



Written by [Dennis Behreandt](#) on July 8, 2019

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God Blessed America With Kate Smith

It was a poignant, somewhat sad, and moving ceremony. An elderly lady elegantly attired in a black dress was pushed onto a stage in her wheelchair at the Raleigh Civic Center. The date was October 26, 1982, and the man pushing her onto the stage was none other than President Ronald Reagan. The lady in the wheelchair was Kate Smith, who, after a long and storied career in the spotlight, beloved by millions, had become immortalized in her own time as “America’s Songbird.” During her career she sold millions of records, and was a pioneering star of first the stage, then of radio, and, finally, of television. Known for her ardent love of faith and of her country, she was now, at the end of her life, being presented with the Medal of Freedom, the highest award that can be given to a civilian.



In awarding her the Medal of Freedom, President Reagan said: “The voice of Kate Smith is known and loved by millions.... In war and peace, it has been an inspiration.... In giving us a magnificent, selfless talent like Kate Smith, God has truly blessed America.”

The award was well and truly deserved because no entertainer, either before or since, has done so much for the American people and the country she loved, and done it so selflessly and with so much passion.

Now, however, in recent months, Smith’s legacy has come under fire. Her detractors allege that, many decades ago at the dawn of her career, she sang two songs with heavy racist sentiments and that, as a result, she should no longer be honored or even remembered, in anything other than a negative sense.

Whether this new view of Smith does her memory justice or not requires a review of her life and times. Such a review reveals that Smith was very unlikely to be a racist as now alleged, and that she richly deserved the love that millions of adoring fans, whom she considered friends, had for her.

Despair and Perseverance

Born in 1907, Kate Smith was blessed with a natural inborn talent for singing and dancing. She never took a singing or dancing lesson, and couldn’t read music or play the piano, but she could sing like no one else. This delighted and worried her family, in about equal measure. While they enjoyed her talents, as she grew up, they hoped for her to pursue a career in nursing, which at one point led to a terrible argument with her father, who slapped the then-teenaged singer. With the urging of her parents and grandparents, Smith eventually attempted to take up nursing, and throughout her life she maintained a special concern for the sick and unwell. But her passion for singing and entertaining was not to be



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denied, and when a break came that represented a chance to be on stage in a production in New York City, Smith boarded what her biographer, Richard K. Hayes, noted was the “first commercial airplane” for the three-hour flight to New York.

Smith was only in her late teenage years when she debuted in the play *Honeymoon Lane* in the fall of 1926. The heavysset teenage vocalist was cast in the role of Tiny Little, where her weight would be played for laughs. This set a trend that would be a source of great anguish and despair for her over the early years of her entertainment career, as she was cheered for her amazing singing talents in equal measure as she was jeered for her weight.

Eddie Dowling, the playwright and actor behind *Honeymoon Lane*, recalled Smith’s role in the production years later, according to biographer Hayes:

I sat her through every scene in the show and never let her open her mouth, just this big, fat, 260-pound girl. People asked, “What is this?” Until this moment, about a quarter of eleven at night. Just before the finale of the show, when the boy meets the girl (which is me in this case) I turn her loose. And boy I want to tell you! I couldn’t finish the play, by the way. They [the audience] wouldn’t let the play finish.

While she surprised and delighted audiences on stage, in her personal life, Smith was in misery. “She was shunned socially by her peers in the cast, so she spent many lonely hours crying herself to sleep in her small hotel room,” Hayes noted in his biography of the singer. “Since she neither smoked nor drank, was offended by risqué jokes, and had a weight problem, she just did not fit in.”

Smith herself recalled her misery in her autobiography, *Upon My Lips a Song*. In the red-tinged darkness of a dingy hotel room, she wrote, she was thinking of happier times with her family in contrast with taunts and jibes she encountered as a member of the cast. “I heard the voice of a boy in the chorus greeting me as I arrived in the morning with ‘Hello, Fatty.’ I heard someone else say as we bought doughnuts and coffee at a stand, ‘Betcha she buys a dozen donuts and a gallon o’coffee.”

