



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on August 6, 2024

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America's Patriotic Songs

Music has a way of stirring the soul like few other things in life, and songs sung collectively can have a very powerful unifying effect on groups of people. For this reason, patriotic songs have been an important part of the cultural collective consciousness of nations throughout history, and the United States is no exception. Patriotic songs have been revered in our nation since its inception, and many have become very popular. Best-known among them, of course, is our national anthem, but the United States did not have an official anthem until Congress selected Francis Scott Key's "The Star-Spangled Banner" in 1931.



Many of America's so-called patriotic songs are performed at sporting events, at secular Independence Day celebrations, and at churches on the Sunday closest to the Fourth of July or as a way of honoring veterans on Veterans Day. They are certainly an important part of the fabric of our country, and they help remind us of who we are as a people and of the greatness of our nation. That being said, some songs considered "patriotic" have troubling back stories and should probably not be sung by true patriotic Americans.

Here we'll take a journey through the history of America's patriotic songs, looking at both the good and the bad.

"Hail, Columbia"

"Hail, Columbia" was played at George Washington's first inauguration and was considered the de facto national anthem throughout the 19th century, until it lost popularity after WWI. "Columbia" was the name given to the national personification of the United States in the late 18th century. The first two verses of the song are primarily about the valiant fight for liberty and the hard-won peace and freedom in the new nation. As the first verse says,

*Hail Columbia, happy land!
Hail, ye heroes, heav'n-born band,
Who fought and bled in freedom's cause,
Who fought and bled in freedom's cause,
And when the storm of war was gone
Enjoy'd the peace your valor won.
Let independence be our boast,
Ever mindful what it cost;
Ever grateful for the prize,*



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Let its altar reach the skies.

The third and fourth verses are mainly about the bravery and virtue of George Washington, first as the leader of the Continental Army and then as the first president.

“The Star-Spangled Banner”

“The Star-Spangled Banner,” which emerged as the official national anthem of the United States in 1931, was penned by Francis Scott Key during the War of 1812, a war he actually opposed. When President James Madison asked Key, a lawyer, to negotiate the release of a civilian held prisoner on a British warship off the coast of Baltimore’s Fort McHenry, Key complied. The British navy, then the world’s most powerful sea force, was poised to bombard the fort into submission.

While the British officers agreed to release the prisoner, the battle commenced and Key was forced to join the civilian in detainment until the fight was over. The bombardment lasted through most of the night of September 13-14, 1814, but when the new day dawned, the rays of the sun revealed that the U.S. flag (the star-spangled banner), and not the British Union Jack, was still flying over the fort.

Inspired, Key used an envelope he had with him to begin penning the words of a poem celebrating the victory. Soon thereafter, the poem was set to music, using a tune then popular in taverns across the nation. The song grew in popularity for the rest of the century, and, during World War I, it became a mainstay at professional baseball games.

By this time, it was the “unofficial” national anthem of the United States, and in 1931, Congress responded to a petition bearing millions of names requesting it be made the country’s *official* national anthem.

Not surprisingly, the song has had its critics, such as those asserting that it is difficult to sing. More seriously, in recent years it has been the target of leftist detractors who argue that Key promoted slavery in its lyrics. Actually, Key took on cases of several slaves seeking their liberation — cases for which he took no fee. His frequent criticisms of slavery’s cruelties were so powerful that they were noted in a newspaper account at this death. The writer of that article stated, “Key convinced me that slavery was wrong — radically wrong.”

One of Key’s most famous cases of legal work was for his friend Congressman John Randolph of Roanoke. After Randolph’s death in 1833, Key and other attorneys worked to carry out his wishes that his more than 400 slaves be not only freed, but provided the funds from Randolph’s estate to buy land in Ohio to support themselves.

Why, then, do some assert that the song is supportive of slavery? First of all, this is a familiar charge that is repeatedly leveled at the great heroes of early American history. In Key’s case, they point to one of the verses of the anthem that condemns both the “hireling and slave” who were fighting for the British side in the War of 1812. There is no doubt that Key held a negative view of anyone involved in the attack on Fort McHenry. One might recall that Americans were also not too fond of the German mercenaries, the Hessians, whom King George III had hired to suppress the American War for Independence. Attempting to invade a country, whether one is German or of black African ancestry, is not the best way to win the love of that country.



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“My Country, ‘Tis of Thee”

Another popular patriotic song that stresses both liberty and dependence upon God is “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee,” written by Samuel Francis Smith while a student at Andover Theological Seminary in Andover, Massachusetts. It was performed publicly for the first time on Independence Day in 1831 in Boston.

The tune was the same as that of the British song “God Save the King” (now the U.K.’s national anthem), which evidently was an intentional way of praising American republicanism rather than English monarchism. Its words stress both liberty and the role of God in giving us that liberty, as reads the beginning of the fourth verse: “Our fathers’ God, to Thee, Author of Liberty, to Thee we sing!”

The song has been particularly popular with black Americans. Singer Marian Anderson performed it in 1939 before a crowd of 75,000 — and a national radio audience — on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. Aretha Franklin sang the song at the first inauguration of President Barack Obama. And during his famous “I have a dream” speech on the National Mall in D.C. in 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. recited the first verse near the end of his address calling for racial equality.

