



The Bombs Bursting in Air

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Little known fact: I was in Girls State in Idaho. I ran for governor and lost, but had a grand time as a legislator. This week-long conference, still run by the American Legion Auxiliary, helps high school girls learn about the political process by electing officials for all levels of state government and actively running a mock government. We were assigned to mock cities in the “Federalist Party” or “Nationalist Party,” and we worked to pass key legislation.

We also learned how to honor our country, including how to stand for the national anthem. I was taught to place my hand over my heart – not with fingers spread out, but close together. The other hand should be straight at my side, holding nothing. I was told to look continuously at the flag while the anthem was sung. Heaven forbid that I would whoop or shout out portions of the anthem! I learned flag etiquette, including how to fold the flag properly and never let it touch the ground and, especially, never let it sit out in the rain or drape it around my shoulders or make it into a t-shirt or use the flag pole to bludgeon someone on the steps of our Capitol. Okay, they didn’t teach that last one; I figured it out on my own.

The flag and the anthem were symbols of the democratic process we were learning firsthand. With confidence in this great social system, I took pride in the values of the country. For those reasons, I celebrate Independence Day with some solemnity. The barbecues and fireworks, of course, are an added bonus.

I’ve only just learned, however, that our anthem has [multiple stanzas](#). The words are a little archane, but revealing nonetheless. I didn’t realize, for example, that our national anthem distinguished between slaves and freemen. No one taught us about that at Girls State.

With the eyes of an adult, I see now the truth behind the anthem’s verse: “What is that which the breeze, o’er the towering steep, As it fitfully blows, half conceals, half discloses?” The values that the flag represents are sometimes disclosed and sometimes concealed. Who we are as a nation is sometimes apparent and laudable and sometimes hidden and hurtful. If we believe in this great democratic process, we shouldn’t back away from seeing all of it – the good and the bad. Indeed, it is that democratic process that allows us to acknowledge what is unjust and move toward something better. If we didn’t want to ensure justice for all, we could live in a fascist state, I suppose. The privilege of living in a democracy comes with the burden of being democratic.

Francis Scott Key concluded the anthem with:

*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.*

As Christians, we gauge whether our cause is just through the lens of God’s Word. Blind patriotism is not what we celebrate on the 4th of July, but the democratic values that hold the promise of making this country great. The Church’s litmus test remains, however, whether such values demonstrate love of neighbor and love of God. By looking critically at who we’ve been and who we are, we can conquer that which threatens us: racism, poverty, climate change, a pandemic, and more. We are brave not simply because we fight wars. It is also the bravery of self-examination and responsive change that will truly make this the land of the free.