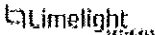


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Francis Scott Key, the Reluctant Patriot

The Washington lawyer was an unlikely candidate to write the national anthem; he was against America's entry into the War of 1812 from the outset

By Norman Gelb

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One by one, the buildings at the heart of the American government went up in flames. On the evening of August 24, 1814, British troops torched the Capitol, the Treasury, the President's House (not yet called the White House). All burned ferociously, as did the structures housing the War and the State departments. Battle-hardened redcoats had overwhelmed and scattered the largely untrained and poorly led American militiamen and regulars deployed to stop them from reaching the capital. President James Madison, along with his attorney general and secretary of state, had fled to safety across the Potomac River. Reporting news of the rout, the *London Courier* crowed: "War America would have, and war she has got."

As the flames rose across the capital on that sweltering August evening, the American government's decision two years earlier to declare war on Britain—in a conflict that would come to be known as the War of 1812—seemed foolhardy and self-destructive. England remained a mighty world power, while the fledgling United States was strapped for cash, plagued by domestic discord and militarily weak. Donald Hickey, author of *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*, says, "The Army was understaffed, untrained, poorly equipped and led by superannuated and incompetent officers. The Navy was just plain outmatched by the Royal Navy."

The British had been largely responsible for provoking hostilities. Locked in a fierce struggle for global domination with Emperor Napoleon's France, they brazenly interfered with neutral America's lucrative maritime commerce with Europe by seizing American ships and forcing kidnapped American seamen to meet the need for manpower on British naval vessels. "At this point," says historian Douglas Egerton, author of *Gabriel's Rebellion* and other works on antebellum America, "England still regarded American trade as part of their domain—even after the Revolution. Britain wanted to prevent American foodstuffs and other goods from reaching France; they needed to cut off that trade in order to help them win against Napoleon."

No matter how unequal the balance of power was between the United States and Great Britain, President Madison nevertheless condemned Britain's "progressive usurpations and accumulating wrongs," asserting that such outrages would not be tolerated by a nation that had earned its right to international respect through victory in the American Revolution three decades earlier.

From the moment hostilities commenced, in July 1812, British naval ships engaged U.S. vessels along the Eastern Seaboard, and British and American forces began skirmishing along the Northwest frontier and in Canada. In Congress, the hawks advocated an attempt to annex Canada, thereby reducing British influence in the contested Northwest. Thomas Jefferson, the

former president, predicted that such a venture would be “a mere matter of marching.”

The torching of the capital was said to be in retaliation for the burning of buildings in York (near present-day Toronto) by American troops earlier in the war. Now, dismay and anxiety reverberated across the country. Would New York be next? Philadelphia? The Royal Navy could put troops ashore anywhere along the Atlantic Coast.

Despite such forebodings, the burning of Washington did not herald disaster for the floundering American cause. Instead, it turned out to be the prelude to one of the most celebrated expressions of patriotic fervor in the young country's history: Francis Scott Key's composition of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” written following the British attack on Baltimore Harbor three weeks after the assault on the capital.

After setting Washington ablaze and raiding adjoining Alexandria, Virginia, the British turned on Baltimore, 40 miles north. They confidently expected America's third largest city (exceeded in population only by New York and Philadelphia) to fall as easily as the capital. A Royal Navy fleet proceeded from the Chesapeake Bay into the wide mouth of the Patapsco River and positioned itself to bombard Fort McHenry at the entrance to Baltimore Harbor. It was to be a coordinated land-sea operation. Once the fort had been silenced, British strategists predicted, the redcoats would take and plunder Baltimore, attempting to underscore the futility of any further challenge by the Americans.

The British launched a withering bombardment of Fort McHenry on a rainy September 13. For much of the onslaught, shells and rockets fell on the fort at the rate of almost one a minute. American major George Armistead, commander of Fort McHenry, estimated that “from fifteen to eighteen hundred shells” were fired during the attack.

At the time, Francis Scott Key, a 35-year-old Washington lawyer and writer of occasional verse, found himself detained on a British ship within sight of the fort. The son of a distinguished judge, he had been born into a family of wealthy plantation owners based in Keymar, Maryland.

Key was in British custody due to an incident that had occurred two weeks earlier, when a 65-year-old physician, William Beanes, confronted some British soldiers who had tried to plunder his Upper Marlboro, Maryland, home. One of the soldiers complained to his officers, who had the doctor placed under arrest. He was escorted to one of their vessels in the Chesapeake Bay. Learning of the incarceration through Richard West, his wife's brother-in-law, Key agreed to act on Beanes' behalf and received permission from President Madison to try to negotiate his release.

