

## **A Day for the Flag; a Song for the President**

**June 14<sup>th</sup>, Flag Day**, is the day officially designated for celebrating the American Flag and all that this proud Emblem of the Nation symbolizes. By happy coincidence, or possibly Divine plan, June 14<sup>th</sup> also happens to be President Donald Trump's birthday. Although the tune that will likely greet the President that day will be *Happy Birthday*, the tune that since the 1800s has most often greeted U.S. Presidents is, of course, *Hail to the Chief*.

The song *Hail to the Chief* was originally a show tune written by British theatrical composer and conductor James Sanderson for a London stage drama at the Surrey Theater. The production was based on Sir Walter Scott's epic six-part poem published in 1810, "The Lady of the Lake", the tragic hero of which was a Scottish clan chieftain, Roderick Dhu. For the song, Sanderson looked to one of the poem's stanzas, which included the words, "*Hail to the Chief who in triumph advances!*" Sir Walter's poem proved so popular that, in 1811, there were already two other London theaters, in addition to the Surrey, where stage versions were being presented, as well as one theater in Edinburgh. On January 1, 1812, a production which included Sanderson's song opened in Philadelphia, and his composition became well known in this country too.

*Hail to the Chief* was first associated with a U.S. President in 1815 – not with James Madison, who was Chief Executive at the time, but with George Washington. The tune was played at an official tribute ceremony for the late First President, to mark his birthday that year, and in celebration of the end of the War of 1812. Its title for that event, however, was *Wreaths for the Chieftain*.

Although *Hail to the Chief* was used on some official occasions for presidents Jackson and Van Buren, and more often during John Tyler's presidency, at the request of his wife, it was President James Polk's wife, Sarah, who made it the accepted presidential standard that it still is. According to the U.S. Marine Band website, "President James K. Polk was an unassuming man of slight stature, and his arrival at large functions frequently went unnoticed. To avoid this embarrassment, Mrs. Polk reportedly asked the Marine Band to play *Hail to the Chief* to announce him. Over the years this tradition continued."

Finally, in 1954, during the Eisenhower presidency, the Department of Defense established the policy which made *Hail to the Chief* the official tribute march used for the arrival of our nation's President. The song's current words, which are rarely sung, were written by 20<sup>th</sup> century American composer and lyricist Albert Gamse. In case any of us would like to sing a very fitting birthday tribute to President Trump on June 14<sup>th</sup>, Gamse's lyrics for *Hail to the Chief* are:

*Hail to the Chief we have chosen for the nation,  
Hail to the Chief! We salute him, one and all.  
Hail to the Chief, as we pledge cooperation  
In proud fulfillment of a great, noble call.*

*Yours is the aim to make this grand country grander,  
This you will do, that's our strong firm belief.  
Hail to the one we selected as commander,  
Hail to the President! Hail to the Chief!*

**Priscilla Poese, Americanism Chair**