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Rush Limbaugh's Favorite Lesbian Socialist -- Author of 'America the Beautiful' -- Inspired the Super Bowl Coke Ad

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Right-wingers like Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, former Congressman Allen West, and others are freaking out about Coca Cola's Super Bowl ad featuring "America the Beautiful" sung in different languages as faces of people of different cultures are shown.

Typical was the reaction of [Michael Leahy](#) of the wacko website Breitbart.com:

The company used such an iconic song, one often sung in churches on the 4th of July that represents the old "E Pluribus Unum" view of how American society is integrated, to push multiculturalism down our throats.

The reliably reactionary Glenn Beck said that the ad will "divide us politically." He added:

That's all this ad is. It's an in your face -- and if you don't like, if you're offended by it, then you're a racist. If you do like it, well then you're for immigration, that's what it is. You're for progress. That's all this is, is to divide people.

Former Florida Congressman Allen West, a Tea Party favorite, blogged:

It started rather patriotically with the words of "America the Beautiful." Then the words went from English to languages I didn't recognize... If we cannot be proud enough as a country to sing "American the Beautiful" in English in a commercial during the Super Bowl, by a company as American as they come -- doggone we are on the road to perdition.

Limbaugh told his listeners:

If you think the best way, if you are convinced that the best way to sell Coca-Cola to Americans is to sing "America the Beautiful" in multiple languages, then why don't you produce the product with labels printed in 10 different languages? Is that the way to sell Coca-Cola?

Had these conservative commentators known the origins of "America the Beautiful," they might have been doubly outraged, accusing Coca Cola of promoting the so-called "homosexual agenda." Because, had they

bothered to look up the facts (not a strong point among reactionaries), they would have learned that "America the Beautiful" was written by -- dare we say this in public? -- a lesbian!

Yes, indeed. The author of this iconic anthem of American patriotism was Katherine Lee Bates. In a brilliant lampoon of the backlash against the Coke commercial, [Stephen Colbert](#) pointed out that Bates was a lesbian. He could also have added that she was also a Christian socialist 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.

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. She 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 folks like Limbaugh find appalling.

Bates' 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.

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 the author of "America the Beautiful."

Limbaugh, West, and the other conservatives outraged by the Coke commercial do have at least one thing in common with Bates. She 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 penned the poem "America the Beautiful" 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 meant 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.

And as long as we're educating the Limbaugh lunatics and company about America's **little-known radical history**, they might also want to know that the *Pledge of Allegiance* was also written by a Christian socialist, **Francis Bellamy**. And that the author of "This Land is Your Land," **Woody Guthrie**, was a committed radical, that the folksinger who popularized the song, **Pete Seeger** (who died last week), was also a left-winger, and that this patriotic protest song includes a little-known stanza that criticizes the notion of private property!

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