“Battle Hymn of the Republic”

Another tremendously popular song among American patriots and often sung in churches is Julia Ward Howe’s “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” first composed in the early days of the Civil War and popularized by *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1862. A close examination of Howe and her song, however, should give churches pause in considering its use.

Howe was married to abolitionist Samuel Gridley Howe, a member of the “Secret Six,” a small group that financially backed violent abolitionist John Brown. Brown had exacerbated the intensity of the national debate of the 1850s over slavery by murdering some settlers in Kansas in 1856. Brown and his fellow murderers slaughtered five of them, mostly using a sword to hack them to pieces. He later explained that he had had “no choice” but to kill them: “It has been decreed by Almighty God, ordained from Eternity, that I should make an example of these men.” While some slanted accounts describe the incident as Brown and his so-called Northern Army of terrorists killing some “pro-slavery settlers,” the truth is that none of his victims were slaveowners, nor were they “pro-slavery.” They were simply farmers who had moved from Tennessee, a “slave state,” because they did not wish to compete with slave labor.

Ungodly man: John Brown was the leader of abolitionist terrorists who murdered farmers in Kansas. Nevertheless, Julia Ward Howe praised Brown with her song “John Brown’s Body.” Later, the song became “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” Brown’s “terrible swift sword” was retained, implying Brown was God’s instrument. (Wikimedia/Public Domain)



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After Brown attempted to start a slave rebellion in October 1859 at Harpers Ferry, Virginia, by seizing the federal arsenal located there — killing seven people, including a free black man, in the process — he was executed for treason. Many abolitionists made Brown a martyr when he swung from the gallows two months later, with Henry David Thoreau even blasphemously comparing Brown’s execution to Christ’s crucifixion.

Julia Ward Howe glamorized Brown with her song “John Brown’s Body,” in which she wrote that while his body was “moldering in the grave,” his truth was “marching on.” Soon thereafter, Massachusetts Governor John Andrew asked her to write a new song with the same tune, which became “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.”

This song did not mention Brown directly, but it did allude to his actions in Kansas when he butchered the innocent farmers with his “terrible swift sword.” As noted above, Brown had argued that he was simply God’s instrument in meting out justice with his blade. The song also equated the Union cause with God’s vengeance on Judgment Day.

While the song is certainly of great historical value, and its tune is no doubt emotionally satisfying to those who are unaware of its history and deeper meaning, the case could be made that this is not a song that should be sung in any patriotic sense, and is certainly inappropriate in any Christian worship service.

“America the Beautiful”

The lyrics for “America the Beautiful” were composed by Katharine Lee Bates, an English professor at Wellesley College in Massachusetts. The music was composed by Samuel Ward, a choirmaster and organist at Grace Episcopal Church in Newark, New Jersey.

Bates’ song began as a poem entitled “Pikes Peak,” written after she was inspired by a sightseeing trip she made across the country in 1893. While standing atop Pikes Peak in Colorado, she was motivated to write words such as, “Oh beautiful for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain, for purple mountain majesties above the fruited plain.”

It was not until 1910 that Bates’ words and Ward’s music were combined into the tune we now know as “America the Beautiful.”



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Bates' song gradually increased in popularity, and was the chief rival of "The Star-Spangled Banner" to become America's national anthem. Representative Phil Crane of Illinois even argued that there is an allusion to the Preamble of the U.S. Constitution in one of its verses. The Preamble states that among the Constitution's purposes is to insure the blessings of liberty not only to ourselves, but also *to our posterity*. In "America the Beautiful," Bates wrote lines such as, "Oh beautiful for patriot dream that sees beyond the years," and, "A thoroughfare for freedom beat across the wilderness."

God is mentioned prominently in every verse, as well. Rather than asserting that America was perfect, Bates called on the Lord to "mend [America's] every flaw," and confirm America's "liberty in law."

"God Bless America"

Belarusian immigrant Irving Berlin loved America and the liberties it was known for. He first wrote "God Bless America" during the First World War, but it was his revised version, penned in 1938, that was sung by Kate Smith, vastly increasing its popularity. The song's lyrics read like a prayer, and although Berlin was Jewish, it soon became a favorite among Christians.

His song originally asked God to "Stand beside her and guide her to the right with the light from above." After some wondered if Berlin was making a political statement by writing "guide her to the right," he replaced those words with "through the night with the light from above."

While the song had its detractors — some members of the Ku Klux Klan, for example, did not like it because it was written by a Jew — it was hugely popular during the Second World War. Both the Democrats and the Republicans used the song during the presidential campaign of 1940.

It was also used during the Civil Rights movement and at labor-union rallies. In the 1960s, it was popular in Christian and conservative circles as an answer to the growing secularism of the time and against atheistic communism. In late 1969, the Philadelphia Flyers professional hockey team began using it to kick off their contests in the National Hockey League. Other hockey teams — as well as other sports teams — likewise adopted the inspirational song. During the turbulent times of protest surrounding the Vietnam War, the song was played on the organ at Chicago's Wrigley Field at the end of each game, and other Major League Baseball teams have often used the song (although the New York Yankees is the only team presently doing so). Lady Gaga even performed the song at Super Bowl 51, as did Celine Dion at Super Bowl 37.