On the face of it, Key seemed an unlikely candidate to write what would become the national anthem. He had referred to the conflict as “abominable” and a “lump of wickedness,” siding with the many Americans—a majority, according to Republican South Carolina congressman William Lowndes—who believed that a diplomatic accommodation with Britain could have avoided hostilities altogether.

The senate vote in favor of a declaration of war, taken on June 17, 1812, had split 19 to 13, reflecting fundamental differences between members of the largely pro-war Republicans and the largely antiwar Federalists. In the House of Representatives, the vote had been 79 to 49, with Republicans once again in favor. It was the closest vote on any declaration of war in American history.

Opposition had been particularly vehement in the Northeast. In New York that autumn of 1812, antiwar Federalist candidates made major electoral gains in Congressional contests. By the waning months of that year, the Massachusetts legislature passed a resolution urging citizens to resist the war effort. Antiwar sentiments ran deep in other parts of the country as well. Key's friend, maverick Republican congressman John Randolph of Virginia, said the war would be financed by the “blood and treasure of the people.” Critics charged, too, that Congressional “war hawks”—Southern for the most part—were promoting the cause of settlers and speculators who eagerly eyed land in British-held Canada and Spanish Florida. The War of 1812, says

historian Hickey, was, even given Vietnam, the most “vigorously opposed war with a foreign power in our history.”

When news of the war reached New England, a few days after the June 17 vote in Congress, church bells in many Northeastern towns and villages tolled slowly in mourning, and shopkeepers closed their businesses in protest. By the time hostilities had dragged on for an inconclusive year and a half, delegates from New England convened in Hartford, Connecticut, to debate whether the Northeastern states should secede from the Union and establish a separate American nation. Massachusetts governor Caleb Strong made overtures to the British commander in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Sir John Coape Sherbrooke, to consider prospects for a separate peace. Historian Egerton believes that had the war gone on much longer, that “process of separation would surely have begun.” At the time, he says, “it seemed as if the war could continue indefinitely. From the [New Englanders’] point of view, they had a president who had destroyed their maritime economy and was also getting Americans killed in an unnecessary war.”

However opposed to America’s entry into the war he had been, Key had been outraged by British incursions up the Chesapeake, the attack on the nation’s capital and the capture of Beanes. On September 7, 1814, Key, accompanied by American prisoner-of-exchange officer John Skinner, boarded the *Tonnant*, flagship of the British fleet, where Beanes was being held. They carried with them letters from British officers who had been treated by Beanes after being wounded during a skirmish in Bladensburg, Maryland. Within hours, the Americans had persuaded a British commander, Maj. Gen. Robert Ross, to release the doctor. By then, however, the assault on Baltimore was imminent; the three Americans, guarded by British marines, were obliged to wait out the battle aboard the British sloop some eight miles upriver from Fort McHenry.

From the vessel, they anxiously watched the bombardment of the fort through the daylight hours of September 13. According to Key, “It seemed as though mother earth had opened and was vomiting shot and shell in a sheet of fire and brimstone.” But as darkness descended, Key could see little more of the battle than the “red glare” of the enemy’s newly designed gunpowder-propelled Congreve rockets tracing fiery arcs across the sky. “The heavens aglow were a seething sea of flame,” he later wrote to his friend John Randolph. In the “angry sea,” as Key described conditions on that stormy night, the flag-of-truce sloop was “tossed as though in a tempest.” Key was alarmed by the sound of “bombs bursting in air”—British shells detonating short of their target.

It seemed unlikely, Key would later recall, that American resistance at the fort could withstand such a pounding. Not until the mists dissipated at dawn September 14 did he learn the outcome of the battle. “At last,” he later wrote, “a bright streak of gold mingled with crimson shot athwart the eastern sky, followed by another, and still another, as the morning sun rose.” Gradually he was able to discern not the British Union Jack that he had feared, but still, defiantly, an American flag, enormous in its dimensions, fluttering in the breeze from the flagpole of an undefeated Fort McHenry. The fort had not fallen: Baltimore remained safe. It was, he later wrote, a “most merciful deliverance.”

