

The Strains of a Nation

by [Jeff Plude](#) (June 2019)



Bombardment of Fort M'Henry, Alfred Jacob Miller, 1828-30

I was about ready to scream myself. I say myself because my little brother had been screaming and moaning for the past hour in his hospital bed. He'd been up all night wailing after having prostate surgery two days before. He was born with Down syndrome and talked in a sort of clipped pidgin speech partly of his own making, and though my wife and I understood him well he couldn't tell us exactly what was bothering him.

For a while my wife and I took turns trying to alternately calm him and cajole him into submission. I sat back down defeated, as I often was with him. I thought of my mother and father, who were both dead. At the time Mike was forty-nine.

There was an aide from the group home where he lived sitting on the other side of his bed near the window. She also tried to talk calmly to him, then grew a little more stern. “Tell us if it hurts, but don’t yell,” she said. But it didn’t work. So I slumped in my chair like my ears had been boxed, my nerves jangled.

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But then something almost miraculous happened. As I instinctively looked up at the flat-screen TV that was up on the wall at the end of my brother’s bed, there was a half-animated action movie on, and during a scene that resembled American soldiers raiding a village of huts in Vietnam “The Star-Spangled Banner” started blaring! For a moment I thought it was part of the show. But the young aide, who was maybe in her mid-twenties, was leaning over Mike’s bed where he was slightly propped up and she was playing the national anthem loudly on her cell phone. It was an instrumental version, a traditional rendition played by an orchestra.

And he fell silent! I was stunned. At the end, my eyes started to well up. Perhaps it was a combination of simple relief or joy from a cease-fire in the aural bombardment of human suffering and that the national anthem can do that to me.

So the aide kept playing the national anthem over and over on her large phone, dangling it over the plastic rail of Mike’s bed. It was like magic—he was completely out. He fell into a deep much-needed sleep.

She explained that whenever he was up at night, as he'd often been over the past several months, and he was passing another of the stones piled up in his prostate, he'd wail and wail and she'd play the national anthem for him, his favorite song, she said, and he'd quiet right down. My wife and I used to know his favorite songs and still knew some of them, but this was a new one on us.

That was four and a half years ago. But I was reminded of it all last month when yet another singer—this one an amateur— butchered the national anthem at a pro baseball game. I hadn't heard something like this since Roseanne Barr's caterwauling version almost thirty years ago, but the latest perpetrator was reportedly just substituting at the last minute and afterward seemed truly sorry. Even professional singers have struggled with it.

Some distortions of the national anthem are deliberate, and can rankle just as much if not more. Probably the most well-known is Jimi Hendrix's mind-bending take on "The Star-Spangled Banner" at Woodstock fifty years ago, complete in full hippie regalia (fringed shirt, jeans, headband) and armed with a Fender guitar and Marshall amp. It was instrumental only, and he played it as part of a medley on Sunday morning to a couple of hundred thousand young people on a farm field in upstate New York, many perhaps stoned or tripping. Was it disrespectful? Was it patriotic in its free-spirited way? Was it a little of both, or somewhere in between?

Coincidentally, on the very same day of the latest mangling of "The Star-Spangled Banner," Agence-France Presse reported that

Germany was in a “heated debate” about its own national anthem, “*Deutschlandlied*.”

Though the music was composed by Joseph Haydn, the opening verse is now *verboten* for Germans to sing: “*Deutschland, Deutschland über alles*” (Germany, Germany above all). That’s because the Nazis would sing only the first stanza—they viewed “all” to mean “other nations” and not the local governments within the country’s boundaries as originally intended—and omitted the other two stanzas. (They also had a second anthem, the “*Horst-Wessel Lied*.”) So in 1952, the *Führer* and his jackboots and swastikas long gone but far from forgotten, West Germany decided it would sanction the singing of the third stanza only, which begins: “Unity and justice and freedom . . .”

The first stanza, however, was never officially banned. Now, nearly seventy years later, an East German politician, with the thirtieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall looming, was proposing that Germany adopt a new national song, one that incorporates input from his region as well, which felt shortchanged in the wake of reunification. East Germany had instituted its own anthem during the split. To make matters worse, “far-right” German politicians have recently been seen on video singing the *Deutschland über alles* verse. West Germans, including Chancellor Angela Merkel, seem to favor keeping the anthem the way it is.

The United States actually has a similar situation, ours North and South instead of East and West. Even a century and a half after the Civil War, the Confederate anthem, “Dixie,” remains controversial. Like the Confederate flag, it still stands as a symbol of the old antebellum South for northerners, one with

slavery as its heart and soul. Indeed, the tune, though its origin is hazy, appears to have sprung from minstrel shows, the lyrics peppered with slave dialect (which has now been standardized). But for southerners, the song revels in their unabashed fondness for their beloved homeland and lifestyle, a jaunty ditty diametrically opposed to the solemnity of the North.

What's worse, at least for its staunch opponents, "Dixie" is a catchy tune. It was said to be a favorite of Abraham Lincoln, and he had it played when it was announced that General Robert E. Lee had surrendered at Appomattox. At a slower tempo, "Dixie" can even be poignant. Bob Dylan, no less, who sang out against the "Masters of War" in 1963, wrote and starred in a movie in 2003 called *Masked and Anonymous* in which he plays a band leader in a crumbling North America of the future, and plays and sings an evocative cover of "Dixie."

