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O Say Can You Theme?

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PRO TOUR-VALENCIA

I was recently talking to Mark Rosewater about ideas for theme deck formats. What if I gathered my friends together, I suggested, for our very own World Cup tournament? Each person could bring a theme deck that represented a country, and only one deck per country could enter. Imagine it: A green-white-red "Mexico" deck squaring off against the monogreen "Ireland" deck. A 30-card "Liechtenstein" deck battling the red-white power of Japan. I don't actually remember Mark's response, probably because I started losing myself in my own little deck world. I do that sometimes.

In honor of the United States Independence Day, here is how I might go about making a "U.S.A." deck for such an event. Whether or not you take my World Cup idea and run with it, my hope is that walking through the process of creating a theme deck will inspire some "theme parties" in your own household or local card shop.

First, some basic ground rules for my imaginary tournament.

As with all of my theme decks, such as these from [Legends](#), every card must fit the theme, with the exception of basic lands and multicolor lands.

The deck should 1) be as competitive as possible and 2) adhere strictly to its theme. Pure theme decks that get slaughtered are only minimally fun. Likewise, very good decks that maim the competition without a theme ruin everyone's day. Err on the side of thematic aesthetics, but competitive matches are worth aiming for in World Cup play.

Because not everyone owns cards from older sets, I'll limit my choices to Standard. My theme decks usually allow the use of any card from any set (including *Portal* and *Unglued*), but there's no need to hunt down *Falling Star* and *Striped Bears* just because they fit the "Stars & Stripes" concept. You and your friends should decide what rules to apply based on your collective card pool.

Some guiding principles for the U.S.A. deck

Because "United States" is a fairly cerebral theme (unlike [Bears](#) or [Nightmares](#)), I'll consider cards for the theme based only on card name and/or art. Flavor text is another way to dig for thematic cards, but it often makes you work too hard to "get it" unless the theme is obvious.

To parallel the colors in the United States flag, I'll include only red, white, and blue cards in the deck. I might include a particularly apropos artifact, but my goal is to have red, white, and blue splashed across the table during games to enhance the feel of the theme.

My guess is that building around a country-specific theme is ripe for gross stereotype and offensive commentary. To avoid editorials, I need some symbol or event that generally epitomizes the United States. Thankfully, Francis Scott Keys has supplied *The Star Spangled Banner*, an anthem sung at every sporting event in which the U.S. participates. *The Star Spangled Banner* will be the basis for choosing the cards.

Ready to get started? Please place your hand over your heart while I begin singing the national anthem of the United States . . .

O say, can you see, by the dawn's early light

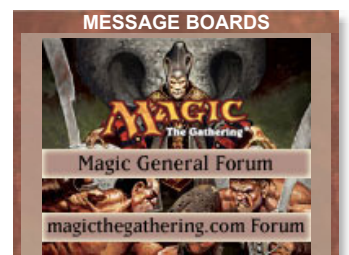
Because it's an anthem, it actually isn't trivial to focus on the word "say." Depending on how I might want to slant the theme, a single *Blessed Orator* might make its way into the deck as the person "singing" the anthem.

Thanks to the phrase "dawn's early light," *Reya Dawnbringer*, *Divine Light*, and *Blinding Light* work well and could find homes in the deck. *Starlight* also has some appeal--especially considering the stars on the U.S. flag--but it's a difficult card to use in the main deck. I like the idea of using *Illuminate* in the deck because it creates that "I'm waking up and seeing the war for independence" feel.

And, of course, I *must* use *Lightning Angel*. It is the only red-white-blue creature (*Rakavolver* doesn't count) around and has bird (read: eagle) wings.



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What so proudly we hail'd at the twilight's last gleaming

Are there cards that epitomize pride? **Pride of Lions** is sadly out because of color restrictions, but **Aegis of Honor**, **Honor Guard**, and **Honorable Scout** seem to fit. There is no need to capture the idea of "twilight," but I guess I could use **Shifting Sky** or **Skyshrout Falcon**.

And **Shifting Sky** lets me use **Starlight!** Just kidding. I won't do that. Sorry, back to the deck.

Whose broad stripes and bright stars, thro' the perilous fight

Ah, the aforementioned stars and stripes, symbols of the U.S. flag. Stars throw me into artifact territory with **Iron Star** and **Star Compass**. I don't see the deck having enough red spells to make **Iron Star** worth it, but **Star Compass** might be *great* in a three-color deck. Yes, I have just decided that **Star Compass** is a must for the deck alongside **Lightning Angel**.

Anyone have any Standard ideas for "stripes"? I don't, either. If I want to capture the whole "fighting" or "war for independence" concept, however, I might consider **Fight or Flight**; **Fighting Drake**; **Kamahl, Pit Fighter**; **Aven Warcraft**; and **Goblin War Drums**.