Major Armistead, the fort commander, could take credit for the flag’s spectacular size, 30 by 42 feet. Leaving no detail to chance in his preparations for the fort’s defense, he envisioned a dramatic emblem, commissioning Baltimore flag maker Mary Young Pickersgill to stitch a banner so large that the enemy would “have no difficulty in seeing it from a distance.” Mrs. Pickersgill had duly supplied the massive flag, sewn of wool bunting. Each of its 15 stars was about two feet across; its 15 stripes were about two feet wide.

History does not record with certainty whether the flag Key saw that fateful morning was the one flown during the bombardment itself. Some historians suggest that a 17- by 25-foot storm flag also sewn by Mrs. Pickersgill may have been run up the flagpole during the downpour, consistent with common practice. The famous Star-Spangled Banner—today one of the greatest treasures of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History—may not have been raised until first light on September 14. “At dawn on the 14th,” wrote militiaman Isaac Monroe of the Baltimore Fencibles, “our morning gun was fired, the flag hoisted, [and] Yankee Doodle played. . . .”

No thoroughly detailed account of this extraordinary moment exists, but we do know that Key was still aboard the *Tonnant* when he began composing a verse about the experience—and his relief at seeing the Stars and Stripes still waving. He used the only writing paper at hand: the back of a letter he pulled from his pocket. He had not yet learned that the British commander who'd been Beanes' liberator, Maj. Gen. Robert Ross, had been killed by a sniper en route to Baltimore. Almost immediately, the entire British fleet began to withdraw. Key and his companions, including Beanes, were released. On their passage back to shore, Key expanded the few lines he had scrawled. In his lodging at a Baltimore inn the following day, he polished his draft into four stanzas.

Key's brother-in-law Joseph Nicholson, a commander of a militia at Fort M'Henry, had the poem printed for distribution to the public. Entitled "Defence of Fort M'Henry," the verse was accompanied by a suggestion that it be set to the music of an English drinking song. Before the week was out, the poem had been reprinted in the pages of the *Baltimore Patriot* newspaper, which pronounced it a "beautiful and animating effusion" that is destined "long to outlive the impulse which produced it." Rechristened "The Star-Spangled Banner" soon thereafter, Key's words were, within weeks, appearing in newspapers across the nation.

In England, news of the setback in Baltimore was met with dismay. The *London Times* called it a "lamentable event." The British public had grown increasingly critical of the conflict, their frustration compounded by crippling losses to the British economy; the suspension of lucrative trade with America, coupled with the staggering costs Britain had incurred during its war with Napoleon's France, had spread hardship across the land. "The tax burden on British citizens was crushing," says historian Hickey. "England had been at war with France for over two decades."

The United States was counting costs too. Confronted with a war-induced financial crisis and the realization that no substantial benefits were likely to accrue as a result of the conflict, President Madison and Congress accepted that the time had come to reach a peace settlement. Negotiations, conducted on neutral ground in Belgium at Ghent, were rapidly concluded; a treaty that provided neither country with major concessions was signed December 24, 1814. No significant territorial exchanges took place. The United States tacitly accepted its failure to annex Canada. As for British harassment of American maritime commerce, most of that had lapsed when the British-French Napoleonic Wars ended with the defeat of the French emperor a few months earlier.

Although neither side achieved decisive or lasting military gain, the conflict did have beneficial consequences for the United States. The nation emerged stronger at least internationally. No matter how poorly prepared the United States had been, the government's readiness to take up arms against a mighty foe substantially enhanced American prestige abroad. Former president Thomas Jefferson said the war demonstrated that "our government . . . can stand the shock of war." Delaware senator James Bayard expressed a commonly held sentiment when he vowed: "It will be a long time before we are disturbed again by any of the powers of Europe." Indeed, within a decade, Madison's successor, James Monroe, formulated the Monroe Doctrine, which put "European powers" on notice that the United States would tolerate no further colonization in the "American continents."

The war had domestic consequences as well. Hickey believes that America actually lost the war "because we did not achieve our war aims—perhaps most significantly, we failed to achieve our territorial ambition to conquer or annex Canada." In Hickey's estimation, Madison showed himself to be "one of the weakest war presidents in America's history" for failing to work effectively with Congress, control his cabinet or provide coherent leadership.

