**The Star Spangled Banner**





Photo credit: Public Domain

*This picture is an artist's rendering of the battle at Fort McHenry. The caption reads, in part, "A VIEW of the BOMBARDMENT of Fort McHenry, near Baltimore, by the British fleet taken from the Observatory."*

**BALTIMORE, Maryland** (Achieve3000, March 6, 2006). *O say, can you see, by the dawn's early light....* Do you recognize those words, and do you know what they mean? They are the first words of "The Star Spangled Banner," which became the U.S. national anthem in 1931. Here is some information about the history of the song and how people feel about it today.

**Inspired by a Flag**

Many Americans are not really sure what the national anthem is about. The song was originally a poem, written by lawyer and amateur poet Francis Scott Key during the War of 1812 between the U.S. and Britain.

Despite its name, the war actually took place between 1812 and 1815. America became involved in the conflict in the course of taking part in international trade. In the years leading up to the war, the U.S. traded with both Britain and France, even though those two countries were fighting each other in Europe. Britain's actions made it increasingly difficult for the U.S. to remain neutral, as Britain's navy repeatedly took over U.S. ships and impressed American sailors to fight on the British side, disrupting U.S. trade. As time went on, many Americans grew hostile toward Britain, and in June of 1812, the U.S. declared war. The war also included a dispute over land—the U.S. wanted to expand into Canada, which Britain ruled. Eventually, the war ended in a stalemate.

On September 3, 1814, while the war still raged, Francis Scott Key boarded a British ship near Baltimore, Maryland. President James Madison had given the young lawyer permission to negotiate with two British officers for the release of an American prisoner. The officers eventually agreed to release the prisoner, but they were concerned that during negotiations, Key might have overheard plans for an overnight attack on Fort McHenry in Baltimore. They decided to hold Key until after the battle was over. Key waited onboard the British ship, anxious about how the battle would turn out. In the morning, he saw that the American flag continued to fly above the fort, indicating that the U.S. had won the battle.

Inspired by the victory, Key wrote a poem called "Defence of Fort McHenry." The poem was printed in a Baltimore newspaper and soon became a popular song, set to a tune by British composer John Stafford Smith called "To Anacreon in Heaven."

By the early 20th century, the song was known as "The Star Spangled Banner" and was played at military occasions and sporting events. On March 3, 1931, Congress adopted the song as the national anthem.

**The Anthem Today**

Today, Americans continue to hear "The Star Spangled Banner" for patriotic occasions and at sporting events. Many people believe that it is a perfect choice for the anthem of the United States. They point out that the song has a stirring melody and patriotic lyrics, as a national anthem should. The U.S. is, after all, "the land of the free and the home of the brave."

However, some people feel that the U.S. should have a different national anthem. Why? For one thing, "The Star Spangled Banner" is about a war that few Americans know much about. The song recounts a battle against Britain, a country that is now a strong U.S. ally. Many people object to the fact that the anthem is about a war at all. They feel that a national anthem should be about national pride without describing conflict.

|  |
| --- |
| **The Star Spangled Banner**O say can you seeby the dawn's early light,What so proudly we hailedat the twilight's last gleaming,Whose broad stripes and bright stars through 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 nightthat our flag was still there;O say does that star-spangled banner yet wave,O'er the land of the freeand the home of the brave?*Listen to the national anthem*  |

Some people believe that "The Star Spangled Banner" is simply too difficult. The words of the song are hard to remember. In fact, the song has four stanzas, but most people know only the first one, if they know the words at all. In addition, many people say that the song is difficult to sing because some of the notes are high and hard to reach. They feel that a national anthem should have a tune that anyone can sing, since anthems are meant for people to share and celebrate.

If the national anthem were changed, which song could replace it? Songwriters have penned many patriotic tunes about the U.S., including "America the Beautiful" and "America (My Country Tis of Thee)." The most popular alternative for a national anthem, though, is "God Bless America," by Irving Berlin. Berlin, a Russian immigrant who came to the U.S. at age 5, wrote the song in 1918, when the U.S. was fighting in World War I. In 1938, with the world heading toward World War II, singer Kate Smith sang the song on the radio. The song became a big hit and has been popular ever since. Many people like the song because it expresses national pride in a simple yet elegant way.

For now, "The Star Spangled Banner" remains the U.S. national anthem. Many people feel that it best expresses how Americans feel about their country.