

Twitter Thread by Chris Dier

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Some of my students are shocked when they learn that The Star-Spangled Banner, the US national anthem, has racist origins, so here's a quick history:

The poem, "Defence of Fort M'Henry," from which Star-Spangled Banner originates, was written by Francis Scott Key after witnessing Fort McHenry's bombardment in Baltimore by the British during the War of 1812 – a war declared by the U.S., in part, to snatch Canada.



Key "was a slave-owner and, as he would demonstrate in his later career, a thoroughgoing white supremacist."* He dedicated his life to suppressing the abolitionist movement and co-founded the American Colonization Society to deport free Black Americans to Africa.



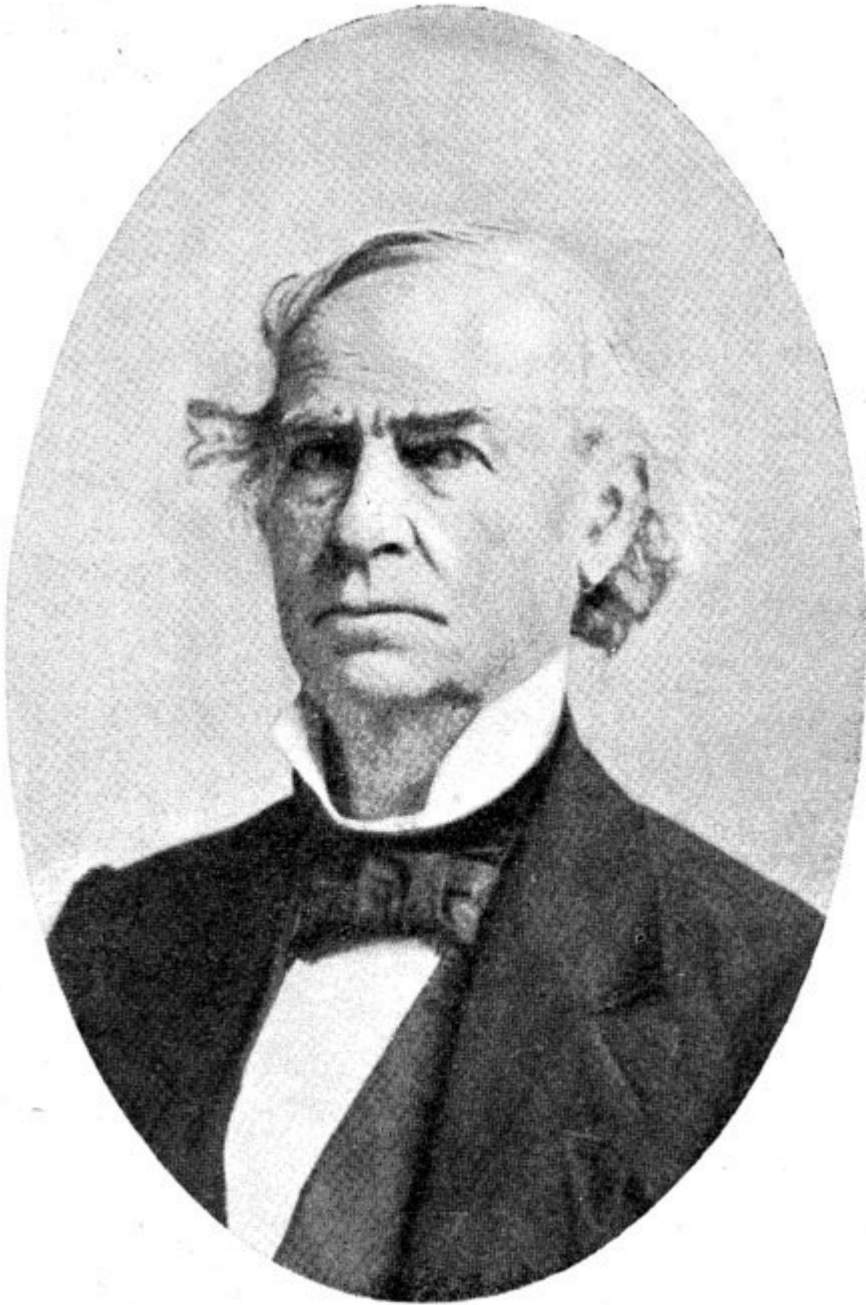
As an attorney, he attacked notable abolitionists. In his poem, he praised the killing of formerly enslaved people who freed themselves from bondage to join the British:

"No refuge could save the hireling and slave
From the terror of flight or the gloom of the grave"

In this phrase, he "brags of terrorizing and killing 'the hireling and slave,' implying that the British soldiers were mercenaries and explicitly condemning the renegade ex-property who fought as enemies of the star-spangled banner."*

He took pleasure in knowing those who liberated themselves did not escape a death he believed they deserved for insubordination. Although he may have publicly criticized slavery at times, he gave enslavers legal representation and owned 8 enslaved people at the time of his death.

Key's poem deeply inspired white supremacists for generations. In 1855, William J. Grayson took his cue from Key and wrote the infamous proslavery/anti-abolitionist poem, "Hireling and the Slave."



W. L. Grayson

Grayson's poem contains one of the first uses of the term "master race" and refers to Black Americans as "savages" who were "tamed, enlightened, and refined" by slavery. The myth of a "master race" coupled with nationalism has led to unimaginable brutalities around the globe.

Note: the term "master race" is often associated with Nazism, but it originated in the US.

The Star-Spangled Banner wasn't adopted as our national anthem until 1931. It was passed by a white Congress and signed into law by Herbert Hoover, a president who opposed anti-lynching legislation and various civil rights measures.

If we have conversations surrounding this song, we must know its origins and impact on our country. There is a severe disconnect between the freedoms espoused and the freedoms granted - then and now.



* Quotes pulled from “American Slave Coast: A History of the Slave-Breeding Industry” by Constance and Ned Sublette (highly recommend).

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