

# God bless America's pastime

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"Please stand and take off your hats for the singing of 'God Bless America.'" That's how the announcer introduced the seventh inning stretch at a recent Minnesota Twins game I attended. Minnesotans are nothing if not rule followers, so we stood, many took off their hats, and some even joined in singing.

My experience with "God Bless America" is limited. I don't think I've ever sung the song in worship or encountered it in many public gatherings. I learned the song in elementary school, but I don't remember singing it outside class. But in recent years "God Bless America" has enjoyed a sort of resurgence, partly because "The Star-Spangled Banner" is so difficult to sing.

I have mixed feelings about the song; if I had my druthers it wouldn't be sung in public venues with the assumption that the listeners are praying along with the singer. That's my interpretation of the announcer's instruction to "take of your hats." The song is addressed to God; it is a prayer. I suppose that if you think it's best to stand and take off your hat to pray, then the announcer was on to something.

But what of those who do not believe in God? What of those who would like to stand but aren't able to do so? What about those who are believers but who are uncomfortable with the song's words, which can be taken as self-centered and miss the possibility that God might be of a mind to send justice to or even curse America for her misdeeds?

Irving Berlin wrote

"God Bless America" in 1918 while he served in the U.S. Army. Berlin revised the song in 1938, and thereafter it became Kate Smith's signature song. Berlin was Jewish, and the song's opening notes echo a Jewish folksong. Although some argued for its adoption as America's national anthem, southern conservatives

opposed the change because Berlin was Jewish and "a foreigner."

Until now I didn't know the song's history as both a victory song and a peace song, but the 1938 version includes an introduction written for the commemoration of Armistice Day:

While  
the storm clouds gather far across the sea,  
Let  
us swear allegiance to a land that's free,  
Let  
us all be grateful for a land so fair,  
As  
we raise our voices in a solemn prayer.

Back

at the game, the Twins and Rangers players doffed their hats and enjoyed the song with the rest of us. It's good, during the multimillion-dollar escape that is Major League Baseball, to remember that baseball is just a game, and that while we enjoy the September pennant races U.S. troops fight overseas. It's good to reflect on God's justice and peace on a beautiful afternoon at Target Field.

But

I couldn't help but wish that "God Bless America" would end quickly so we could move on to "Take Me Out to the Ballgame." For a few hours, I wanted a diversion from the culture and religion wars. Can't a guy just enjoy a baseball game in peace?