

## The Committee

The Chairman banged his gavel to bring the committee to order.

“The Special Select Subcommittee on Patriotic Lyrics will now come to order,” he announced. “As you know, the purpose of this committee is to propose alternative lyrics to patriotic songs which some of our constituents find objectionable or confusing. I thought we’d begin with a relatively noncontroversial song and work our way up to more difficult songs as we gain experience. Today we’ll look at ‘America the Beautiful.’ The first line is ‘Oh beautiful for spacious skies.’ Anyone have a problem with that?”

“Why does it start with ‘oh?’” the representative from New Jersey asked. “How often do you start a sentence with ‘oh’ in everyday life? Sounds a bit pretentious to me.”

“I think we need to allow for a bit of artistic liberty in the wording,” the Chairman suggested. “Lyrics are a form of poetry, and the wording is sometimes chosen for beauty instead of clarity.”

“But we shouldn’t let the beauty get in the way of clarity,” said the representative from Iowa. “One of the reasons these songs are losing favor with our voters may be because the wording is abstruse.”

“The word ‘abstruse’ is abstruse,” quipped the representative from Kansas.

“I think the real issue is that the first line of the song takes too long to get to the point,” said the representative from Ohio. “The song is trying to say that America is a beautiful country, but you don’t find that out until the fifth stanza. That’s well past the average listener’s attention threshold.”

“But that’s implicit in the title,” the Chairman pointed out.

“You don’t sing the title,” the Ohio representative countered.

“The first line is trying to tell us that our country is beautiful,” the representative from Texas declared. “Why don’t we just say that?”

“With spacious skies,” added the representative from Maryland.

“My state conducted an understandability analysis of the song,” the representative from California said, “and we found that the word ‘spacious’ is slightly archaic and beyond the vocabulary comprehension of the median second grader, which is where the song is typically introduced.”

“Then let’s just say with big skies,” said the representative from Arkansas.

“Should it be ‘skies,’ or ‘sky?’” asked the representative from Maine. “We all share the same sky.”

“Not that I want to throw cold water on the suggestion,” said the representative from Montana, “but ‘Big Sky Country’ is our state slogan. My constituents won’t like it if every state claims to be part of a Big Sky Country.”

The debate raged for hours. During the lunch break small groups of committee members formed caucuses, where they tried to hammer out wording they could agree upon. Then they lobbied other members to accept their wording. At the end of the day the committee finally agreed upon the words “Our country is beautiful and it has a lot of sky.” The vote was 51 for to 43 against, with five abstentions and one member who simply made an obscene gesture when his name was called.

On the second day the Chairman opened the meeting by hesitantly asking if there was any object to the second line “for amber waves of grain.”

“Why are we ignoring citrus products?” asked the representative from Florida.

“Or pork?” added the representative from North Carolina.

The debate continued throughout the day, with each state trying to insert its primary agricultural product into the line. At the end of the day the Chairman tried to force an agreement on “We’re also very good at producing and processing food,” but the industrial states that didn’t produce food objected and the Chairman lost the vote. He agreed to continue the discussion on the following day.

It took nearly two weeks for the committee to work its way through the song to the line the Chairman had expected to be controversial, “God shed His grace on thee.” He grew up in an era when that line was taken for granted, but he was astute enough to know that in the current political climate that line not only violated the separation between church and state, it was gender specific and therefore sexist.

One member suggested “Our country is truly blessed” but opponents claimed that implied there was a deity to give the blessing. Arguments that humans could give blessings, too, were rejected because opponents said the word “blessing” implied a belief in a higher being. And, they argued, given the widespread sexism and racism in the country, if no gender or race for that higher being was specified the prevailing view among believers would be that the higher being was a white male. An intellectual member tried to counter this by saying most people tend to create God in their own image, so people would assume the Supreme Being was of the same gender and race as themselves. He couldn’t cite a peer reviewed study to validate this opinion, though, and opponents argued that even if it was true it only meant that whatever gender and race formed the majority of the people singing the song determined the gender and race of the Supreme Being. That in itself was sexist and racist.

The committee finally agreed that conceptually what they wanted to say was that if a Supreme Being existed, regardless of that being’s skin color, that he/she/it/ or whatever had blessed the country, and if such a being did not exist, it was still a pretty good country. They were struggling to find wording that expressed that view and still fit within the rhythm of the song when the Sergeant-At-Arms entered the room.

“Excuse me for interrupting,” the Sergeant said. “The Speaker is recalling all committee members to the floor. They’re about to vote on the \$3.7 trillion omnibus spending bill.

“I haven’t had time to read it!” the Chairman complained. “We’ve been tied up in this committee for weeks because the Speaker said *this* was a top priority!”

“It’s a spending bill,” the Sergeant replied. “Nobody reads those. It’s over 4,000 pages and it wasn’t released until this morning. You just have to trust the committee that wrote it.”