.

Francis Scott Key finished the poem about three days later and gave it to his brother-in-law Judge Joseph Nicholson. Judge Nicholson quickly matched it to the melody of a popular tune, which was used by the British and some Americans for "The Anacreontic Song" and which had been adopted earlier by Francis Scott Key for his 1805 heroic hymn "When the Warrior Returns." By September 20, two newspapers, *The Baltimore Patriot* and *The American* printed the lyrics and the music. And this song, now under the title "The Star Spangled Banner," quickly spread throughout the land. In 1889, the American Navy began playing The Star Spangled Banner whenever raising or lowering the flag. In 1916, President Woodrow Wilson ordered that it be played on military and other fitting occasions. John Philip Sousa promoted the idea of adopting this song as our national anthem and Congress soon agreed. And so, on March 3, 1931, President Herbert Hoover signed legislation that established The Star Spangled Banner as America's national anthem.

B. Arguments for the Adoption of The Star Spangled Banner as the National Anthem

In successfully argued for its adoption as the National Anthem, John Phillip Sousa, the great patriotic composer, said that this song has "soul stirring words" and "music that inspires." For the anthem recognizes the difficulty of preserving freedom, as exemplified by this nation's early struggles and the fact that the future is uncertain. But it also reflects a confidence that, the fourth verse says, "the star spangled banner in triumph will wave // over the land of the free and the home of the brave." Thus the poet and biographer Daniel Epstein argued in his essay for the book Star of Wonder (1986), that the words are "the purest example of unpremeditated, inspired genius in American history."

As that essay describes, the arguments against the Star Spangled Banner generally are in three categories: (1) that the tune is based upon an epicurean song *To Anacreon in Heaven*, and thus unfitted for our national song; (2) that, with its wide ranging notes, the tune is difficult to sing; and (3) that the words are too war-like and based upon only one event in American history. These arguments, which Michael Kinsley and Alexandra Petri trotted out again in the *Washington Post* in 2009 and 2011, respectively, do not take account of the subtlety of thought in the words, nor of the nature of literature and music generally. The following section will address each of these arguments in turn and begin to describe why the Star Spangled Banner does in fact represent well the republican and heroic spirit that makes this nation great.

First, it is true that Francis Scott Key's brother-in-law Judge Joseph Nicholson did set the words of the poem to the tune of a popular song *To Anachreon in Heaven*, which was first popularized by the Anacreontic Society in London. And it is true that

Anacreon was, in the Greek pantheon, a god of wine, women and song. The song was thus originally a rather epicurean or even pagan celebration of worldly pleasures, which then became popular with both the British and American public. However, the tune itself is not decadent, only the words that had been attached to it. What Judge Nicholson did here, as Francis Scott Key had done earlier in his song *When the Warrior Returns*, was to take the popular music away from the pagans and give it to a nobler purpose.

Such a strategy is hardly new, and in fact, has been rather common in the conversion of pagans. For example, Christians took the pagan winter feast of Saturnalia, and used the same day for the celebration of Christmas, as we would later do with the Christmas tree. And likewise, Christians took many of the pagan symbols for their spring celebration, such as bunnies and colored eggs, and used them instead for the celebration of Easter. When Pope St. Gregory the Great sent a group of monks led by one Augustine (now known as St. Augustine of Canterbury) to England to restore the Gospel there, Augustine wrote back and asked what he should do with the pagan temples in areas where the Christian faith had taken hold. In his famous response, St. Gregory said that “you should not destroy the pagan temples but only the idols in them. . . . If the people see that the places that they are accustomed to are preserved they will go to them more readily.” That is what Francis Scott Key and Judge Nicholson did with the tune of *To Anacreon in Heaven*, first in composing *When the Warrior Returns* and then with *The Star Spangled Banner*. They took the musical temple of a pagan society and re-consecrated it for a noble and patriotic cause.

This tune to *The Star Spangled Banner*, with its rapidly notes spanning over two octaves, is certainly not easy to sing. And that is the second reason why some people sometimes do not want it as the National Anthem. Shelby Wilson emphasizes this argument in an essay that shows up in various places entitled “Time for an Anthem the Country Can Sing.” And Alexandra Petri of the *Post* complains that the song “is in no way, how shall I put this, singable.” The tune, however, is not unsingable. If it were, it never would have become a popular song in the first place. It is instead catchy and delightful to try to sing, while at the same time difficult even for good singers to perform alone very well. As Mr. Epstein says, “The Star Spangled Banner is a sublime anthem, democratic and spacious, holding at least one note for every American, but too many for any solitary singer. The tune is a test pattern, not only for the voice, but for the human spirit. The soul singer, the rock star, and the crooner are all humbled by the anthem.” Its full beauty is thus a challenge, but an attractive challenge, for all people.” That aspect, the very difficulty of singing it alone, and therefore the need for effort and assistance from others, makes *The Star Spangled Banner* an excellent analogy for virtue and for the virtuous republic, which are attractive and, to some degree, attainable to all, but very difficult to achieve in fullness, and in fact impossible to do alone. The fact that *The Star Spangled Banner* is difficult, makes it ever fresh, ever a challenge, as defending liberty under law is ever fresh, ever a challenge. As a 1930 editorial in the *New York World* argued during the debates over its adoption as the National Anthem, “The virtues of ‘The Star Spangled Banner’ are that it does require a wide compass, so that school children cannot sing it, and that it is in three-four tune so that parades cannot march to it. So being, it has managed to remain fresh, not frayed and worn, and the citizenry still hear it

