

James Knox Polk and *Hail to the Chief* - II

Lead: The use of the stirring, heroic melody, *Hail to the Chief*, was ritualized by First Lady Sarah Childress Polk, dealing with her husband's public relations problems. The story behind the tune, however, is not very good news for a politician.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: James Knox Polk, Eleventh President of the United States, was short, usually unkempt and wore cheap, ill-fitting suits. He

and Sarah were not universally popular in Washington society and he could walk into a room and be completely ignored. To call attention to his presence and increase respect, Sarah Polk decreed that he should have a theme song. Whenever he entered the room, the Marine Band was instructed to play *Hail to the Chief*.

The tune has a "Scottish Snap" rhythm, a major key, and a rising pitch which signaled the President's arrival, silenced the crowd, and transfixed it in reverent attention. The song had been around since the early 1800s. The music was probably written by James Sanderson, the conductor of London's Surrey

Theater Orchestra. He set to music words from the Second Canto of Sir Walter Scott's epic poem, *Lady of the Lake*, a tremendously popular romantic saga drawn from Scotland's medieval clan warfare. It was played in the presence of Presidents Quincy Adams, Jackson and Tyler, but Mrs. Polk institutionalized it and it remains a fixture of White House ceremonial life. Despite its heroic origins and lilting melody, however, the story is hardly encouraging for a politician.

The poem describes the demise of a failed Scottish chieftain, Roderick Dhu of the Douglas clan, who was betrayed and executed by his enemy, King James V. Scott's narrative is

typically 18th popular literature; turgid, politically incorrect, and a bit alien to modern ears, but it tells the story of the shifting winds of popular opinion that is surprisingly up-to-date. In Canto Five, James is lamenting to himself about the fickle nature of his constituents:

**'O Lennox, who would wish to rule
This changeling crowd, this
common fool?
Hear'st thou,' he said, 'the loud
acclaim
With which they shout the Douglas
name?
With like acclaim the vulgar throat
Strained for King James their
morning note;**

**With like acclaim they hailed the
day
When first I broke the Douglas
sway;
And like acclaim would Douglas
greet
If he could hurl me from my seat.
Who o'er the herd would wish to
reign,
Fantastic, fickle, fierce, and vain?
Vain as the leaf upon the stream,
And fickle as a changeful dream;
Fantastic as a woman's mood,
And fierce as Frenzy's fevered
blood.
Thou many-headed monster-thing,
O who would wish to be thy
king?—**

Walter Scott, *The Lady of the Lake*,
Canto V, Stanza 30

From Polk onward, presidents have been presented to the people using the stirring the notes of *Hail to the Chief*. Some have actually been caught up in the adoration implied in its use and believed it could help protect them from the ordinary dangers of political collapse. Perhaps each President prior to his or, her inauguration, prior to that time when they are first welcomed by the strains of *Hail to the Chief*, should be required to read *all* of Sir Walter Scott's *Lady of the Lake*, a story of the rise and triumph of heroes and their swift and painful fall.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

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**Scott, Walter. *The Lady of the Lake, A Poem in Six Cantos.*
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"Hail to the Chief: The origins and legacies of an American ceremonial tune." American Music 15 (Summer 1997): 123-136. Call number: ML1 .A47, ISSN: 0734-4392.

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