The Union, of course, had its own anthem, the "Battle Hymn of the Republic." The lyrics derive from the promises in the Old and New Testaments that God would just the wicked in the end. It also features the "grapes of wrath," which John Steinbeck appropriated for the title of his famous novel of Depression-Era desperation. You couldn't find two more different songs and cultures, and that's still true today to a great extent.

"The Star-Spangled Banner" itself has not escaped criticism, far from it. People often complain that it's too hard to sing, as I already alluded to. It covers a notoriously wide range. And it uses archaic diction to describe military exploits—a battle, the flag waving in the twilight, the fight raging on and in doubt through the night, along with the survival of the young nation against its former ruler, the bombs and rockets'

red glare lighting up the night sky, and then the dawn, which the song starts with. The sonorous opening rises quickly in pitch in the first bar: “Oh-oh say can you see . . .” Lyrically it can sound strange and stodgy.

Some Americans seem to want “The Star-Spangled Banner” to be replaced by something simpler, like “America the Beautiful” or “God Bless America.” I’m not one of them. The night of September 11, 2001, after the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon that morning, members of Congress stood on the steps of the Capitol and sang “God Bless America.” But since both these songs contain the G-word—one even has it in the title—I think there’s little chance of that happening. I can hardly believe Britain still tolerates “God Save the Queen (or King),” but it still has the monarchy too, at least in name.

“The Star-Spangled Banner,” however, seems dignified and rousing at the same time, at least to my ear. And it depicts in vivid imagery exactly the scene and consequently the emotional import and significance of our battle for survival and freedom, our creation. The replacements, pleasant enough sounding in their way, do not come close to this. And there’s the crescendo ending, the couplet like two cannon balls of elongated phrasing fired at the world, with the iconic grand finale:

0 say does tha-at star-spang-led ... ban-errr ye-et wa-ave

0’er the la-and ... of the freeeee ... and the ho-ome ... of the
... bra-ave.

I think the only other national anthem that has an ending with as much impact is “O Canada,” which was the second national anthem I came to know. I used to hear it when I went to a ballgame at Jarry Park in Montreal, which was actually closer to where I lived than Yankee Stadium or Fenway Park. The hometown crowd sang it robustly in French and English. I always remembered the coda, repeated twice with a flourish: “Ohh Ca-nada ... we stand on guard ... for thee.”

National anthems are often ritually played before ballgames, which I’m sure is the first time I ever consciously heard it, probably to firmly implant it in the public mind. And of course at the Olympics the national anthem of each gold medalist is played as they stand atop the platform with the silver and bronze medalists whom they defeated standing below them as they all face their flags being hoisted above them. When I was a kid, the American champions sometimes sang along with tears running down their cheeks.

Except for in Mexico City in 1968, when during the national anthem two black American sprinters each bowed their head and raised a fist in a black leather glove high over their head—the sign of so-called Black Power. It was a rude and facile gesture, just like the kneelers on U.S. football fields these days. One of the first lessons I learned in sports is how to lose with grace, but learning how to win with grace, though just as important, is often neglected.

I’d never thought much about my country’s anthem, though I knew its lyrics and basic background, having grown up when all kids learned such things in school. Francis Scott Key, the author, was a thirty-five-year-old lawyer who was watching the British attack Fort McHenry from the Chesapeake Bay in

September 1814, during the War of 1812. He wrote the lyrics partly aboard a British ship he'd boarded to secure the release of a prisoner, and it was published soon after in a magazine whose editor was Washington Irving. It was apparently set to an English song composed for a gentlemen's club. But it didn't become the national anthem until 1931, failing several times to pass Congress.

Indeed, since statehood is often attained and maintained by fighting, some national anthems have a military theme and tone, which these days can be problematic. The United States, in fact, is in the middle of a campaign by many to undo its history as a way to control the present. It's a political shell game at best, and at worst cultural suicide.

You might take it a step further and ask if a country even needs an official national song. Naysayers may see national anthems as an indoctrination of sorts. Music, indeed, has an almost otherworldly power to transcend rational thought. Anthems seem to work the way a hymn, a psalm, does to evoke profound feelings for God. Along those lines, Jehovah's Witnesses refuse to sing the lyrics to a national anthem. Evangelical Christians have no such qualms; nothing in the Bible prohibits a believer from showing allegiance to the state, as long as that display doesn't directly conflict with Christian doctrine. In other words, render unto Caesar what is Caesar's. There's a difference between honoring and worshiping.

But a national anthem is simply designed to evoke an old-fashioned sentiment, one I think is now in great danger of becoming anachronistic: patriotism. Whenever I hear that word, I recall Samuel Johnson's infamous dictum about it being the

“last refuge of a scoundrel.” (Though Boswell tries to cover for him by saying Dr. Johnson means only those who pretend to love their country out of self-interest, that is, false patriots.) However, I believe it’s also the first rampart of liberty.

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My brother Mike died last year, so whenever I hear the national anthem these days I think of that morning in the hospital room and how it quelled his pain. It’s the sound of political freedom, apparently the perfect Rx for even someone like Mike.

“It calms him right down, every time,” the aide had said.

“You saved the day,” I told her.

Sometimes I wonder if America will be saved. “The Star-Spangled Banner” continually asserts our struggle for existence for all citizens to hear, no matter how messy and imperfect that history has been. For now, at least, it’s still the land of the free and the home of the brave.

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Jeff Plude has been a freelance writer for more than twenty years. He is a former daily newspaper reporter and editor, and he has written for the *San Francisco Examiner* (when it was owned by Hearst), *Popular Woodworking*, *Adirondack Life*, and other publications. His poetry has appeared in the *Haight Ashbury Literary Journal*.

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