

First, I think, we should note that the Star Spangled Banner, although a battle song, was not the literary creation of a War Lord—nor even of a professional soldier.

No. Key was a typical American of the sort we could meet any day on Main Street. He lived in the then small town of Baltimore, worked for his living -- went to his church -- and asked no more of life than to be allowed to go on living in his own free, personal, American way.

But this he was not allowed to do. Forces over which he had no control began to shake the snug little world in which he lived. What happened is now history.

Europe in 1812 was much farther off than it is today. Yet, two years after the start of war, there were enemy ships in Chesapeake Bay -- there were enemy soldiers in the streets of Washington. I don't mean to draw frightening parallels—but only to point out that being a peace-loving man of a peace-loving Nation did not prevent Key in September, 1814, from being aboard an enemy ship which was bombarding Baltimore.

There he was in a good position to learn something about the nature of war. How little that nature has changed! The men at Pearl Harbor found that out on December 7th. We have all found it out since—thank Heaven, not too late. This Nation had not gone to war -- but war had come to us.

So it was a simple citizen who gave us our National Anthem. Moreover, a man who was the eye-witness of shell-fire falling on American soil. And there arose in that man's bosom -- as it rises again in ours -- the overwhelming, out-pouring surge of patriotism—an emotion in words that long outlived him.

And the song itself—the American battlesong—what about it? It is significant and indicative of the American character that it is not a song of conquest—not a song of hate.

It could not be either of these and still represent the American spirit.

Key looked through the smoke of battle on the dawn of that day and saw that the Flag was still there. The Flag was a symbol then—as it is now—of things the very opposite of conquest and hatred. The Flag still flying there means to Americans today—that our homes—our personal liberties—our chosen ways of work and worship—all these things are also there.

Everyday things, commonplace things. Things our grandparents had—and which we expect our grandchildren to have. Yes, we have taken such things for granted because we have always had them.

Yet, sometimes we forget that our forefathers did not always have them. At Bunker Hill they won these liberties. At North Point and in the Argonne Forest, these liberties were preserved. Today Americans are fighting to preserve them again.

Jefferson said: "The God who gave us Life gave us Liberty at the same time." Yes, but our lives are what we make them. So are our liberties. Freedom is not the sort of a possession to be wrapped up and carefully stored away.