

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

The Stars and Stripes Forever

JOHN PHILIP SOUSA

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This patriotic American march is widely considered the magnum opus of composer John Philip Sousa (1854–1932). Young Sousa grew up on military music. As a child, he enjoyed hearing the Civil War military bands that frequently played in Washington, DC as well as his father's trombone in the US Marine Band. Sousa followed in his father's footsteps, enlisting as an apprentice violinist and eventually becoming bandleader. Later he formed his own band, the Sousa Band, which toured for 39 years and entertained millions of people.

*Sousa composed his famous march on Christmas Day, 1896 while at sea, returning from a trip to Europe. While on vacation, he had learned that his close friend and manager of the Sousa Band, David Blakely, had died. Sousa and his wife immediately booked the next ship back to New York, where he began work on the march. In his autobiography, *Marching Along*, Sousa said the song was about the feeling of coming home to America and how “in a foreign country the sight of the Stars and Stripes seems the most glorious in the world.” The march was designated the official National March of the United States of America in 1987.*

Although not as familiar as the music itself, Sousa wrote lyrics for the march. What does it mean to say, of the Stars and Stripes, that it is “the flag of flags”? Can this view be justified? What does it mean to say “by their might, and by their right / It waves forever”? Is “forever” a wish, a hope, a goal, or a certainty? How does hearing the march make you feel? Does this song—words and music—add to your understanding of, and your attachment to, the flag?

For a musical rendition, watch the “The President’s Own” US Marine Band perform Sousa’s march on March, 3, 2009, in the John Philip Sousa Band Hall at the Marine Barracks Annex in Washington, DC: www.youtube.com/watch?v=a-7XWhvvIpE.

Let martial note in triumph float
And liberty extend its mighty hand
A flag appears 'mid thunderous cheers,
The banner of the Western land.

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The emblem of the brave and true
Its folds protect no tyrant crew;
The red and white and starry blue
Is freedom's shield and hope.

Other nations may deem their flags the best
And cheer them with fervid elation,
But the flag of the North and South and West
Is the flag of flags, the flag of Freedom's nation.
Hurrah for the flag of the free,
May it wave as our standard forever,
The gem of the land and the sea,
The banner of the right.
Let despots remember the day
When our fathers with mighty endeavor,
Proclaimed as they marched to the fray
That by their might, and by their right
It waves forever.

Let eagle shriek from lofty peak,
The never-ending watchword of our land;
Let summer breeze waft through the trees
The echo of the chorus grand.
Sing out for liberty and light,
Sing out for freedom and the right.
Sing out for Union and its might,
O patriotic sons.

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And cheer them with fervid elation,
But the flag of the North and South and West
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Hurrah for the flag of the free,
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