But in the public mind his successes—the defense of Fort M'Henry and the defeat, against all odds, of a Royal Navy squadron on Lake Champlain—outweighed his shortcomings. The greatest boost to American self-esteem was Gen. Andrew Jackson's victory in the Battle of New Orleans, which took place after the war had officially ended—the peace treaty having been signed in far-off Belgium more than a week earlier. "Americans were aware of the many failures in the war," says C. Edward Skeen, author of *Citizen Soldiers in the War of 1812*, but "to end the war on a high note certainly pumped up American pride,"

particularly since “most counted simple survival [in the war] as a victory.”

Patriotic emotions had the effect of diminishing, at least temporarily, the political and regional rivalries that had divided Americans since the founding of the nation. Former secretary of the treasury Albert Gallatin, one of the United States negotiators at Ghent, believed his countrymen now felt more American than ever. “They feel and act,” he said, “more like a nation.”

That emergent sense of national identity had also acquired a potent emblem. Before the bombardment in Baltimore Harbor, the Stars and Stripes had possessed little transcendent significance: it functioned primarily as a banner to identify garrisons or forts. Now the flag—and Key’s song inextricably linked to it—had become an emotionally charged symbol.

Key’s “land of the free and the home of the brave” soon became a fixture of political campaigns and a staple of July fourth celebrations. Still, more than a century would pass from its composition until the moment in 1931 when President Herbert Hoover officially proclaimed it the national anthem of the United States. Even then, critics protested that the lyrics, lengthy and ornate, were too unfamiliar to much of the public. Others objected that Key’s poem extolled military glory, equating patriotism “with killing and being killed . . . with intense hatreds and fury and violence,” as Clyde Miller, dean of Columbia University’s Teachers College, said in 1930. The *New York Herald Tribune* wrote that the song had “words that nobody can remember to a tune that nobody can sing.” Detractors, including New York civic leader Albert S. Bard, argued that “America the Beautiful” would make for a more suitable, more singable anthem.

Despite the carping, Congress and Hoover conferred official status on “The Star-Spangled Banner” on March 3, 1931. Proponents had carried the day only after a campaign that featured two sopranos, backed by a Navy band, demonstrated the song’s “singability” before the House Judiciary Committee.

As for the huge flag that inspired the writing of the anthem, it came into fort commander Armistead’s hands not long after the Battle of Fort McHenry and remained in his family’s possession until 1907, when his grandson, Eben Appleton, offered it to the Smithsonian Institution. Today, Smithsonian experts are painstakingly conserving the flag. Enclosed in a climate-controlled laboratory, it is the centerpiece of an exhibition at the National Museum of American History. The treatment, which has taken five years, is expected to be completed this year.

Although Francis Scott Key was a prolific writer, the only one of his poems to stand the test of time was “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Although it would ultimately elevate him into the pantheon of American heroes, Key was known during his lifetime primarily as a respected figure in legal and political circles. As a friend and adviser to President Andrew Jackson, he helped defuse pre-Civil War confrontations between the federal government and the state of Alabama.

A religious man, Key believed slavery sinful; he campaigned for suppression of the slave trade. “Where else, except in slavery,” he asked, “was ever such a bed of torture prepared?” Yet the same man, who coined the expression “the land of the free,” was himself an owner of slaves who defended in court slaveholders’ rights to own human property.

Key believed that the best solution was for African-Americans to “return” to Africa—although by then most had been born in the United States. He was a founding member of the American Colonization Society, the organization dedicated to that objective; its efforts led to the creation of an independent Liberia on the west coast of Africa in 1847. Although the society’s efforts were directed at the small percentage of free blacks, Key believed that the great majority of slaves would eventually join the exodus. That assumption, of course, proved to be a delusion. “Ultimately,” says historian Egerton, “the proponents of colonization represent a failure of imagination. They simply cannot envision a multiracial society. The concept of moving people around as a solution was widespread and being applied to Indians as well.”

When Key died at 63 on January 11, 1843, the *Baltimore American* declared that “so long as patriotism dwells amongst us, so

long will this Song be the theme of our Nation." Across America, statues have been erected to his memory. Key's Georgetown house—where he lived with his wife, Polly, and 11 children—was removed to make way for a highway in 1947. The two-story brick dwelling, a national landmark by any measure, was dismantled and put in storage. By 1955, the building, down to the last brick, had disappeared from its storage site; it is presumed lost to history. By a joint resolution of Congress, a flag has flown continuously since May 30, 1949, over a monument marking his birthplace in Keymar, Maryland. It celebrates Key's important role in shaping, as historians Bruce and William B. Catton once wrote, Americans' belief "not merely in themselves but also in their future . . . lying just beyond the western horizon."

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