



Lincoln Lore

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MARYLAND, MY MARYLAND

In "some of the most moving debates in the Senate this year," the Maryland state legislature considered changing the words to the 123-year-old state song, *Maryland, My Maryland*. So reported the *New York Times* of March 13, 1984, and the article stimulated a modest firestorm of replies which were quite revealing of modern attitudes toward Lincoln's record on civil liberties.

On April 19, 1861, the Sixth Massachusetts regiment marched through Baltimore to the relief of the nation's capital, surrounded by slave territory and widely thought to be in danger of capture after the recent firing on Fort Sumter. Baltimore had a reputation for political violence. Election days there had often been marked by riotous behavior at the polls, and the Know Nothing party had held considerable power there in part by means of physical intimidation at the polls.

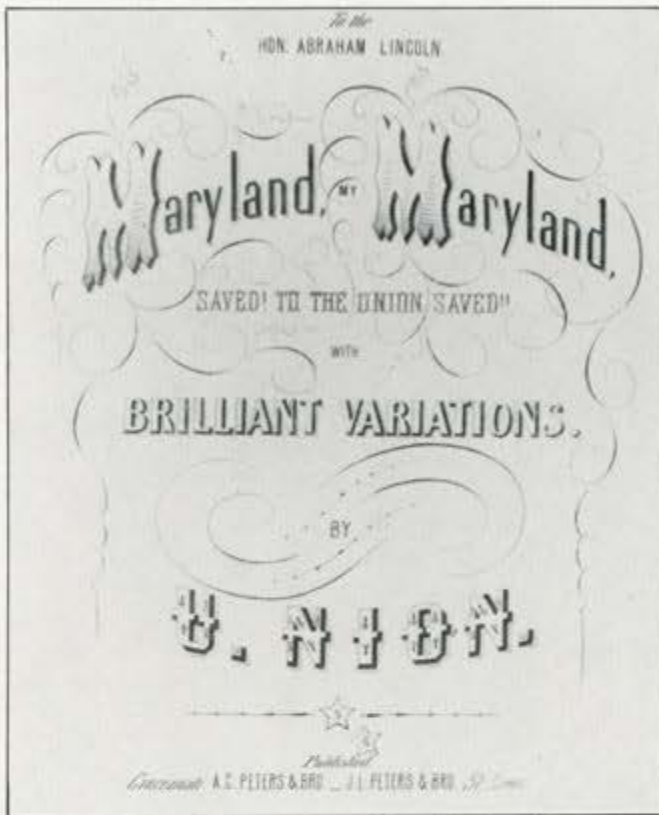
Gangs of "plug-uglies" were a Baltimore tradition, and the town's notorious Southern sympathies, coupled with this violent heritage, made it a place Republicans liked to avoid if at all possible. Lincoln's skulking avoidance of any public appearance in Baltimore en route to his inauguration had got his administration off to a bad start, but threats of assassination from Baltimore — and Lincoln learned of such threats from two different sources — had to be taken seriously. After all, the Lincoln administration would end in sudden violence when another Maryland plot succeeded in assassinating the president four years later.

Baltimore lived up to its bloody reputation on April 19, 1861, when a mob of Southern sympathizers greeted the Massachusetts men with a storm of abuse and paving stones. Firing broke out and several soldiers and civilians died in what came to be called "The Baltimore Massacre."



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FIGURE 1. The Baltimore Massacre.



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FIGURE 2. The song with objectionable words removed.

One of the civilians who died in that riot was a friend of a poet named James Ryder Randall, a Baltimore native then teaching at a college in Louisiana. Randall was inspired by the event to write *My Maryland*, which began this way:

The despot's heel is on thy shore, Maryland,
my Maryland!
His torch is at thy temple door, Maryland,
my Maryland!
Avenge the patriotic gore that flecked the
streets of Baltimore
And be the battle queen of yore, Maryland,
my Maryland!

The "patriots" whose blood was shed, in Randall's view, were the Baltimoreans, not the Massachusetts soldiers, and the "despot" was, of course, President Abraham Lincoln.

Randall read the poem to his pupils and then sent it to the New Orleans *Delta*, where it was published on April 26. Widely copied in Confederate newspapers thereafter, the poem was set to music by Jennie and Hetty Carry of Baltimore who quickly discovered a close fit with a popular college tune which we know today as *Tannenbaum, Oh Tannenbaum*. In pro-Confederate circles, and hence in Maryland, the song was immensely popular.

As a state song in the twentieth century, however, *Maryland, My Maryland* poses some problems, or so Baltimore County elementary school teacher Barbara Klender thinks. "How are you going to explain the despot is President Lincoln?" she asks. Ms. Klender has offered these words as substitutes for the allegedly offensive lines quoted above:

Oh join we all to lift a song,
Maryland, our Maryland
To home and state we've loved so long,
Maryland, our Maryland

This is pretty innocuous stuff after the gore and despotism of Randall's original, and it is little wonder that critics have risen to the defense of the old song.

The critics have not yet prevailed. The senate voted initially to reject the new words, 24-22, but in March the senators reconsidered the measure and it passed, 24-21. Proponents of the change depicted the old song as a "despicable Confederate fight song dripping with hate." Defenders of the Randall original warned against the first steps of "tampering with tradition," which would surely lead to a new state dog, state motto, and state fish.

Defenses of the old version of *Maryland, My Maryland* with a good deal more interesting intellectual content soon followed. Conservative columnist William Safire published an "essay" entitled "Patriotic Gore" in the *New York Times* of March 16. Safire knows more about Lincoln than any other practicing syndicated columnist, but he has no truck with "prettifiers, feelings-soothers and tidiers-up." He is willing to live with a tough Lincoln:

In cracking down on the disloyal element in Maryland, President Lincoln usurped Congress's power to suspend habeas corpus and authorized arbitrary arrests, and went on to dispatch General McClellan to arrest Maryland legislators before they could meet to vote secession.