After the terrorist attacks on America on September 11, 2001, members of the U.S. House and Senate — both Democratic and Republican — spontaneously broke out in singing "God Bless America" on the steps of the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C.

"This Land Is Your Land"

Another song that is often proposed — incorrectly — as a "patriotic" song is "This Land Is Your Land" by Woody Guthrie, with some even arguing it should replace "The Star-Spangled Banner" as our national anthem. Guthrie, a folk singer from Oklahoma, was a regular columnist for *The Daily Worker*, a communist publication in the late 1930s, with a column dubbed "Woody Sez." While Guthrie often claimed to be a communist — and said that he had joined the Communist Party in the United States — there is no conclusive evidence that he ever paid any dues.



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No patriot: Oklahoma native Woody Guthrie is famous for his song “This Land Is Your Land,” which is often mistakenly viewed as patriotic. Actually, Guthrie, a supporter of communism, wrote the song in protest to Irving Berlin’s patriotic song “God Bless America.” (Library of Congress)

He did, however, write 174 columns for *The Daily Worker*, including one in which he praised Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin’s unprovoked invasion of Poland in 1939.

Many of his songs were written from a decidedly leftist viewpoint, including “This Land Is Your Land,” which he penned in a fury, reacting in anger to the inspirational and patriotic “God Bless America.”

One of the verses found in Guthrie’s song demonstrates his anti-private property ideology:

*Well, as I was walking, I saw a sign there
And on the sign it said “No Trespassing”
But on the other side it didn’t say nothing
That side was made for you and me!*

“God Bless the U.S.A.”

The most recent contribution to America’s collection of patriotic tunes is country singer Lee Greenwood’s “God Bless the U.S.A.,” released in 1984. It was an immediate hit, and was performed in a film about President Ronald Reagan at the Republican National Convention. Greenwood performed the song in person at the 1988 Republican National Convention.

During the Persian Gulf War in 1991, the song’s popularity was renewed.

Greenwood was first inspired to write the song in response to the Soviet Union shooting down Korean Air Lines Flight 007 in 1983, with the loss of all 269 passengers and crew (including Congressman Larry McDonald, then-chairman of The John Birch Society, the parent organization of this magazine).

The main thrust of the song is that, regardless of any flaws, the identity of America is its freedom. The opening words of the song set this tone:

If tomorrow all the things were gone



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*I worked for all my life
And I had to start again
With just my children and my wife

I thank my lucky stars
To be living here today

'Cause the flag still stands for freedom
And they can't take that away*

Some might wonder what Greenwood meant when he said that they can't take away our freedom. In an interview several years ago, he explained, "Growing up on my grandparents' farm in California gave me an appreciation for folks who worked hard and got by on very little.... My grandparents lost their farm after government regulation prevented them from farming the more profitable fields." He added, "But they didn't question why it happened; they just started a new business. They trusted that America would hold true to the promise that freedom gives you choices. They believed that no matter what difficulties we experienced as a family, we would be okay because we were free."

So, rather than some mindless nationalistic praise of the government, it was an assertion that freedom prevailed *in spite* of the government regulations that caused his grandparents to lose their farm.

American Exceptionalism in Song

Patriotic songs are certainly important, but we should be mindful of the lyrics and the reasons the songs were written before we sing them. If they glorify God and praise American liberty, they are good. If not, they should be avoided. Songs such as "God Bless America," "God Bless the U.S.A.," "My Country, 'Tis of Thee," "America the Beautiful," and "The Star-Spangled Banner" are all appropriate for both religious and secular celebrations of our nation's independence.

For instance, God is recognized as the author of human liberty in "The Star-Spangled Banner." The last verse makes this clear:

*O! thus be it ever, when freemen shall stand,
Between their lov'd 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 preserv'd 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.*

In fact, it is the words "In God is our trust" that indirectly led to the words "In God we trust" finding their way onto the nation's currency and coins.

The thread of a common theme runs through all good patriotic American songs. First of all, God — not government — is recognized in all of them as the source of our liberty. This mirrors the words of the Declaration of Independence, which proclaims that "all men ... are endowed by their Creator with



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certain unalienable rights.”

This is Americanism. This is what is meant — or at least, *should be meant* — by American Exceptionalism. America was founded on the concept that the purpose of government is to protect our God-given rights.

None of these songs would have much meaning if the United States ceased to be an independent and sovereign nation. Without America retaining its national sovereignty, this commitment to individual liberty would be watered down or, more likely, obliterated altogether.

This commitment to the liberty given to us by God Himself should be the central emphasis of all public displays of patriotism throughout the year, including on Memorial Day, Independence Day, and Veterans Day. While we absolutely should honor those who have served in the uniformed services of the Republic, we should foremost honor God and the liberties He has bestowed upon this land. We should thank God for our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, and all the other liberties — not given to us by the Bill of Rights, but rather *recognized* by the Bill of Rights as rights we already have — given to us by our Creator.



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