

# WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

*The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song*

## Remarks at a Flag Day Ceremony

RONALD REAGAN

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*In the decades following World War II, world affairs were dominated by the Cold War—and the threat of nuclear war—between the United States and its Western and Asian allies and the Soviet Union and its allies. But during and after the unsuccessful war in Vietnam (which ended in 1975), American public opinion was divided about America’s role in the world, and for many Americans, patriotism itself was under suspicion. It was against this background that Ronald Reagan (1911–2004) came to the presidency, determined to restore American honor abroad and patriotic sentiment at home.*

*The idea of an annual “Pause for the Pledge” had been conceived in 1980 at Baltimore’s Star-Spangled Banner Flag House. In 1985, President Reagan signed legislation recognizing “Pause for the Pledge” as part of National Flag Day activities: at 7:00 pm (EDT) on June 14, all Americans are invited to place their hands over their hearts and face our flag in a simultaneous recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance. In these (excerpted) remarks at Fort McHenry, delivered on June 14, 1985, President Reagan marked the 100th anniversary of the first Flag Day ceremony in a program sponsored by the National Flag Day Foundation.<sup>1</sup>*

*What, according to Reagan, is the primary meaning of the flag? What does Reagan mean by “freedom”? Why does he mention the letter from the women from the labor camp in the Soviet Union? Does the content of the speech offer any insight into why he “always get[s] a chill up and down my spine when I say the Pledge of Allegiance”? What is the point of pledging allegiance to the flag? With what thoughts and feelings do you recite it?*

Thank you all for that welcome, and thank you, Senator Mathias. Governor Hughes, Mayor Schaefer, and Members of the Congress who are here, I appreciate their warm welcome, and Don Schaefer, I know you’re the mayor, but I understand that just the other

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<sup>1</sup> *In this speech, Reagan honors Bernard J. Cigrand as the father of Flag Day. However, there are many other claims to the first official observance of Flag Day. For more on the history of Flag Day, see “The Origins and Traditions of Flag Day” above.*

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day the Earl of Baltimore<sup>2</sup> returned to the city. It is great to be here in the home of the Baltimore Orioles.

I don't know about you, but I always get a chill up and down my spine when I say that Pledge of Allegiance, and I hope that everyone here will join us and Americans all across the country when we pause for that pledge tonight. You've been given the time in which we will all do that across the Nation—reaffirm our thankfulness, our love, and our loyalty to our blessed and beautiful land.

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This flag that we salute today is a replica of one that flew through the night, as you know, 171 years ago during the bombardment of Fort McHenry signaling defiance to the British and hope and inspiration to Francis Scott Key. Some historians have called the War of 1812 the second war of independence, the crucial test of our young republic as it fought for its life against what was then the strongest nation on Earth. By the end of the summer of 1814, the British had already taken our capital and burned the White House as the Senator told you. Baltimore was the next target in their grand design to divide our forces and crush this newly independent nation of upstart colonies. All that stood between the British and Baltimore, all that stood between America and defeat, was this fort and its guns blocking their entry into Baltimore Harbor.

The British fleet of warships moved within 2 miles of the fort and began a bombardment that was to last for 25 hours. Through the dark hours of the night, the rockets fired and the bombs exploded and a young American patriot named Key, held captive aboard a British ship, watched anxiously for some proof, some sign, that liberty would prevail.

You can imagine his joy when the next morning, in the dawn's early light, he looked out and saw the banner still flying—a little tattered and torn and worse for wear, but still flying proudly above the ramparts. Fort McHenry and the brave men manning it had withstood the assault. Baltimore was saved. The United States, this great experiment in human freedom, as George Washington described it, would endure.

Thinking back to those times, one realizes that our democracy is so strong because it was forged in the fires of adversity. In those dark days of the war it must have been easy to give in to despair. It truly was a perilous night for our new nation. But our forefathers

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<sup>2</sup> *Earl Sidney Weaver (1930–2013), Hall-of-Fame Baltimore Orioles manager.*

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were motivated by something bigger than themselves. From the harsh winter of Valley Forge to the blazing night above Fort McHenry, those patriot soldiers were sustained by the ideal of human freedom.