These Presidential actions may be described in history classes as having been necessary and in a good cause, but if practiced by a Central American ally today would rightly be denounced as "despotic."

Mr. Safire lives in Maryland now but is not, I believe, a native. The reaction from a true son of Maryland was predictably neo-Confederate. Describing himself as one of Maryland's "exiled sons," one Charles C. Rettburg, Jr., of Shaker Heights, Ohio, wrote the *New York Times* on March 15 to express his "indignation" at Ms. Klender's "effrontery." She is "as poor a student of history as she is a versifier," he fumed, and here is why:

A review of almost any text about the Civil War will disclose that Marylanders rightly regarded Lincoln as a despot.

He suspended habeas corpus in order to incarcerate many prominent Maryland citizens suspected of anti-Government



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FIGURE 3. The song with new objectionable words.

views. He seized private property without compensation and subjected Baltimore to unwarranted military occupation. Passing through the city, his troops fired on a demonstration, killing and wounding over a score of protestors. This incident, which prompted James Ryder Randall's composition, was nothing less than an early-day Kent State. Any one of these acts, if committed today by Ronald Reagan, would lead to a drumhead media trial followed by demands for impeachment.

Abraham Lincoln, after all, is regularly rated by historians as America's greatest president. It seems remarkable in light of his reputation to think that he might have been a "despot" whose acts are comparable to those now performed by death squads. It seems remarkable to think he might have been impeached for presiding over slaughter like that at Kent State had modern standards of moral rectitude been applied to him. Yet such views of Lincoln quickly surface when the subject of civil liberties comes up. In fact, the anomaly is so great that it demands explanation, but this *Lincoln Lore* will not supply one.

Instead, it will point out only that careful students of Lincoln's era know that Ms. Klender's is not the first attempt to change the words of *Maryland, My Maryland*. In fact, trying to change the words to the song is almost as traditional as the words themselves.

The words to *Maryland, My Maryland* were so partisan that they constituted pure Confederate doctrine, and they quickly drew partisan response from the other side. A pro-Union version sung to the same tune began:

The traitor's foot is on thy soil, Maryland
my Maryland!
Let not his touch thy honor spoil, Maryland
my Maryland!
Wipe out the unpatriotic gore That flecked
the streets of Baltimore,
And be the loyal state of yore, Maryland,
my Maryland!

William H. C. Hosmer's *Answer to My Maryland* was a similar pro-Union response.

Maryland, My Maryland was clearly popular, for its minority political viewpoint, verging on the treasonous, did not cause it to disappear from the Northern scene. All that could be done, apparently, was to adapt the song to more patriotic sentiments. The thing could not be buried. Thus in 1863 A. C. Peters & Brothers of Cincinnati and J. L. Peters & Brothers of St. Louis published a version of *Maryland, My Maryland* dedicated "To the Hon: Abraham Lincoln" and bearing the crucial subtitle: "Saved! to the Union Saved!!" The composer was "U. Nion." The sheet music contained no words, only "brilliant variations" on the stubbornly popular song.

William K. O'Donoghue wrote the words for *Abraham my Abraham*, a piece of sheet music issued by various publishers across the North. This version retained the meter of Randall's poetry but changed the words. The alteration, however, was not aimed at reshaping the original pro-Confederate sentiments into a more acceptable Unionism. Rather, the song now became a satirical attack on the Lincoln administration's Emancipation Proclamation. The first verse cleverly retained a reminder of the song's roots in Maryland:

The contrabands have got the floor, Abraham
my Abraham,
They're butting at the white house door, Abraham
my Abraham.
They've heard the proclamation o'er So skedaddled
from the southern shore,
As you once did through Baltimore, Abraham
my Abraham.

This anti-Negro song also capitalized on Lincoln's reputation

as a jokester too small for the presidential office by saying that the words on Emancipation which Lincoln spoke reminded Jefferson Davis "of a little joke."

A more orthodox alteration was *Abraham! Our Abraham! A Rallying Song and Chorus to the Popular Melody Maryland! My Maryland!* Published in 1864, this song was, as the word "rallying" indicates, meant for the Union (Republican) campaign for the presidency. Its anti-Confederate sentiments were as tough as the pro-Confederate sentiments of the original song:

From California's sea-girt shores, Abraham,
our Abraham,
To where the great Atlantic roars, Abraham,
our Abraham,
The people cry with one accord, Death! death
to all the rebel horde!
Let Freedom conquer by the sword, Abraham
our Abraham.

James Ryder Randall would have hated those words. Only twenty-two when the war began, he had attempted to enlist in the Confederate army, but poor health kept him off the battlefield. *Maryland, My Maryland* was published in Richmond by Macfarland & Ferguson in 1862 with the subtitle *And There's Life in the Old Land Yet*. The song was published as a broadside in Savannah in the same year. After the war the poet became a journalist and an aide to Southern politicians. Randall continued to write poetry until his death, but his collected poems were published only posthumously, in 1910. Even the author was haunted by the song's fame. "I have written better poems," he said, "but the world tags me with the more sonorous lyric."

The most surprising aspect of the recent attempt to change the words to the Maryland state song proves not to be the novelty of the attempt 123 years after the song was written. It is, rather, the fact that *Maryland, My Maryland* survived the earlier assaults of pro-Union orthodoxy and is still on the scene, ready to receive challenges.



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FIGURE 4. The same song with patriotic words.