Alone in that hotel room, hurt and saddened, Smith considered quitting. But, she recalled, “My pride would not let me turn back.”

Fate and Fortune

Smith’s next major appearance was in the production *Flying High*, and her treatment was even worse than before, even though her stunning talents were evident on stage. They were so evident that they attracted the attention of Ted Collins, recording manager for Columbia Records. Collins was in the audience that night in 1930 only because he missed his train and decided to catch a performance of *Flying High* while he was waiting for the next train. He was stunned by Smith’s talents and requested a meeting with her.

Collins invited Smith, who was initially skeptical of the man, to come to the Columbia Phonograph Company studios to sing for the recording engineers, with the prospect of landing a recording contract. Of course, with Smith’s voice, the result was never in doubt, and soon enough Kate Smith recordings were appearing in record stores. It wouldn’t be long before her albums would sell in the millions.

This was also the beginning of a business relationship with Collins, who would become her manager. Famously, the pair set up their partnership on a handshake and nothing more. “They would divide the



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work, and the profits, equally” noted Smith’s biographer Hayes. He would take care of bookings and finances, and select her songs. “We’ll be millionaires before you know what to do with a million dollars,” Smith recalled Collins telling her. “And all you’ll have to do is sing — and follow my instructions. Look, here’s my hand; when we shake, the deal’s on,” Collins promised her. How did Smith react to this seemingly preposterous proposal? She instinctively felt she could trust him, and answered: “All right, Ted. It’s a deal.”

From a modern perspective, this deal seems too good to be true, offered by the stereotypical “rapacious executive” looking to take advantage of a young, naive talent. But not in this instance. Collins was genuine, and he was right all along. The partnership was more successful than even he could imagine, and certainly more successful than Kate, who was still considering “exiting from stage right” straight out of the music business, could conceive. The result was Smith appearing in a string of radio and television shows and broadcasts, and generating millions of record sales, over the next several decades.

Photo credit: AP Images

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“God Bless America”

By 1938, Kate Smith was more than a singer. She was an ever-present part of America’s entertainment landscape, as well as being a respected “public intellectual” of a sort, bringing perspective on the news and the issues of the day to her audience via her radio program *Kate Smith Speaks*. In those days, storm clouds of war were clearly on the horizon, and Ted Collins and Smith both felt something special was needed to help bring the country together around the values of faith and patriotism.

On Armistice Day, 1938, during one such program, Smith explained the reasoning behind the new song she was introducing. “It has been my privilege to be on the air on Armistice Day or Armistice Day Eve for the past eight years,” she told her audience. “This year ... I felt I wanted to do something special — something that would not only be a memorial to our soldiers — but would also emphasize just how much America means to each and every one of us. I wanted more than an Armistice Day song — I wanted a new hymn of praise and love and allegiance to America.”

The song she would introduce is now her most famous, and one that many have thought should replace the “Star Spangled Banner” as the national anthem (though Smith did not agree with this idea).

Continuing her broadcast, Smith said: “So, several weeks ago, I went to a man I have known and admired for many years — the top-ranking composer in the music field today.... I explained as well as I could what I was striving for. He said, ‘Kate, you want something more than a popular song. I’m not sure, but I will try.’ He worked day after day, night after night, until at last his task was completed. The other day he sent me his masterpiece, and along with it this little note: ‘Dear Kate: here it is.... I did the best I could, and it expresses the way I feel.’ The song is called ‘God Bless America’; the composer, Mr. Irving Berlin.”

Of course, this is one of the greatest songs ever composed, and in Smith it was delivered by one the greatest female vocalists of the 20th century. Even today, when the mind hears the tune of “God Bless America,” the imagination delivers it in Smith’s voice.

As it turned out, not only did Berlin and Smith bless America by delivering to the country the immortal



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words and melody of the song, Smith herself was a blessing to a country embroiled in a globe-spanning war against tyrants, genocide, and evil bloodlust.

