How the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" became America's hymn

By John Stauffer
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Here's one thing Presidents Bush and Obama have in common: both had the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" featured at key points in their presidencies. But how did a song with such clear sectional roots become an "American hymn"? As we commemorate the Civil War, the song's history sheds light on key aspects of who we are as Americans.

The song's origins are as much African as American. It probably began as a slave spiritual: "Say, brothers, will you meet us, / On Canaan's happy shore." "Say Brothers" was first published in an 1807 hymnbook, with call-and-response directions reflecting the form of spirituals. Numerous eyewitnesses describe slaves singing it in a ring shout, an African religious ritual in which people gathered in a circle to sing and dance.

In the 1850s, the song migrated north through hymnbooks. It became especially popular among soldiers of the Massachusetts Second Battalion—the "Tigers"—who garrisoned Fort Warren in Boston Harbor after the fall of Fort Sumter in April 1861.

One of the Tigers was a Scottish immigrant named John Brown. He formed a choral group with comrades, who needled him for his name. "You can't be John Brown," they sang; "John Brown is dead!" Another soldier would add, "His body lies mouldering in the grave." They were referring to the abolitionist John Brown, hanged for treason after raiding the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia in 1859. Brown's raid was the 9/11 of the Civil War era, widely believed to have sparked secession and war.

The Tigers called their immensely catchy song "John Brown's Body." In June 1861, the Boston abolitionist C.S. Hall published it as a penny ballad, which quickly sold out. The Twelfth Massachusetts Regiment sang it on Boston Common while under review, and in New York as they marched down Broadway. A *New York Tribune* journalist was so taken with the tune that he published the lyrics. By August, "John Brown's Body" was the most popular song in the Union army.

Two months later, Julia Ward Howe—a Boston belle known as the “poetess of America”—went to Washington with her husband, a leading conspirator in Brown’s raid. From across the Potomac, Howe watched a review of troops—until a Confederate raiding party broke it up. A traffic jam ensued as both troops and sightseers tried to get back to the city.

During the wait, Howe sang “John Brown’s Body” in her operatic voice. The soldiers shouted, “Good for you!” Her minister, who was with her, suggested that she “elevate” the lyrics of “that stirring tune.” Howe said that she had often thought of doing so but had not received the inspiration.

Inspiration came that night. Howe awoke “in the grey of the morning twilight,” as she later recalled. Borrowing imagery from Revelation, she “thought out all the stanzas,” found “an old stump of a pen” and wrote them down. The “Battle Hymn of the Republic” was published on the cover of the *Atlantic Monthly* in February 1862. Howe often said that she didn’t write the song, God did.

Throughout the war and Reconstruction, “John Brown’s Body” was far more popular than “Battle Hymn,” owing chiefly to its simplicity: it was easy to memorize and sing while marching. But it also tapped into the popular image of bodily decay co-existing with spiritual birth: “John Brown’s body is mouldering in the grave, / His soul is marching on.”

The “Battle Hymn” did not become a *national* song until the 1890s. It was an era of sectional reconciliation, so “John Brown’s Body”—which imagines hanging Jeff Davis from a sour apple tree—was sidelined. “Battle Hymn” avoids such explicit associations. The main character is God, who urges Americans to fight and die for “freedom,” a message both Northerners and Southerners could embrace. In the 1890s, the University of Georgia adopted the “Battle Hymn” as its fight song, and today the song is arguably most popular in the South.

The song’s legacies are abolitionist legacies, of people heeding God’s will in their fight for some version of freedom. In the 20th century, it became both Billy Sunday’s theme song and Billy Graham’s. It was also the anthem of Teddy Roosevelt’s Progressive Party, a labor anthem (rewritten as “Solidarity Forever”), and a Civil Rights song. Martin Luther King Jr.‘s last public words were “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

Throughout its history, the “Battle Hymn” has brilliantly united Americans while simultaneously dividing them. It is an ideal song for a nation at war, clarifying distinctions between “us” and “them” while encouraging sacrifice. Used in the service of violent and nonviolent causes, conservative and radical, it has always been an *aspirational* song. It envisions a good society, a millennial reign of peace and harmony.

No wonder it is so often performed at political conventions and presidential funerals. It offers uplift, inspiring the masses to sacrifice themselves for the greater good of a nation whose destiny has been prescribed by God.

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