

'The Battle Hymn of the Republic' What It Really Means

By Michael Dan Jones

One of the most enduring traditional American hymns and patriotic songs is Julia Ward Howe's "The Battle Hymn of the Republic." It is a staple with many Christian church choirs and hardly a patriotic holiday passes without this song being sung and played at ceremonies nationwide. But is "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" truly appropriate for religious hymnals and patriotic ceremonies? Who was the author? What motivated and inspired her? What message was she trying to convey?

What do the words mean? What meaning do they have for us today?

The author, Julia Ward Howe, was born in 1819 in New York City. She married a prominent physician, Dr. Samuel Howe Gridley (1801-1876) in 1843 and they lived in Boston, Mass. where they raised five children. She was a much celebrated author, a tireless supporter of the anti-slavery movement, preached in Unitarian churches, and was a zealous worker for the advancement of women, prison reform, world peace and other humanitarian movements. She died 17 October 1910 at her summer home in Oak Glen, Rhode Island.

News reporters of her day delighted in describing this unusual woman. She was diminutive in stature, barely over five feet; invariably wearing a white trimmed, black dress and lace cap and had the habit of peering over her silver-rimmed glasses as she read her lecture in a crisp Boston-Yankee accent.

But her literary works had dark themes, such as murder, suicide and betrayal, perhaps reflecting her own unhappy marriage with her domineering and unfaithful husband. Her church, the Unitarian Church, although it claimed to be Christian, denied the divinity of Jesus Christ, the Doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

And although she was devoted to the anti-slavery movement, like many other Northern radicals of her time, such as Abraham Lincoln, her own words reveal her to be a hypocrite on the subject of race. Julia Ward Howe believed and wrote the "ideal negro" would be one "refined by white culture, elevated by white blood." She also wrote, "the negro among negroes, is coarse, grinning, flat-footed, thick-skulled creature, ugly as Caliban, lazy as the laziest brutes, chiefly ambitious to be of no use to any in the world. . . He must go to school to the white race and his discipline must be long and laborious." Her own disgusting words expose the kind of hypocrisy that was rampant in the abolitionist movement.

Mrs. Howe and her husband, Samuel Gridley Howe, were supporters of the most radical and violent wing of the anti-slavery movement. These "disunion abolitionists" wanted to tear apart the American republic of sovereign, independent states, and reconstruct it along their own radical political, cultural and religious ideals. History records only how too well they succeeded with their treason.

Her husband and her pastor, Unitarian Rev. Theodore Parker, were conspirators in the treasonous group known as "The Secret Six." These wealthy Northeasterners financially supported terrorist and murderer John Brown in his insane Harpers Ferry raid, and advocated slave rebellion that would destroy the original American republic.

Brown's Anti-Southern terror campaign started in Kansas in the mid-1850s. There, on 23 May 1856, Brown and his murderous band descended on a settlement of Southerners at Pottawatomie Creek. They carried with them newly sharpened swords — an image that played a prominent part in Mrs. Howe's

song. Her hero and his fellow terrorists literally hacked to death five innocent men. Northern historians try to excuse this crime by saying Brown was exacting revenge for atrocities committed by pro-slavery "Border Ruffians." This is a lie!

The first three of his victims, James P. Doyle and his sons, Drury and William, were Catholics from Tennessee who moved to Kansas to get away from slavery. They never had a thing to do with the institution. But because they spoke with a Southern drawl, and possibly because they were Catholic, Brown marched them to a clearing where their heads were split open with the sharpened swords. Drury's arms were chopped off. Mrs. Doyle was later asked why her husband and sons had been so brutally murdered? She replied, "just we were southern people, I reckon."

The other victims of Brown's murderous rampage were Southern settlers Allen Wilkinson, executed while his wife and children stood by in horror, and William Sherman, whose mutilated body was found floating in the creek with his left hand hanging by a strand of skin and his skull split open with "some of the brains" washed away.

When she got word of the massacre, Julia Ward Howe's own words reveal her to have been perversely thrilled and inspired by this grisly crime. The "terrible swift sword" in her song was terrible indeed, but hardly reflecting Christian values. Mrs. Howe and Brown mutually admired one another, as their own words demonstrate. Mrs. Howe wrote Brown was "a Puritan of Puritans, forceful, concentrated, and self-contained." Brown wrote of Mrs. Howe, in a letter to a friend, that she was "a defiant little woman" and that her personality was "all flash and fire." After the failure of Brown's bloody raid on Harpers Ferry, her husband, who was deeply involved in the treasonous conspiracy, like a coward in the night, fled to Canada until he was assured he was safe from prosecution in Massachusetts.

Mrs. Howe, in a letter to her sister at the time, made it clear she was in complete sympathy with the attempt to start a slave rebellion in the South, and tear the nation apart. She wrote, "I have just been to church and hear [James Freeman] Clarke [another Unitarian minister] preach about John Brown, whom God bless, and will bless! I am much too dull to write anything good about him, but shall say something at the end of my book on Cuba, whereof I am at present correcting the proof-sheets. I went to see his poor wife, who passed through here some days since. We shed tears together and embraced at parting, poor soul. . . . [Brown's] attempt I must judge insane but the spirit heroic. I should be glad to be as sure of heaven as that old man may be, following right in the spirit and footsteps of the old martyrs, girding on his sword for the weak and oppressed. His death will be holy and glorious—the new saint awaiting his martyrdom, and who, if he shall suffer [execution], will make the gallows glorious like the cross."