with some semblance of a thrill, some touch of reverence.” Like the faith, like virtue, like the spirit of freedom, *The Star Spangled Banner* is challenging, and therefore, ever fresh and ennobling.

On the other side, the third objection people sometimes raise against *The Star Spangled Banner* is that it is only about one event in American history; they likewise say that because it is concerned entirely with a battle, it is too warlike. The objection is that it is too warlike is rather amusing, given the fact that Francis Scott Key was a most gentle person, who saw the Battle of Baltimore from a British ship precisely because he was on a mission of mercy to save a friend of his and a prisoner of war. Furthermore, as we celebrate the heroism of martyrs while deploring the persecutions that led to their martyrdom, we can celebrate the valor shown in war even as we deplore the violence that leads to its necessity. And in fact if one continues reading *The Star Spangled Banner* to the end, one does not get the sense of any celebration of war, but rather references in the third verse to “the havoc of war and the battle’s confusion” and in the fourth verse to freemen standing “between their loved home and the war’s desolation.” It is a celebration rather of the purity represented by the white of the flag, the courage of patriots and martyrs represented by the red, and the eternal truths represented by the fixed stars that forever shine upon light upon this mixed up earth.

In addition, *The Star Spangled Banner*, while written on the occasion of one battle, is not *only* about that battle, but rather applies its lessons for all time. Such is the case for fine literature and inspiring writing in general. A specific occasion may be the occasion for great literature, but it has messages for all ages. The words of each of the Biblical prophets were given to a specific nation, usually Israel, at one time and place, but these words guide the people of God in every time and place. Most of the letters of Saint Paul, and the messages of Jesus to seven churches in Revelations chapters 2-3, were originally written for Christians in specific towns in the first century; but they are in the Bible because their principles are relevant throughout time and space. The Magna Carta was originally an agreement between King John of England and 23 nobles in 1215, but it became a foundation of the recognition that there are human rights above any governmental entity. The Declaration of Independence was written to explain the rationale for the Revolution, but its brilliance has inspired people throughout the world. The Gettysburg Address was originally intended as the secondary speech for the dedication of a war cemetery. But Lincoln’s words have become a central statement of the principle that America is a nation “conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” And likewise *The Star Spangled Banner* was written upon one occasion; and perhaps Francis Scott Key, like the nobles behind the Magna Carta and Lincoln in 1863, did not realize that it would be anything more than that. But it has become a statement of the principles of the courageous struggle and virtuous liberty that will ever be needed to ensure that our flag ever waves over the land of the free and the home of the brave. The next section will describe how the words of its four verses show forth these themes in poetic beauty.

C. The Themes of the National Anthem

With the Star Spangled Banner, as with any good literature or music (and it is both), a full understanding comes only with a knowledge of the whole. Because most people know only the first verse of the anthem, they do not comprehend the full import of its message and inspiration. Thus, for example, as an editorial in the *Baltimore Sun* last September pointed out, when we know only the first verse, it sounds like the anthem ends with an unanswered question, whereas the actual song ends with clarity. The author of that article Fred Shoken, seemed to like the emphasis on uncertainty. However, in the vision of Francis Scott Key, as with the vision of the Founding Fathers, there is rather a balance between the uncertainty of history and the clarity of the values of the republic that the full anthem reflects. Thus it is helpful to give the full text of the four stanzas, which read as follows:

O! say can you see by the dawn's early light
What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming
Whose broad stripes and bright stars thro' the perilous fight
O'er the ramparts we watched were so gallantly streaming?
And the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air
Gave proof through the night that our flag was still there.
O! say does that star-spangled banner yet wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?

On the shore, dimly seen through the mists of the deep,
Where the foe's haughty host in dread silence reposes,
What is that which the breeze, o'er the towering steep,
As it fitfully blows, half conceals, half discloses?
Now it catches the gleam of the morning's first beam,
In full glory reflected now shines in the stream:
Tis the star-spangled banner! O! long may it wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.

And where is that band who so vauntingly swore
That the havoc of war and the battle's confusion
A home and a country should leave us no more!
Their blood has washed out their footsteps' foul pollution.
No refuge could save the hireling and the slave
From the terror of night, or the gloom of the grave:
And the star-spangled banner in triumph doth wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.

O! thus be it ever, when freemen shall stand
Between their loved home and the war's desolation!
Blessed with victory and peace, may the heaven rescued land
Praise the Power that hath made and preserved us a nation.

Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just,
And this be our motto: "In God is our trust."
And the star-spangled banner in triumph shall wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave!

As one can read from the text, the first two stanzas focus on the present, when Francis Scott Key, and all the Americans who witness the battle, were anxiously awaiting news of whether Fort McHenry had fallen, and thus whether Baltimore and the rest of the nation would be subject to a devastating invasion. And when reading or singing those stanzas, we are meant to sense what it was like for Key and for all Americans in the midst of that conflict, when the future was uncertain, and great courage was called for, to fight the good fight, not knowing what the future held. It is similar way, for example, when reading the passages of Scripture, we are not meant simply to see them as a record of past events, but to sense and imagine what it would have been like to have been there, and ask ourselves how we would react. As St. Ignatius of Loyola, the sixteenth century founder of the Jesuit order, recommended in his classic Spiritual Exercises, we should train our imagination to have a "felt sense" of what is happening in the scenes the Bible describes. Likewise, with the first two verses of the anthem, we can use the imagination to be drawn into a felt sense of what it was like for those Americans in danger at the time, and by extension for all the heroes of our country, Christopher Columbus and his crew to the first settlers at Jamestown and Plymouth Rock to the heroes of the Revolution and the World Wars to those who today live and die upholding what is true and righteous at home and abroad. That felt sense of the courage of patriots throughout the ages, exemplified in those first two verses, gives us inspiration today to fight for the right to life, for religious freedom, for family, prayer and decency in a world often hostile to it.

The third verse is then written from the standpoint of the patriot reflecting back upon the past and how it is that the foe who seemed like so powerful a threat is now vanquished. The iron laws of history, the night and the grave, had consumed the foes of that war, and Francis Scott Key's words reflect a confident that, in the end, with God's guidance, "the night and the grave" would consume all attacks upon liberty. The Founding Fathers of this nation certainly believed that God guides human affairs and that His guidance was and is essential to liberty. Thus, at the end of the Declaration of Independence the signers declared, "with firm Reliance on the Protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor." Reflecting upon the success of the Revolution, George Washington wrote to General Thomas Nelson, "The Hand of providence has been so conspicuous in all this, that he must be worse than an infidel that lacks faith, and more than wicked, that has not gratitude enough to acknowledge his obligations." And in response to the first Congress' proclamation of the first national day of Thanksgiving in 1789, General Washington agreed and called upon all Americans to "unite in rendering unto Him our sincere and humble thanks, for His kind care and protection of the People of this country previous to their becoming a Nation, for the signal and manifold mercies and the favorable interpositions of His providence, which we experience in the course and conclusion of the late war." Thus, they were confident, and Francis Scott Key was, that a reflection

upon history will confirm the belief that, if we are faithful, God will guide those who seek religion, virtue and liberty to a better future, although generally with great struggles and sacrifice. And, looking back upon the history of this country, with her victories over slavery, tyranny and oppression, both here and abroad, we come back to the Providence of God, who may and indeed will allow people who desire virtue and freedom, to struggle and face great dangers; but in the end we are confident that He will reward their labors. In an analogous way, we reflect upon how God has guided the Catholic Church through all the vicissitudes of history, how the Church alone among institutions on this earth has defied the iron laws of death and decay, how the saints, with all of their suffering, struggles and often martyrdom, did in the end prevail against the “jaws of death” that Christ promised could not defeat the Church. See Matthew 16:18. And we should thus be inspired to confidence about the future if only we are faithful.

And so the fourth stanza turns toward the future with a lesson and a prayer. On the one hand, it calls for freemen ever to defend their homes against “war and desolation.” For the recent conflicts with both terrorists and tyrannies around the world and what Pope Benedict has called “the dictatorship of relativism” in government and culture demonstrate so clearly we can never relax in our defense of liberty. As the abolitionist Wendell Phillips so famously put it in 1848, “Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty.” Emphasizing the need for justice and strength to go together, the song expresses confidence that “conquer we must, when our cause, it is just.” However, the stanza also recognizes as much or more that we are not and cannot be on our own. For trust in God and reliance upon His Providence is also essential. Thus the song calls upon “this heaven rescued land” to “[p]raise the Power that hath made and preserved us a nation.” And after saying that the just cause must ever triumph, it adds the reason for this confidence, namely, the call that “this be our motto: ‘In God is our trust.’” Thus this final stanza calls upon both active courage and virtue and a reliance on Providence. Far from being exclusive, the two virtues complement each other. For as St. Paul says in his letter to the Philippians, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God is at work in you.” Phil. 2:12-13. As it is for our salvation, so it is for the virtuous republic. We must ever strive, as saints and true patriots have ever done, to show forth the virtues of our faith and our land, confident that God ever works within us. Part II of this essay will then discuss in more detail the subtleties and poetic symbolism with which our national anthem adorns these themes of history and wisdom, of virtue and freedom, of confidence in Providence and an active faith.