

Answering the anthem

We sing it. But do we know the story behind “The Star-Spangled Banner?”

The national anthem is part of our identity. I have sung it innumerable times before big events or before a ballgame. I teared up the first time I heard it sung after 9/11, as well as when my oldest daughter sang it solo for the first time before a high school basketball game.

But what is not well known is that every time we struggle to get notes and words right, we are, in fact, asking a question. During our Fourth of July holiday, I hope we answer this question in our own minds and hearts.

Saving Baltimore and the bravery to endure

In September 1814, British warships unleashed a dizzying array of shells and rockets onto Fort McHenry in Baltimore Harbor. It was 25 hours of pounding.

This attack came only weeks after the British had attacked Washington D.C., burning the Capitol, the Treasury and the White House to the ground. The Port of New Orleans had fallen and the American Republic was at a tipping point during the War of 1812.

Who was Dr. William Beanes? A Baltimore physician imprisoned on a British war ship, he was the reason Francis Scott Key — a 35-year-old American lawyer — was dispatched by President James Madison to secure Beanes’s release.

Part of the agreement was that Key could not leave the ship until after the British attack began. Subsequently, Key watched the carnage unfold, and wrote a set of observations and questions that ultimately became the lyrics of our national anthem. He had a long time to think about the toughness of his country.

Given the large scale of the attack, he was certain the British would win. But in the clearing smoke of the “dawn’s early light” the following day, he did not see a Union Jack flying above Fort McHenry.

Rather, it was the Stars and Stripes.

“[T]he rocket’s red glare” actually reported a new technology utilized by the British. The rockets would screech through the air, not with the purpose to inflict bodily harm but to scare the troops.

The other little-known fact is that the flag was enormous — a 30-by-42-foot garrison flag that took 11 men to hoist when it was dry.

The night that Key witnessed the shelling of Baltimore, it rained heavily. The flag would have been soggy and weighed over 500 pounds and snapped the flagpole. Fort McHenry flew a smaller flag during the night but raised



the much bigger (and still dry) flag in the morning. That is the flag that Key saw and wrote about.

The challenge in Key’s words

The anthem doesn’t merely point to the seminal moment of the flag flying after an evening of punishing attacks. It’s also a moment to reflect.

Are we still upholding the ideals embodied in the vision of America as “the land of the free and home of the brave?”

Originally titled “The Defence of Fort McHenry,” Key’s lyrics raised several questions around the nation’s commitment to survival. During times of great stress, would its men and women step up? These were not settled matters at the time. The British Empire was still trying to settle the score after the Revolutionary War.

The same question can be asked today, just as it was 203 years ago. At the dawn of each new day, can we successfully make our country a better place?



Jeff Stone
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A century in the making

“Yankee Doodle” and “The Star-Spangled Banner” were two patriotic songs that emerged out of the War of 1812. Union soldiers sang “The Star-Spangled Banner” during the Civil War and the song’s popularity increased over the following decades.

President Woodrow Wilson signed an executive order in 1916 to allow the anthem to be played at military ceremonies. It was not until 1931, after 40 attempts to pass a bill in the United States Congress, that “The Star-Spangled Banner” was formally designated as the national anthem of the United States.

A brave and enduring republic

Over two centuries later, worn down by the years, the actual flag that inspired Key still survives. To preserve this American icon, experts at the National Museum of American History completed an eight-year conservation treatment.

To this day, “The Star-Spangled Banner” continues to resonate with our nation in different ways and reasons. It is more than just a symbol: it evokes powerful ideals and emotions about what it means to be an American.

How will we answer the question? Because we cannot be free if we are not brave. It is up to each generation to answer this call and take inventory of our hearts and minds every time “The Star-Spangled Banner” is sung. Happy Fourth of July to all! ☺