Honoring the Star Spangled Banner

By Richard M. Gardella



Bill Press, a radio show host, gained national attention some time ago when he criticized our national anthem, The *Star Spangled Banner*. "I'm embarrassed every time I hear it," he reportedly said.

His musical complaint and his description of the anthem as "unsingable" are not what drew the attention or sparked anger. It was his attack on the lyrics that focused the wide response.

Calling the lyrics "inappropriate," he criticized the use of the phrase "home of the brave" and the anthem's reference to "bombs bursting in air."

The criticism reminded me of a sermon delivered on New Year's Day at a New Year's Day at a church in Westchester. The pastor pointed out that Maryland was marking the bicentennial of The War of 1812 in the new year with car license plates inscriptions. He blasted the license plate recognition as "gloating" over war.

I better understood the pastor's brief remarks when I later read the church bulletin. It contained an article by the cleric on the War of 1812. He guessed that war would have been found unjust under church "critical thinking" standards and mocked the war's description as a second war of independence.

Both Press and the pastor allow anti-war sentiments to cloud a view of this nation's history and obscure that history's importance in forming who we are as a people. The War of 1812, stumbled into with ill-defined goals, ended doubts about the continued viability of this young nation. Naval victory on Lake Champlain saving Plattsburgh; the defense of Fort McHenry in Baltimore; the stunning victory at New Orleans, and the rebuilding of the Capitol eliminated any question about the nation's independence on the world scene.The lawyer-author of The *Star Spangled Banner* actually saw "bombs bursting in air" as he viewed the defense of Fort McHenry from a ship in the harbor and was inspired to write what became our anthem.

Ditching the current national anthem makes no more sense than closing Fort McHenry as a historic site. Both are part of our history. Such action would be akin to asking the French to honor Petain's World War II efforts instead of DeGaulle's and to celebrate the fall of Paris rather than its liberation.

You cannot ignore history even if you are embarrassed by it. You cannot ignore history any more than you can turn your back on war. Cicero's sage remark comes to mind; "I do not reject peace, but I am afraid of war disguised as peace."

National sentiment expressed through patriotism, flag waving and war memorial observance may aid in fighting a war, but it doesn't cause war. The causes of war are far more complicated. Economics, religions, intellectual, character, geographic, climate and traditional differences all feed world competition among people. That competition, often further fueled by envy, hate, corruption and the desire for power, can and has led to war.

The first historian, Thucydides, said history is a nation's philosophy taught by example. In other words, our history is who we are. I believe that. As a result, in this space I have often promoted the study of history, especially for lawyers.

While there are parts of our history that lead to shame and embarrassment, that history also evokes pride

be cause of its focus on individual freedom. That pride is not "gloating" any more than memorial recognition of past sacrifice in defense of this country is war mongering.

Maryland is right to remember the War of 1812 on its license plates and The *Star Spangled Banner* helps give life to that memory. It is history. Our history.

The White House—Casualty in 1814, Preserved in 2001



The enemy seamen trod through the gracious rooms of the absent leader's home. Sampling food and wine, and touching laid out china, crystal and other furnishings, they exercised malevolent curiosity. All very humiliating to the young nation and its diminutive president, but worse was to come.*

The enemy admiral allowed only the taking of inexpensive souvenirs to guard against looting charges. However, looters had already flitted through the empty mansion before the enemy arrived.

The seamen ended their stay by setting the structure on fire, leaving only a smoldering shell of the former impressive mansion. With one important exception, most of its furnishings and belongings were destroyed or gone. The Capitol building as well as other structures also were heavily damaged by the invaders, adding to the capitol city's gloom. Damage was estimated at $1.5 million.

James Madison was physically our smallest president at about 100 pounds. William Howard Taft, the largest president, was three times heavier than the fourth president.

Neither Taft nor any other president faced what Madison faced on the morning of August 27, 1814 when he surveyed the ruined White House three days after the enemy's visit. A founding giant, he must have felt even smaller than his frail frame. Humiliation and despair produced a toxic phlegmatic mix. The forced resignation of John Armstrong, his Secretary of War, provided little relief. The prospect for rebuilding the mansion and the Capitol building in their present locations seemed dim. The money and leadership energy needed appeared problematic.

Sarcastically called "Mr. Madison's War," the War of 1812 was entered by his administration ill-prepared and with ill-defined goals. The Washington destruction came after 4,000 seasoned British troops backed by naval support routed American forces at Bladensburg on August 24th and marched on the Capitol.

Dolley Madison, known for her White House entertaining, was ordered to leave by messenger from her husband after the president witnessed the defeat. In retreat, the president stopped at the empty White House for a few moments before the enemy arrived. He refused food. It is not hard to guess his mood as he left.

The British viewed the Washington destruction as payback for the damages caused to government buildings in York, Canada, (now part of Toronto) by American forces the previous April.

The gloomy vision initially produced by the Washington raid did not last more than a few months thanks to good fortune and two future presidents. James Monroe, Madison's Secretary of State agreed to also take on the Secretary of War post. Monroe, a Revolutionary War veteran who fought at the Battle of White Plains, was up to the job. The Washington destruction was followed by the successful defense of Fort McHenry in Baltimore by American forces in September - an event that gave birth to our national anthem and helped restore pride.

A peace treaty was agreed to at the end of 1814. Ironically, it came before America's greatest victory of the war. Two weeks after the signing of the treaty, Andrew Jackson, who was to become this country's seventh president, engineered a stunning victory against the British at New Orleans on January 8, 1815.

Now, the White House and the Capitol would have to be restored to what they were. Despair was replaced by a spirit similar to that chronicled in an old Sinatra song-it was time "to pick yourself up, dust yourself off and start all over again."

Madison and his wife would never return to live in the White House, but his successor, Monroe, moved into the restored home and celebrated with a great reception on New Year's Day of 1818. Supplied with whiskey, port wine, cheese sugar and crackers, workmen who rebuilt the home also celebrated.

The only major furnishing to be restored in the new White House was a Gilbert Stuart portrait of George Washington which Dolley Madison had ordered saved. Its frame had to be broken so the portrait could be rolled up and removed before the invasion. That portrait is now touted as the one item which has been in the White House from its original use in 1800.

One hundred and eighty seven years passed before the President's house was again threatened by an enemy. That threat was aborted into a Pennsylvania field by a brave group of ordinary citizens who gave their lives. The Madisons would have been very proud of those citizens. I know I am.

**See The President's House, Volume I, by William Seale, published by The White House Historical Association in 1986, which was relied on to produce this column.*



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