What "martyrs" could Mrs. Howe have been speaking of in her letter? Surely she could not mean the early Christian martyrs who were slain in many perverse, cruel and cold-blooded ways by the ancient Romans, just as her hero, John Brown, slew the Southern martyrs in Kansas. Her fascination with his sword is also revealed in the letter. This grotesque and warped view of Christian values is reflected in her violent and bloody war song.

Here we have the author of the much revered "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" condoning murder and treason by a ruthless and brutal killer. Her dark fascination with Brown's bloody sword and the killer's unbridled violence seemed to thrill the diminutive author. Clearly, the seeds of inspiration for her "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" had been planted in the poisonous soil of murder, rebellion and treason.

But what was the final inspiration for the famous lyrics? In November 1861, after the start of the tragic war the Howe's had for so long worked to instigate, a party which included the Unitarian Rev. James F. Clarke and Mrs. Howe, visited an outpost of the invading Union troops in Northern Virginia. However an unexpected Confederate attack canceled the review. Mrs. Howe and her party were waiting in a

buggy while Northern troops came marching by, returning from the skirmish. The camp visitors heard the Yankees merrily singing an obscene version of "John Brown's Body."

When the party returned to Washington D.C., the Rev. Clarke asked Mrs. Howe if she could supply more dignified words for the popular tune. So, inspired by the memory of her late, "martyred hero," John Brown, and the skirmish that so rudely interrupted her review of her beloved invading Northern vandals, she wrote the words for the famous Anti-Southern abolitionist anthem, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic," by candlelight in the middle of the night at the Willard Hotel.

James T. Fields, the editor of the Atlantic Monthly, accepted the song and published it as a poem in the February 1862 issue. This bloody, hate-filled, song has been marching on ever since. The "hymn," sung by so many church and school choirs, was inspired not by the Bible or a stirring religious sermon, but by a dastardly killer, John Brown, and by the march of Northern invaders trampling over Southern soil, Southern lives and Southern rights in quest of subjugating or killing the Southern people.

And what horrible crime was the South guilty of to warrant its extermination?

The people of the South were guilty of only wanting independence for a government of their own choosing, a pro-Christian, God-based government that safeguarded states' rights, individual liberty and put strict limits on the national government. This was the type of government the founders established in 1776, and the South was trying to preserve it as handed to them.

It was Abraham Lincoln, who is said to have cried the first time he heard the abolitionist war song, and radicals like Mrs. Howe who were the real revolutionaries. It was their forces who, by brute force of arms, destroyed the original voluntary union of sovereign, independent states at the cost of 620,000 dead Americans, and changed the nation into an involuntary union of defeated, militarily occupied, captive states.

In 1863, Mrs. Howe recited "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" at a gathering of fanatical abolitionists. One of those who saw and heard her, commented, she had a "weird, penetrating voice." Considering the bloody, ungodly history of her war song, what a chilling experience that must have been.

In summary, here is a "hymn" celebrating the killing of Southerners on Southern soil, written by someone involved in the most radical causes of her day, who supported the most extreme and violent response to the South, who wrote the song after being inspired by the murderous career of John Brown and her Northern vandal invaders of the South. Whenever "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" is played, five innocent men hacked to death by the "terrible swift sword" of John Brown should be remembered. It is also a dirge for the 620,000 Americans who died in the War for Southern Independence and which war transformed America into a despotic centralized state with practically unlimited powers

What meaning does the song have for the South today?

It is, in effect, a "stealth" heritage attack. It is conditioning Southerners to accept the Yankee myth of history that their ancestor's were wrong, and their Northern "betters" were right and they should be glad 260,000 Southrons were slaughtered in the War for Southern Independence. The message of the song is, "Believe in Mrs. Howe's almighty centralized government to tell you what is right and what is wrong." Don't listen to the founders of 1776 or 1861, is the message of this hymn. Yes, Mrs. Howe's abolitionist hymn is still doing her work, quietly and covertly, of destroying Southern heritage by conditioning Southerners to accept her fanatically leftist cultural and religious philosophy.

How ironic that such a joyous traditional Southern song as "Dixie" is now all but banned throughout the South, while a vicious Anti-Southern war song such as "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" is sung in churches and patriotic ceremonies all over the Confederate states.

What meaning does it have for the Church?

Did Jesus Christ teach that God is a vengeance seeking, sword-wielding maniac that slaughters innocents and tramples people under His wrathful feet, as Mrs. Howe's violent and bloody lyrics would have you believe? No, such lyrics don't fit in with any Christian liturgy I'm familiar with. They do fit in the theology of radical egalitarianism which says everyone must be equal in all aspects of life, or the full force and power of the federal government will destroy you. It also fits in the philosophy of giving to the government god-like powers to declare a whole segments of humanity as nonpersons, such as the unborn, who can then be legally slaughtered by the millions at the whim of the mother and abortionist.

If Americans truly care about individual liberty, limited, constitutional government, and the sacred right of self-government of the people in their states assembled, then all such false icons as "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" must be exposed and rejected.

For further reading, I suggest: "The Secret Six: The True Tale of the Men Who Conspired with John Brown," by Edward J. Reunion Jr. (New York, 1995); "The Secret Six: John Brown and the Abolitionist Movement" by Otto Scott (Murphy, Calf., 1993); "The Singing Sixties: The Spirit of the Civil War Days Drawn from the Music of the Times" by Willard A and Porter W. Heaps (Norman, Okra., 1960); "Notable American Women 1607-1950: A Biographical Dictionary" Vol. 11, Article on Julia War Howe, (Cambridge, Mass.); and "The Encyclopedia of Religion" Vol. 15&16, Article on Unitarians, (New York, 1995).