

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

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## Review

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**Stauffer, John and Soskis, Benjamin.** *The Battle Hymn of the Republic: A Biography of the Song that Marches On.* Oxford University Press, \$29.95 ISBN 978-0-19-983743-4

### The Importance of a Song to the War Effort

John Stauffer (Harvard) and Benjamin Soskis (George Mason University) are both uniquely qualified by training and experience to undertake interdisciplinary studies, and in *Battle Hymn* they demonstrate this talent with great depth, insight, and impressive intellectual attention to detail.

No one single icon can completely represent America or the American experience, but if one had to be chosen, the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” is a viable candidate. Although it began as a simple revival camp song (“Say Brothers, Won’t you Meet Us”), by the time it was wedded to the radicalism of “John Brown’s Body” in the late Antebellum era it was already well on its way to cultural immortality. In 1861, Julia Ward Howe woke from sleep and penned the words to go with the same tune that are now familiar to most Americans today—“Mine eyes have seen the glory”—and an entire war effort adopted the combination of lyrics and music to a holy mission to free men and preserve the Union. The subsequent timelessness of the Battle Hymn of the Republic may be culturally unique in comparison to any other song.

Stauffer and Soskis use the song as a fulcrum upon which to balance an incredibly rich story of American exceptionalism, division and solidarity, regionalism, millennialism, and radicalism. The Hymn has inspired, angered, threatened, and uplifted countless people during times of national crisis, labor unrest, and war, and the authors compare it metaphorically to abolitionist John Brown’s legacy: “His place in history remains unresolved. Can we celebrate him for his uncompromising opposition to the evils of slavery without encouraging others to take up his ‘terrible swift sword’” (p. 14)? In analogous fashion, the Battle Hymn’s place remains unresolved, confirmed by events as recent as 9/11

and America's war on terror, when use of the song signals both strength and solidarity, but also rings ominous notes of judgment and violence. From the Civil War to the Civil Rights Movements, the authors make it quite clear that the Battle Hymn is both a celebration and a challenge, literally and figuratively.

Stauffer and Soskis engage throughout the text in a highly sophisticated analysis of the factors that comprise the social construction of the "America" personified by the Battle Hymn, with elements of political science, anthropology, psychology, history, literature and sociology all coming into sharp focus, and commanded for a specific narrative purpose. Although this might seem at the outset like a Sisyphean task beyond the scope of any single text, the organizing theme remains cogent and the story entertaining, with anecdotes and sidelights that seemingly fall into place as if by command. Again, referencing Brown, the authors suggest that "he never would have become the militant abolitionist he did had he not gone bankrupt" (p. 31). In a similar fashion, the authors have left all myopic historical agendas to the wayside, and pursued an objective course without wavering, resulting in a unique and compelling chronicle.

An unknowing critic might suggest that "surely there is more to America than just this one song." Stauffer and Soskis convince readers of the opposite, that "surely there is even more to this song" than even they have uncovered and so eloquently elaborated on in a remarkable text that will be of interest to a wide range of scholars and readers, ranging across disciplines from musicology to American studies. Like the radicalism of Brown and the Battle Hymn itself, this story will "keep marching on."

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