

June 13, 2014



# Right-wing Congressman Mo Brooks Quotes Socialist Lesbian Poet to Justify His Opposition to Immigration Reform

Posted: 07/14/2013 5:00 pm

On Wednesday, Republican Congressman Mo Brooks of Alabama used the words of a lesbian socialist poet to oppose immigration reform.

House Speaker John Boehner organized the meeting of the Republican caucus in the basement of the Capital building to discuss how his party would respond to the Senate's proposal to overhaul the nation's immigration laws. During the emotional two-and-a-half hour gathering, Republican members lined up 10 deep at two microphones to weigh in on the unfolding controversy, according to the *New York Times*.

When it was his turn to grab the microphone, Brooks read a line from "America the Beautiful" to make his point that respect for the rule of law must be inviolable: "Confirm thy soul in self control, thy liberty in law," Brooks said.

Brooks explained that he used these lines to remind his GOP colleagues that he will strongly oppose any proposal "that rewards or ratifies illegal conduct. Anyone who's come to our country whose first step on American soil is to thumb their nose at American law and violate our law, we should not reward them with our highest honor, which is citizenship," the *Washington Post* [reported](#).

Brooks' official biography on his Congressional website does not indicate that he's a lover of poetry or a student of American social history. So perhaps we wasn't aware that "America the Beautiful" was written by Katherine Lee Bates, who was a Christian socialist, a lesbian, and an ardent foe of American imperialism.

Bates (1859-1929), a well-respected poet and professor of English at Wellesley College, was part of progressive reform circles in the Boston area, concerned about labor rights, urban slums and women's suffrage. To honor her achievements, two elementary schools - one in Wellesley, Mass., the other in Colorado Springs, Colorado - and Bates Hall dormitory at Wellesley College are named for her.

For decades Bates lived with and loved her Wellesley colleague Katharine Coman, founder of the college's economics department, who authored *The History of Contract Labor in the Hawaiian Islands* and *The*

*Economic History of the Far West*. Coman was also a poet. Coman and Bates jointly wrote *English History as Taught by English Poets*. Although they lived together for 25 years in what was then called a "Boston Marriage," they could not publicly acknowledge their intimate relationship. When Coman died, however, Bates published *Yellow Clover: A Book of Remembrance* that celebrated their love and their involvement in the radical and social reform movements of their day.

Were Bates and Coman alive today, they would probably have taken advantage of Massachusetts' law allowing same-sex couples to marry - a law that Brooks stridently opposes. Indeed, last week Brooks was one of 28 co-sponsors of a bill, The Federal Marriage Amendment, designed to change the U.S. Constitution so it declares marriage in the United States "shall consist only of a man and a woman."

There is nothing in Bates' writings that indicate her views about immigration. But her circle of reformers and radicals -- including union activists, feminists, and housing crusaders -- were strong advocates for immigrants. Bates and Coman volunteered at Denison House, a Boston settlement house that worked to improve the lives of immigrants who lived in Boston's slums and worked in its sweatshops. Denison House was founded by their Wellesley colleague Vida Scudder, another radical socialist, feminist, and lesbian. It was modeled on Hull House, founded by Jane Addams in Chicago.

Bates and Brooks do have at least one thing in common. Bates was a lifelong Republican, at a time when there were many progressive Republicans. But Bates broke with the party to endorse Democratic presidential candidate John W. Davis in 1924 because of the GOP's opposition to American participation in the League of Nations. (Davis lost that election to Calvin Coolidge). Like many activists at the time, Bates believed that the U.S. should participate in global affairs, but that it should not be a bully against weaker nations - sentiments she clearly expressed in "America the Beautiful."

Bates she penned the poem in 1893 after visiting Pikes Peak in Colorado, from which she saw the Rocky Mountains in one direction and the Great Plains in the other. When she returned to her hotel room, she wrote a letter to friends, observing that "countries such as England failed because, while they may have been 'great,'" they had not been "good." She declared, "Unless we are willing to crown our greatness with goodness, and our bounty with brotherhood, our beloved America may go the same way." She revised the poem several times. The most famous version appeared in her collection *America the Beautiful, and Other Poems* (1912).

"America the Beautiful" is both a declaration of Bates' patriotism and a protest against Gilded Age greed. It begins with the now well-known words,

"Oh, beautiful for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain; For purple mountains' majesty above the fruited plain."

Then she pivots to the lines Brooks quoted at the GOP meeting. Bates meant these words as a protest against America's reckless and illegal overseas military adventures as well as the U.S. government's illegal suppression of free speech, dissent, and civil liberties:

"America! America! God mend thine every flaw, Confirm thy soul in self-control, Thy liberty in law! "

In another verse, she observed:

"America! America! God shed his grace on thee. Till selfish gain no longer stain The banner of the free! "

Bates wasn't happy about America's political leaders, either, as reflected in this verse:

"America! America! God shed his grace on thee. Till nobler men keep once again. Thy whiter jubilee!"

The poem's final words -- "and crown thy good with brotherhood, from sea to shining sea" -- are an appeal for social justice rather than the pursuit of wealth.

"America the Beautiful" was published in 1895 and later set to music written by Samuel Ward, the organist at Grace Episcopal Church in Newark, New Jersey.

Brooks' comments about immigration reform is not the first time he's expressed himself on the issue.

In 2011, the [San Antonio Express-News reported](#) Brooks' controversial remarks about undocumented immigrants, made in an interview with an Alabama television station, WHNT, which were posted on YouTube.

"As your congressman on the House floor, I will do anything short of shooting them," Brooks said.

"Anything that is lawful, it needs to be done because illegal aliens need to quit taking jobs from American citizens."

"They have no right to be here. They are clogging up our emergency rooms and making our education system more expensive," said Brooks, who was first elected to Congress in 2010 after a long career in the Alabama legislature..

In the county jail in Huntsville, Ala., Brooks said, "there are far too many illegal aliens there because they have victimized Americans."

Brooks, who garnered 100% ratings from the anti-immigrant Numbers USA and Americans for Prosperity (funded by the Koch brothers) echoed those sentiments at a [town hall meeting](#) held in Killen, Alabama on June 30, 2011, also captured on YouTube.

He gave several examples undocumented immigrants for who were involved in car accidents and other crimes in his Alabama district, blaming them for the resulting injuries and deaths. "Many people would be alive today but for our illegal alien policy," Brooks told the crowd.

At the same meeting, he accused Obama of socialism. Obama isn't a socialist. But Katherine Lee Bates was. And she would surely object to almost everything that Brooks stands for, including his mis-use of her poem to justify his right-wing views.

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