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Understanding Mayor Carter’s reference to national anthem as ‘an ode to slavery.’

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During his inaugural speech Tuesday, St. Paul mayor Melvin Carter III said he was honored to have a locally-born musician present at his own Central High School to sing the national anthem — with a big caveat.

“We cannot ignore the painful reminder, written into our anthem’s third verse, of just how deeply injustice is rooted in the American tradition ... Our national freedom song is an ode to slavery,” Carter said.

“This is the American paradox, passed from generation to generation, dating back to the noble group of rich white straight male landowners who embedded into our founding principles a yearning for a set of God-given rights they sought to secure for only themselves,” the mayor added.

Carter is referring to a verse that isn’t typically heard during public events.

Francis Scott Key wrote “The Star-Spangled Banner” as he watched bombs from the British fleet fall on Fort McHenry during the Battle of Baltimore in 1814. Usually only its first verse is sung at public gatherings.

But the third verse, which Carter partially quoted, reads in full:

*“And where is that band who so vauntingly swore
That the havoc of war and the battle’s confusion,
A home and a country, should leave us no more?
Their blood has washed out their foul footsteps’ pollution.
No refuge could save the hireling and slave
From the terror of flight, or the gloom of the grave:
And the star-spangled banner in triumph doth wave,
O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave.”*

Some academics — including Robin Blackburn, a British historian who has published books on colonial slavery in the Americas — believe Key’s use of the word “slave” refers to the Corps of Colonial Marines, runaway slaves who fought with the British in exchange for freedom.

Jason Johnson, an associate professor of politics at Baltimore’s Morgan State University, pointed out in a recent article for The Root — an online publication on African American culture for

which he is the politics editor — that Key himself served as a lieutenant in the 1815 Battle of Bladensburg, where his troops were badly beaten by a battalion of Colonial Marines.

But others argue it isn't clear that Key was referencing Colonial Marines, pointing out that he never explained the lyrics.

Walter Olson, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute wrote in a September column in the National Review that, “at the time Key was writing, the word ‘slave’ had long functioned in English as a wide-ranging epithet, hurled at persons of any and all colors, nationalities, and conditions of servitude or otherwise.” He noted that Shakespeare commonly used the word as an epithet.

The verse has garnered increased attention in recent months.

In September, vandals defaced a Baltimore statue of Key with the words, “Racist Anthem,” with red spray-paint. And in November, the NAACP’s California chapter called on Congress to remove The Star-Spangled Banner as the national anthem, referencing the third verse.