

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

The Star-Spangled Banner

WORDS BY FRANCIS SCOTT KEY

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Francis Scott Key (1779–1843), Washington lawyer and amateur poet, was inspired to pen the verses of “The Star-Spangled Banner” by the unlikely success of American troops resisting the British attack on Baltimore’s Fort McHenry on September 13, 1814, two days after the burning of the capital. Nearly all American school-children are taught the words of Key’s first stanza, now our national anthem, and for the rest of their lives they hear it sung on patriotic holidays and at sporting events. Rarely, however, do we attend to the words. Many whose hearts are stirred by hearing the anthem sung probably could not tell you what it literally means or what Key intended to convey.

What is the meaning of the poem’s opening question: “O! say can you see by the dawn’s early light / What so proudly we hailed at the twilight’s last gleaming”? How does it differ from the question that concludes the first stanza: “O! say does that star-spangled banner yet wave / O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave?” Why, according to the song, is the waving banner important? Why sing a song about a flag? The last stanza turns from the present war to the future. For what does it call? What relation does the song suggest between the flag and the motto “In God is our trust”? How does singing the song make you feel? Does thinking about the anthem’s words alter those feelings?

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,

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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 foul footsteps' pollution.
No refuge could save the hireling and slave
From the terror of flight, 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!

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O! thus be it ever, when freemen shall stand
Between their loved home and the war's desolation!
Blest with vict'ry and peace, may the heav'n 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!