The early history of “God Bless America” reveals a shifting relationship with war that reflects a changing historical landscape during the first half of the 20th century. Irving Berlin first composed “God Bless America” in 1918, when he was serving in the army and stationed at Camp Upton in Yaphank, New York. While there, he wrote an all-soldier revue as a fundraiser for the camp, called “Yip Yip Yaphank.” The show featured satirical spoofs of army life (including the now well-known “Oh, How I Hate To Get Up in the Morning”) and boisterous, Ziegfeld follies–style dance numbers with male soldiers dressed in drag. Berlin originally wrote “God Bless America” as the show’s finale but ultimately decided not to include it. He later wrote that he felt the song was “too obviously patriotic for soldiers to sing,” that it was “like gilding the lily” to have men in uniform performing such an overtly patriotic tune.

In 1918, Berlin filed “God Bless America” in his trunk of rejected songs, where it lay until a confluence of events led to it being unearthed in the fall of 1938. Berlin was in London that September during the time of the Munich crisis, and he returned troubled by the growing tensions in Europe. He tried writing a new song to express his feelings of gratitude for the United States, but he was not satisfied with his attempts. That fall, the radio star Kate Smith and her manager Ted Collins, asked Berlin for a new patriotic song for Smith to sing for a special Armistice Day radio show. Berlin rediscovered his old song, made changes to it, and gave it to Smith to premiere on her show, which aired on the eve of Armistice Day, November 10, 1938. Smith continued to sing it on her radio program nearly every week until early 1941, when the broadcaster’s ASCAP boycott prohibited its performance. She made an iconic recording of the song in 1939 for Victor, the same year that Irving Berlin published the sheet music--both became best-sellers.

It is important to note that when Berlin recovered “God Bless America” from his trunk in 1938, much had changed since he had first sketched his song in 1918. A wartime marked by the zeal of Cohan’s “Over There” had given way to an increasing mood of isolationism in response to the escalating conflict in Europe during the 1930s. According to one public opinion poll given in 1936, 95 percent of Americans were opposed to US participation in another European war. In Kate Smith’s 1938 autobiography, she articulated an unquestionably non-interventionist stance, writing, “I’m frank to say, if I had a son, I wouldn’t want to send him off to battle in a strange land, to fight other nation’s battles.” Armistice Day itself, the occasion for the song’s premiere, had only recently been made a legal holiday, when an act of Congress in May 1938 declared it “a
day to be dedicated to the cause of world peace.” (The name of the holiday wasn’t changed to “Veteran’s Day” until 1954.)

When Irving Berlin had returned from London that September, he told a reporter, “I’d like to write a great peace song […], a great marching song that would make people march toward peace.” Against this backdrop, “God Bless America” appears to have been positioned as an anthem for non-interventionism in the escalating war in Europe. The original introductory verse reflects this sentiment:

As the storm clouds gather, far across the sea  
Let us swear allegiance to a land that’s free  
Let us all be grateful that we’re far from there  
As we raise our voices in a solemn prayer

The “storm clouds” in the first line are an obvious reference to the growing strife in Europe, and follow Tin Pan Alley conventions linking bad weather to troubled times. But most importantly, the line “let us all be grateful that we’re far from there” strongly points to a non-interventionist position, one that may have been sympathetic to the suffering in Europe but that did not urge action to bring Americans into the fray.

Yet “God Bless America” seems to have only been explicitly called a “peace song” in advance press surrounding its debut. Such language was not present in later articles and interviews about the song. This shift may be related to the fact that the premiere of “God Bless America” happened to occur the day after Kristallnacht, the Nazi’s calculated attacks on Jewish communities in Germany and its annexed territories, which began on November 9, 1938. According to many scholars of World War II, the brutality of these attacks signaled a turning point for a growing American condemnation of Nazi Germany, and a consequent move away from staunch isolationism. Thus, while a “peace song” may have suited the public mood in the days before the song’s premiere, as Kate Smith continued to perform the song in late 1938 and early 1939, a march toward peace became less and less called for. By February 20, 1939, when the printed sheet music was copyrighted, the storm clouds stayed, but “Let us all be grateful that we’re far from there” was changed to “Let us all be grateful for a land so fair.”

Just one month after Berlin published the sheet music, Smith released her iconic recording of “God Bless America” on Victor, in March 1939, which omits the verse completely. Certainly, there were practical reasons behind the decision to cut the verse--it was common practice for Tin Pan Alley songs to lose their verses, and it was an easy way to trim the song’s length in order to fit within the three-minute limit imposed by the recording technology of the time. But there were likely more strategic reasons as well. For one, the opening line of the verse (“As the storm clouds gather”) positions the song within a specific historical moment. Without the verse’s symbolic reference to the escalating conflict in Europe, the recording carries a sense of timelessness that allowed it to remain popular beyond this pre-war period.

Beginning in 1940, “God Bless America” was embraced by the public as an interventionist anthem. Irving Berlin sang it at several rallies in support of American involvement in the conflict, and Kate Smith, who retained “God Bless America” as a signature song, became the quintessential voice of the home front during the war. She mounted elaborate shows at North American military bases and held several war-bond drives on the radio, 13-hour marathon fundraising efforts that broke records for war bond sales. Smith’s association with “God Bless America” essentially created and reinforced her patriotic image, and her wartime use of the song in turn solidified the song’s role as a signifier for home-front support for war, a connection that would continue into the 21st century.
Sheryl Kaskowitz is the author of “God Bless America: The Surprising History of an Iconic Song” (Oxford University Press, 2013).

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.