While the flower of America's youth took to the skies, seas, and far-flung beachheads of World War II to stand against both the Nazi and Imperial Japanese juggernauts, Smith rallied those who remained behind to support the troops with epic fundraising efforts.

Smith's war bond broadcasts remain the stuff of legend. She was expert at using her vocal talents and naturally engaging storytelling ability to draw a picture in the minds of her listeners of the demands and sacrifices war meant to Americans serving in the conflict. "All over America, autumn is dancing over the hills and plains, tapping out the rhythm of the changing season," she said during a CBS war bonds broadcast. "But somewhere in the mud and the grime and noise of the battlefield a young man in khaki lies sprawled on unfamiliar earth. He lies very still and in his eyes there is untold agony. The guns of the enemy have gotten him, and as his comrades plunge forward into the black hell of war, he waits for the stretcher-bearers.... He is just an average American kid, came from a little town like any other American town.... He didn't want to set the world on fire. He wanted to live and work and love and get married.... Why in God's name should he lay down his precious life on the altar of freedom while we go our accustomed ways in comfort and safety? ... Is there any way we can get this ghastly war over more quickly for him and his comrades in arms?"

Of course there was, Smith told her audience. "Buy bonds and more bonds," she urged, "because you're down on your knees thanking your Creator that we have Americans fighting for freedom, fighting for victory."

With Smith's impassioned pleas echoing across America's airwaves, millions invested in war bonds. "No entertainer did more for the war effort on the home front than Kate Smith," Hayes noted in his biography of the singer. "She put every bit of [her energy] to work from December 7, 1941, until September 2, 1945. Her noon-day chats were constantly giving moral support to those of us here at home. She sang more patriotic songs than any other singer, expanding her broadcast schedule to include Armed Forces Radio shows, public service messages and bond drives. The cast of the 'Kate Smith Hour' traveled some 52,000 miles on the North American continent to give entertainment to military bases and centers of war work."

Fame and Fortune

From at least 1930 to 1950, no entertainer was more beloved by Americans than Kate Smith. Thereafter, interest in her flagged for a time, as new talents and song-styles emerged during the 1950s. But Kate Smith was always in demand and, as she did for the radio, she became the pioneering broadcaster for the fledgling technology of television. Even after she stopped hosting her own shows, she was in demand for guest appearances on other programs, even through the 1970s with programs such as *The Sonny & Cher Show* and the *Tony Orlando and Dawn show*.

Of her considerable success, Ed Sullivan, who had long known Smith and watched her career, remarked on the occasion of an awards ceremony in 1974 that she was "a great singing lady who has been entertaining America for nearly half a century." She was, he continued, "one of the top selling recording artists of all time" and "was one of radio's first major stars." Moreover, he noted, "She introduced the daytime talk show to television [and] her big time variety shows set new trends in both radio and TV." Eventually, her legend was compounded by her affiliation with the Philadelphia Flyers of the National



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Hockey League. She had always liked sports, and was flattered when the Flyers started featuring her recording of “God Bless America” before games, as team superstition held that if played before a game, a win was sure to follow. Smith sang the song in person, on a red carpet that had been rolled out on the ice, to a crowd of 17,007 fans on October 11, 1973. Doug Favell, the goalie from the opposing team that night, recalled the moment, saying, “I knew our goose was cooked.” As Richard Hayes notes in his biography of Smith, the score that night “was Philadelphia 2, Toronto 0.” The Flyers went on to erect a statue of Smith in full-throated song outside their arena.

Kate Smith and the Snowflakes

That beautiful and inspiring sculpture of America’s Songbird is now gone, removed because today’s social-justice snowflakes have been “triggered” by it. Moreover, both the New York Yankees and the Flyers have decided not to use Smith’s rendition of “God Bless America” any longer because, they suggest, Smith may have been a racist.

The terrible charge stems from Smith having performed two controversial songs, at least one of which possessed racist overtones and content, early in her career.

