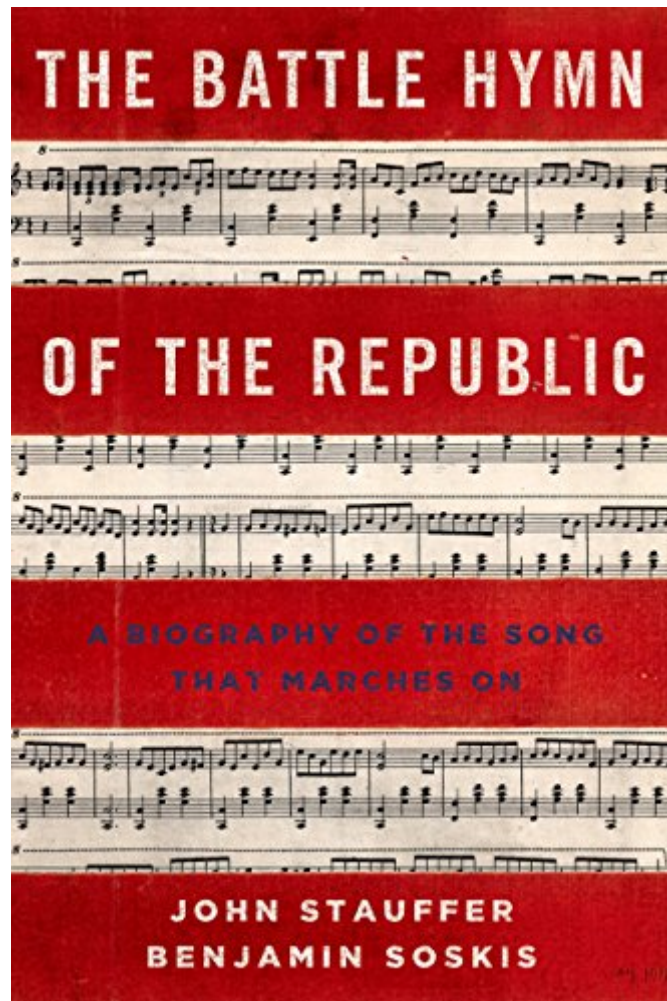


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# The Battle Hymn Of The Republic: A Biography Of The Song That Marches On



## Synopsis

It was sung at Ronald Reagan's funeral, and adopted with new lyrics by labor radicals. John Updike quoted it in the title of one of his novels, and George W. Bush had it performed at the memorial service in the National Cathedral for victims of September 11, 2001. Perhaps no other song has held such a profoundly significant--and contradictory--place in America's history and cultural memory than the "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." In this sweeping study, John Stauffer and Benjamin Soskis show how this Civil War tune has become an anthem for cause after radically different cause. The song originated in antebellum revivalism, with the melody of the camp-meeting favorite, "Say Brothers, Will You Meet Us." Union soldiers in the Civil War then turned it into "John Brown's Body." Julia Ward Howe, uncomfortable with Brown's violence and militancy, wrote the words we know today. Using intense apocalyptic and millenarian imagery, she captured the popular enthusiasm of the time, the sense of a climactic battle between good and evil; yet she made no reference to a particular time or place, allowing it to be exported or adapted to new conflicts, including Reconstruction, sectional reconciliation, imperialism, progressive reform, labor radicalism, civil rights movements, and social conservatism. And yet the memory of the song's original role in bloody and divisive Civil War scuttled an attempt to make it the national anthem. The Daughters of the Confederacy held a contest for new lyrics, but admitted that none of the entries measured up to the power of the original. "The Battle Hymn" has long helped to express what we mean when we talk about sacrifice, about the importance of fighting--in battles both real and allegorical--for the values America represents. It conjures up and confirms some of our most profound conceptions of national identity and purpose. And yet, as Stauffer and Soskis note, the popularity of the song has not relieved it of the tensions present at its birth--tensions between unity and discord, and between the glories and the perils of righteous enthusiasm. If anything, those tensions became more profound. By following this thread through the tapestry of American history, *The Battle Hymn of the Republic* illuminates the fractures and contradictions that underlie the story of our nation.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is one of those rare books whose subject will command the attention of few readers, but whose comprehensive research and skilled interpretation of the context of current events in which words and phrases are used, rewards readers with an understanding well beyond its modest claim as the biography of a song. The authors trace The Battle Hymn of the Republic's origins from early 19th century Methodist camp meetings, to "John Brown's Body" following his martyrdom, to Julia Ward Howe's inspiring poem, to adaptations by groups such as labor's "Solidarity Forever." They trace it's evolution from a marching song by Union troops during the Civil War to a unifying memorial hymn for traumatic events from Lincoln's funeral to the 9/11 memorial service. They probe the incongruities of its inclusion in early 20th century Klu Klux Klan songbooks and its inspiration for John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath* whose first edition included both words and music on the endpapers to assure readers got the message. This book is a thought-provoking examination of the American belief in a unique god-given responsibility to provide all people freedom and liberty as Americans define these concepts. The words of The Battle Hymn in all of its manifestations have both united and divided those who sang it. This is a book you probably haven't heard about and didn't plan to read, but I found it fascinating.

A much better book than one would imagine from its dry title. The authors tell the tale of the formation and popularization of the great song of the Civil War and bring its impact forward over the past 150 years. The Battle Hymn has been put to use by various political leaders, social reformers, religious groups, labor organizers, and others through the many decades since the days of Julia Ward Howe. Within this book the song itself provides a vehicle to tell many interesting historical

stories, ranging from the rise of Billy Sunday to the days of the Wobblies to Martin Luther King, Jr., and 1960s civil rights movement. As this is an effort by two university professors, not surprisingly almost every use of the Battle Hymn by conservatives is belittled. I thought this overall good book drifted to a weak closing chapter, ending with shots at such people as Newt Gingrich and Rush Limbaugh.

It's a song, as an American, you've probably heard thousands of times; a song as deeply ingrained in the American psyche as any other; and whose strange and fascinating history resonates through the course of the country's last two hundred years. Soskis and Stauffer's "Battle Hymn of the Republic" tells a captivating story of the song's humble origins as a gospel hymn in the South, through its powerful transformation during the Civil War, and of its legacy as a song so fundamental to our country's spirit that it was performed at the national memorial service for the victims of 9/11. Included in this account, the authors present vivid portrayals of the famous and not-so-famous individuals connected with the song's history (John Brown, Julia Ward Howe-author of the Battle Hymn as we know it today, Bill Sunday) and offer deeply thoughtful insights about the song's unique ability to influence and reflect our nation's character. If you are interested in American history, or musical history, or would simply like to know more about the strange, apocalyptic lyrics that are now an indelible part of our culture, then you will be richly rewarded by time invested with this excellent biography of the song.

The authors flesh out in interesting detail the background to Julia Ward Howe's composition of the battle hymn. Background on the early 19th century evangelical camp meetings and discussion of John Brown's failed attack on Harper's Ferry lend historical perspective. The progressive era and labor union modifications to the battle hymn were somewhat interesting but tended to bog down the narrative.

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