O'er the ramparts we watch'd, were so gallantly streaming

Ramparts, strictly speaking, don't exist in Standard. **Wall of Spears**, **Wall of Swords**, **Prison Barricade**, and **Castle** might suffice. **Castle** carries some appeal because I have already decided to use **Lightning Angel**. **Keep Watch** also fits here.

Gallantry works very well thematically. I'm also attracted to cantrips of all kinds, generally, and cheap ones, specifically. I hereby vow to use **Gallantry**.

And the rockets' red glare, the bombs bursting in air

I sure would like to include **Rocket Launcher**, but I might have to settle for **Urza's Rage** because of the artwork. Sadly--and I'm only saying this once--**Tahngarth's Glare** is actually a "red glare" spell. But I'm still not using it.

"Bombs bursting in air" is a fun string of words to unpack. **Bomb Squad** has a place, as do **Aether Burst**, **Magma Burst**, **Air Elemental**, and **Wall of Air**. **Magma Burst**, in particular, seems to capture the theme.

Gave proof thro' the night that our flag was still there

Here is where we separate the theme purists from the **Spikes**. Some people might decide that the word "proof" gives them license to use **Fact or Fiction**. Those people are bad and should avoid theme parties.

The real word to focus on, however, is "flag." Some combination of **Coalition Flag** and the Flagbearers (**Coalition Honor Guard** and **Standard Bearer**) should make their way into the deck.



*An Anthem, a Rampart, a Rocket, a Flag... what will you put in **your** All-American deck?*

O say, does that star-spangled banner yet wave

In strict terms, an oriflamme is a banner, so **Orcish Oriflamme** could work. See what kind of crazy mental gymnastics theme decks entail? I, too, am frightened.

O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave

Shelter is both a good "home" proxy and a cheap cantrip. **Liberate** looks good. I just can't use **Liberated Dwarf** in a deck with no green creatures, even if it is a "freedom" card. Hey, but if I use **Shifting Sky** . . . sorry, sorry.

On the other hand, the very brave **Valor** works so well thematically that it'll jump right into the deck (and hopefully into the graveyard, too).

Finally, it's worth a final scan to see obvious thematic cards that don't fall under the line-by-line analysis of the song. For example, could **The Star Spangled Banner** be an **Ancestral Tribute**? At the very least, it's a **Glorious Anthem**. Indeed, **Glory** should fit into the deck somewhere, as should **Wings of Hope**.

And since the deck is a U.S. deck rather than a strict anthem deck, there is every reason to include **Cloudchaser Eagle**--a card related to the country's national symbol.



No U.S.A. deck would be complete without eagles.

I just threw a lot of different card choices at you, some of them for very weird reasons. Sifting through the morass and finding a deck that both works reasonably well and looks like a U.S. theme deck is not an easy task. Below are "lite" and "nonlite" ways I might assemble the deck, though you'll almost certainly disagree with my choices.

In fact, you probably would have approached the idea of making a U.S. deck differently. I encourage you to try your own hand at making country-specific theme decks, and possibly even to live out my dream of a World Cup tournament. If you do, don't forget to write me about the results; theme parties make me happy.

If you live in the United States, have a safe and happy holiday. If you don't, go have some barbecue chicken wings anyway.

Next week: Kill them, please!

-j

The Star Spangled Banner Deck

Main Deck
60 cards

4 Adarkar Wastes	2 Bomb Squad	1 Ancestral Tribute
4 Battlefield Forge	4 Cloudchaser Eagle	1 Coalition Flag
2 Island	3 Glory	2 Gallantry
2 Mountain	4 Lightning Angel	4 Glorious Anthem
9 Plains	4 Standard Bearer	3 Illuminate
3 Terminal Moraine	3 Valor	3 Liberate
24 lands	20 creatures	2 Star Compass
		16 other spells

The Star Spangled Banner Deck *Lite!*

Main Deck
60 cards

3 Island	4 Cloudchaser Eagle	2 Blinding Light
3 Mountain	3 Coalition Honor Guard	2 Illuminate
14 Plains	4 Standard Bearer	2 Liberate
4 Terminal Moraine	3 Valor	2 Magma Burst
24 lands	2 Wall of Swords	4 Shelter
	16 creatures	4 Star Compass
		4 Wings of Hope
		20 other spells

U.S.A. Deck (all-set version)

Main Deck
60 cards

4 Adarkar Wastes	3 Cloudchaser Eagle	3 Falling Star
4 Island	4 Freewind Falcon	4 Free-for-All
4 Plains	2 Battle Rampart	4 Liberate
4 Plateau	4 Lightning Angel	11 other spells
4 Tundra	1 Rakavolver	
4 Volcanic Island	3 Sea Eagle	
24 lands	4 Standard Bearer	
	4 Stormwatch Eagle	
	25 creatures	



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