Through the hardships and the setbacks, they kept their eyes on that ideal and that purpose, just as through the smoke of battle they kept a lookout for the flag. But with the birth of our nation, the cause of human freedom had become forever tied to that flag and its survival.

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As the American Republic grew and prospered and new stars were added to the flag, the ideal of freedom grew and prospered. As our country spread across the continent, millions of the dispossessed, the persecuted, the tired, the hungry, and poor flocked to our shores. And the human energies unleashed in this land of liberty were like those never before seen in this world.

From the mountains of Kentucky to the shores of California to the Sea of Tranquility on the Moon, our pioneers carried our flag before them, a symbol of the indomitable spirit of a free people. And let us never forget that in honoring our flag, we honor the American men and women who have courageously fought and died for it over the last 200 years—patriots who set an ideal above any consideration of self and who suffered for it the greatest hardships. Our flag flies free today because of their sacrifice.

And today we mark the 100th anniversary of the first Flag Day ceremony. It was a small and modest ceremony honoring the anniversary of the creation of our flag, a “Flag Birthday,” as they called it, conducted by a young schoolteacher and his students at the Stony Hill School in Wisconsin. The teacher’s name was Bernard Cigrand, and through his subsequent efforts, he helped establish the national observance of Flag Day. His granddaughter, Mrs. Elroya Cigrand Brown, is with us today to help us celebrate. Congratulations, Mrs. Brown.

We have a few other distinguished relatives with us today—the great-great-great-granddaughter of Francis Scott Key, Mrs. Elizabeth Blunt Wainwright, and her two sons, Andrew and Peter. Mrs. Wainwright, it’s been many years since your ancestor wrote the stirring poem that’s become our national anthem. Now, with that same spirit of self-reliance, a private sector initiative called the Patriots of Fort McHenry has been formed to refurbish this historic monument. I commend the ingenuity and patriotism of the business and civic leaders that are undertaking this important event.

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As we mark the 100th “Flag Birthday,” the ideals for which our flag stands still challenge our nation. And today, as before, we strive to reach the full potential of freedom, to put things right, and open wide the door of the American opportunity society so that all of our citizens can walk through.

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The great American experiment in freedom and democracy has really just begun. Celebrations such as this remind us of the terrible hardships our forefathers willingly endured for their beliefs. And they challenge us to match that greatness of spirit in our own time.

These anniversaries remind us that freedom is not a resting place, but a constant goal spurring us on to ever-greater achievements. America has always recognized our historic responsibility to lead the march of freedom. Since our revolution, the first democratic revolution, and the founding of our republic, America has been a hope and inspiration to the oppressed and tyrannized the world over. . . .

[F]reedom’s story is still being written. The brave defense of Fort McHenry by our patriot army was one of its first chapters. But the story will continue as long as there are tyrants and dictators who would deny their people their unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

I would interject here, right now—I have a letter which I treasure very much. It is a full letter. It is on a slip of paper only 2 1/2 inches long and just under an inch in height. But on that is penned a letter, which can only be read with a magnifying glass, and then, in my case, had to be translated, and there are 10 names affixed in signature to that tiny letter. It was smuggled out of a labor camp in the Soviet Union. It was signed by 10 women in that camp who have gone through hunger strikes in their desire for freedom. And the reason they wrote me was to tell me that we, in the United States, represented to them the hope that one day there would be freedom throughout the world. I’m going to keep that letter for as long as I live.

You know, the story, as I say, will continue. Every time we place our hand over our heart and pledge allegiance to the flag, we’ll be reminded that our most precious inheritance is freedom and that history has bestowed on our nation the unique responsibility for its protection.

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When the commanding officer of Fort McHenry commissioned the original Star-Spangled Banner, the one that was later to bring so much hope to Francis Scott Key, he ordered one that would be, in his words, “so large that the British will have no difficulty in seeing it from a distance.” Today the flag we so proudly hail still sends a message to any distance that the spirit of a free people is unconquerable and that our democratic nation will always remain “the land of the free and the home of the brave.”

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