



IS THE NATIONAL ANTHEM RACIST?

JAMES ROBBINS

Is America's national anthem racist?

Had you asked this question just a few years ago to fans at a baseball, basketball, or football game, they would have assumed you had imbibed one too many beers.

Today, thanks to an assault by the progressive left on “The Star-Spangled Banner” and its composer, Francis Scott Key, you might get a different reaction.

For example, here's what Jason Johnson, journalism professor at Morgan State University and popular cable news commentator, wrote about the anthem: “It is one of the most racist, pro-slavery, anti-black songs in the American lexicon...”

Is Johnson serious? Actually, he is. And sadly, a lot of progressives agree with him. But why? To answer that question, we need a brief history of the song.

Key wrote “The Star-Spangled Banner” after witnessing the American victory at the Battle of Ft. McHenry during the War of 1812, a rare bright spot in the young country's second conflict with Britain—a conflict in which the Americans mostly got their butts kicked.

Critics like Johnson focus on the third stanza, in which Key mocks the retreating British soldiers. Before describing those lyrics, I need to make a point: The third stanza is virtually unknown. Almost no American has ever sung, read, or heard it. But even so, it's not nearly as offensive as it's made out to be.

Here's what Key wrote: “No refuge could save the hireling and slave, from the terror of flight, or the gloom of the grave.”

The claim of racism focuses, of course, on Key's use of the word “slave” which, so the argument goes, refers to the British Second Corps of Colonial Marines. This unit was composed of former American slaves who had been encouraged to escape bondage and fight alongside British troops.

According to this line of thinking, the slave-owning Key, a prominent attorney, was terribly upset by the idea of freed blacks fighting against their former masters and was so gratified by their defeat that he inserted this line into his poem.

Like many Americans living in the early 19th century, Key's record on race was mixed. On the one hand, he owned slaves himself. On the other, he offered free legal representation to

slaves petitioning the Maryland court for their freedom.

In 1835, he served as prosecutor in a case in Washington, D.C. of an enslaved black man, Arthur Bowen, who was accused of threatening his white female owner. But when a riot ensued over the incident, Key bravely stood between Bowen and a lynch mob bent on killing him.

With respect to the anthem, there is no direct evidence that Key was referring to the Second Corps of Colonial Marines, that he even knew that the unit existed, or cared if it did. It should further be noted that this unit was not even present at the battle, so Key could not have seen them fleeing the field.

Why, then, did Key use the word “slave”?

We’ll never know for sure, of course, but it’s important to note that Key was not the first person to use the expression “hirelings and slaves.” It was a common rhetorical device of the time, used on both sides of the Atlantic.

You find it in newspaper articles and English-language literature well before the onset of the war. It was an all-purpose insult that could be used to refer to enemy troops, foreign leaders, corrupt politicians, or anyone else in need of a put-down.

For example, in 1795, long before the Second Corps of Colonial Marines even existed, a dispatch from Baltimore condemned the “the Hireling Slaves” of the English king, George III.

And remember, “slave” was a convenient rhyme for “grave.” Key was, after all, writing a poem. It may be as simple as that.

Before the recent ruckus, no one who sang the national anthem thought it sent a racial message. If anything, people believed that the anthem promoted unity, as it was intended to do. Besides, as previously noted, hardly any Americans even knew the third stanza existed.

During World War II, GIs trying to uncover German infiltrators would ask suspected spies to sing the second (or third or fourth) verse of “The Star-Spangled Banner.” If they *didn’t* know the words, they were assumed to be genuine Americans.

Those who declare the flag and the national anthem to be racist would do well to remember that Martin Luther King, Jr. and his supporters carried the American flag during their famous Selma march. When they reached the statehouse in Montgomery, Alabama, guess what song they sang?

That’s right. “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

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