The first of these was the song “That’s Why Darkies Were Born,” which certainly sounds aggressively racist. The lyrics, though, are not so clear-cut. The song is part lament: “Brothers, sisters, what must be, must be; though the balance is wrong, still your faith must be strong.” And then, it points out that the unjustly enslaved are heroes for their courageous perseverance in the face of the unthinkable evil perpetrated against them: “Someone had to fight that old Devil, Shout about Gabriel’s Horn; Someone had to stoke that old train, That would bring God’s children to green pastures; That’s why darkies were born.”

No one today would write such a song, the reference to “darkies” being especially irritating and terrible. But in the spirit of 1931 when this made its appearance in the Broadway revue *George White’s Scandals*, it may have been somewhat of an affront to the otherwise casual racism that was not exactly uncommon in the media of the day. It is also worth noting that the song was recorded by black superstar Paul Robeson, and it seems highly unlikely that he would have recorded a song that was overtly racist.

The other controversial song performed by Smith was “Pickaninnies’ Heaven,” from the one Hollywood film in which she starred, 1933’s *Hello Everybody*. Richard Hayes, Smith’s biographer, rightly called it an “offensive novelty.” Did Kate Smith mean for it to be offensive? We can’t ask her, now. But we do know her opinion about racism in general.

Smith addressed the issue of racism in 1945 on the CBS show *We, The People*. On that show she said, “Race hatreds — social prejudices — religious bigotry — they are the disease that eat away the fibers of peace. Unless they are exterminated it’s inevitable that we will have another war. And where are they going to be exterminated? At a conference table in Geneva? Not by a long shot. In your own city — your church — your children’s school — perhaps in your own home.” And she continued, exhorting her vast listening audience: “You and I must do it — every father and mother in the world, every teacher, everyone who can rightfully call himself a human being.”

Obviously, these are not the words of a racist. Instead, they are the words of someone who had come to understand that racism is an evil that opposes the American values of individual freedom and natural rights that are so fundamental to the country that she loved.



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It's necessary to consider, as well, the fact that Smith was more than just words on this subject. If she were the racist that is now alleged by some moderns, then she would not have featured so many black performers on her various shows. These included the great musicians Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Harry Belafonte, and the superb Nat King Cole. Also appearing on her show, making her TV debut, according to Richard Hayes, was "Josephine Baker, the talented, voluptuous, controversial black dancer-chanteuse who spent most of her adult life in France."

This would not seem to be the résumé of a racist, as Smith's modern critics allege.

Instead, it's part of Smith's broader legacy, that being her ability and willingness to try new songs herself, to keep the performers of the past in front of ever-changing audiences by helping them get access to newer broadcast technologies, and to find new talents and bring them to the attention of the American people.

For the better part of the 20th century, Kate Smith charmed and delighted audiences with her voice, her empathy for her fellow Americans, and her warm personality. Through peace and war, through times of plenty and times of economic distress, and despite attacks on her physical appearance and weight that continued throughout her life, she was a true American original. As many, including President Reagan, have said before, God blessed America with Kate Smith.

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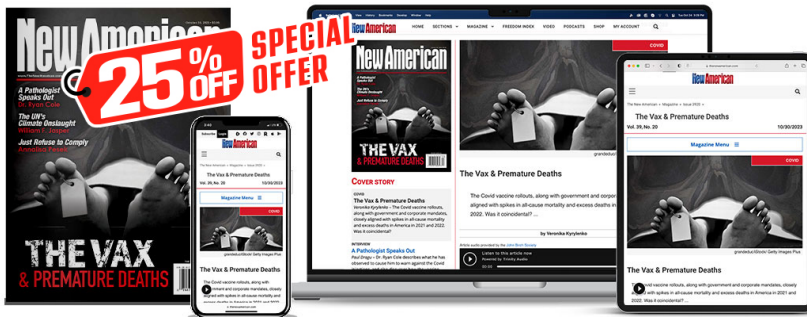
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