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## “Old Glory”

I will admit it. I cannot sing our national anthem, “The Star Spangled Banner,” not because it is difficult to sing (which it is) or because I do not know the lyrics or the tune but because I get choked up before I can get past the first few lines. Lest you accuse me of being an overly sentimental fellow (which may for other undisclosed reasons be true), I must hasten to say I’ve spoken to other grown men, usually one-on-one, who admit privately they too have that problem.

As school kids we learned the lyrics come from an 1814 poem by Francis Scott Key and a few of us may have even learned the tune was composed in the middle 1760s by John Stafford Smith from Gloucester, England. (I had to look that up.) Whether or not we were taught the history of it, we learned to sing our national anthem, if not well at least loudly and maybe even enthusiastically. And we cheered when we finished, perhaps not always knowing why (or perhaps because it *was* finished).

We hear “The Star Spangled Banner” rendered at official functions, of course, but more often at sport venues. It may be difficult to sing, let alone sing well, but I am not a fan of many sporting event versions. I don’t think of myself as a traditionalist (whatever *that* means) but the U.S. Army Field Band and Chorus performance on YouTube is more to my liking. I *will* say sports fans predictably contribute *loud* cheers at the end of a rendering, whether performed well or not-so-well.

Our flag got its nickname from a 19<sup>th</sup> century American sea captain, William Driver, who dubbed his own flag “Old Glory.” (I had to look that up, too.) The name caught on. Someone gave me a T-shirt

emblazoned with our flag and “Old Glory.” I do wear it but wonder if passersby might think the phrase refers to the old man wearing the T-shirt rather than the flag on it.

If you look up Key’s original poem and try to sing the other three verses to the familiar Smith tune, I’m guessing you will find it almost impossible. I did. Thank goodness we only use the first verse which, by the way, ends with a question. As far I know, ours is the only national anthem that ends with a question but I could be wrong. If there are others, enlighten me with an email.

I suspect most Americans have only heard the word “ramparts” in our national anthem. Just to confirm my recollection, I looked up ramparts: “A defensive mound of earth or a wall with a broad top and usually a stone parapet; a wall-like ridge of earth, stones or debris.” But I doubt when we hear our anthem many of us think of the 1814 Fort McHenry ramparts Key wrote about.

So, what stirs us so intensely when we hear or sing our national anthem? That question is much too complex for these two columns and the answers will be as varied as are the American people. For me, it is more than just conditioning or socialization. For those of us who strive to live our own versions of the American Dream in this great country of incredible natural beauty and broad freedom, the connection is deep within our minds and hearts. So the answer to that question “Oh, say does that star-spangled banner yet wave / O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave?” is a resounding “Yes!”

