The Quote Verifier

BY RALPH KEYES

On the eve of the war in Iraq, variations on this quotation were ubiquitous: "No plan survives contact with the enemy." That thought was usually attributed to Dwight Eisenhower. Or did Napoleon say it? George Patton perhaps? No one seemed sure. This observation actually originated with Helmuth von Moltke in the mid-nineteenth century. The Prussian field marshal's version was not so succinct, however. What von Moltke wrote was "Therefore no plan of operations extends with any certainty beyond the first contact with the main hostile force." In a process that's routine in the world of quotation, von Moltke's actual words were condensed into a pithier comment over time, then placed in more familiar mouths.

Discovering who actually said what, where, and when, is a challenge for anyone who wishes to quote others. Misquotation is an occupational hazard of quotation. The more we quote, the more likely we are to misquote. This practice is engaged in by the well educated and poorly educated alike, the erudite and the ignorant, those with multiple degrees or with none at all.

John Kennedy, the modern president most likely to quote others, routinely misquoted them. That is why so many contemporary misquotations can be traced back to a speech by JFK. The most notable example is "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing," which Kennedy attributed to Edmund Burke. Even though no one has ever been able to confirm this attribution, or determine who actually said those words, a survey of 100 familiar quotations by the Oxford University Press found that this admonition, usually misattributed to Burke, is the most popular one of all.

Misquotation is as at least as common as accurate quotation, and for perfectly good reasons. The primary reason is that when using quotes, the reference we're most likely to consult is our memory. This is a hazardous form of research. Our memory wants quotations to be better than they usually were, and said by the person we want to have said them. For years I thought it was Lincoln who explained that he'd written a long letter because he didn't have time to write a short one. Only after undertaking to verify quotations did I discover that this comment originated with Blaise Pascal. In a previous book I mistakenly attributed "Because it's there" to mountaineer Sir Edmund Hillary. That rationale for climbing mountains is better credited to Hillary's predecessor, George Mallory. In a speech I quoted Einstein as saying there was no hope for an idea that did not at first seem insane, something I later learned he hadn't said. Like many, I thought that Faulkner had said the past is never dead in Mississippi, it's not even past, even though the author didn't limit this observation to his native state.

When it comes to quotations, memory is too much the servant of aspirations, not enough an apostle of accuracy. That is why misremembered quotations so often improve on real ones. Memory may be a terrible librarian, but it's a great editor. Excess words are pruned in recollection, and better ones added. The essence of a good remark is preserved, but its cadence is improved. Churchill's "blood, toil, tears, and sweat" becomes "blood, sweat, and tears." Durocher's "The nice guys are all over there. In seventh place" morphs into "Nice guys finish last." Gordon Gekko's "Greed, for lack of a better word, is good " ends up as "Greed is good."

Think of this as *bumper-stickering*. Quotations that start out too long, too clumsy, and too inharmonious end up shorter, more graceful, and more melodious in the retelling. Common usage functions like a verbal sculptor, reshaping rough material into something more aesthetically pleasing. A complex thought clumsily expressed is boiled down to its essence. Rodney King is justly remembered for the simple eloquence of his plea "Can't we all just get along?" This is close to what King said after the police who beat him with nightsticks were acquitted in 1992, but not word perfect. What King actually said during a press conference that day was "People, I just want to say, you know, can we all get along? Can we get along? Can we stop making it, making it horrible for the older people and the kids? . . . It's just not right. It's not right. It's not, it's not going to change anything. We'll, we'll get our justice. . . . Please, we can get along here. We all can get along. I mean,

we're all stuck here for a while. Let's try to work it out. Let's try to beat it. Let's try to work it out."

This is how we speak. It is rare for crisp, eloquent remarks to be expressed spontaneously. More often we wander around the edges of what we're trying to say before reaching its heart. When a quotable comment does emerge from someone's mouth in polished, pithy form, we can feel confident that this person spent a long time honing those words. Disraeli, Twain, Churchill, and many others kept mental archives of well-rehearsed mots to pull out and "ad-lib" as opportunities presented themselves. Oscar Wilde was notorious among his friends for testing quips in conversation much like a comedian perfecting routines. Will Rogers spent years tinkering with different versions of his "epitaph" before settling on "Here lies Will Rogers. He joked about every prominent man in his time, but he never met a man he didn't like.'" Anne Herbert considered many alternatives before scribbling on a restaurant place mat, "Practice random kindness, and senseless acts of beauty."

Of course the California writer seldom gets credit for this well-known contemporary quotation. Who's heard of Herbert? This suggests another key reason for getting quotations wrong: the need to put them in familiar mouths. Quoting Mark Twain about a lie traveling halfway around the world before the truth can get its boots on is one thing. But what good does it do a speaker, or writer, to cite the Reverend Charles Haddon Spurgeon, who in a mid-nineteenth-century sermon launched this observation into public discourse as "an old saying"?

Since clever lines so routinely travel from obscure mouths to prominent ones, it is generally safe to assume that when two parties are thought to have said something, the lesser-known party said it first. Sociologist Robert Merton devoted an entire book to exploring the origins of the saying routinely attributed to Isaac Newton about being able to see farther because he stood on the shoulders of giants. As Merton discovered, this saying antedated the great mathematician by several centuries. How did Newton get credit for an observation that was at least five centuries old when he repeated it? This proved to be one more case of an already familiar quotation being put in the most prominent plausible mouth. In Merton's words, the aphorism "became Newton's own, not because he deliberately made it so but because admirers of Newton made it so."

The misattribution process is not random. Patterns can be discerned. If a comment is saintly, it must have been made by Gandhi (or

Mother Teresa). If it's about honesty, Lincoln most likely said it (or Washington), about fame, Andy Warhol (or Daniel Boorstin), about courage, John Kennedy (or Ernest Hemingway). Quotations about winning had to have been made by Vince Lombardi (or Leo Durocher), malaprops by Yogi Berra (or Samuel Goldwyn). If witty, a quip must have been Twain's concoction, or Wilde's, or Shaw's, or Dorothy Parker's. "Everything I've ever said will be attributed to Dorothy Parker," playwright George S. Kaufman once moaned. Parker herself disavowed authorship of most of the witticisms that were routinely put in her mouth. At the same time, Parker once wrote in a poem that when tempted to try an epigram in literate company, she never sought to take credit because, "We all assume that Oscar said it."

Oscar Wilde was well aware of his status as a flypaper figure to whom all manner of quotes stuck. Wilde also noted the migration of quotes from obscure mouths to prominent ones other than his own. When he toured the United States in 1882, the Irish playwright was asked by a Rochester reporter whether it was true that when he'd complained about the lack of quaint ruins and curiosities in this country, a local lady responded, "Time will remedy the one, and as for curiosities, we import them." Wilde said this was an excellent story, but one he had already heard, featuring Charles Dickens and a local wit. "I find every community has its lady who is remarkably bright in her repartee," Wilde added, "and she is always credited with the latest *bon mot* going the rounds."

A good quip invariably works better when put in the mouth of someone whose very name inspires a grin. Introducing a knee-slapper as something said by Leno, Chappelle, or Letterman starts our smile even before we hear the punch line. As a result, the wits of the hour get far more credit for funny material than they're due, as do quotable people in general. Shakespeare, Voltaire, Pope, Franklin, Emerson, Lincoln, Wilde, Twain, Shaw, Parker, Churchill, Goldwyn, and Berra are the notable figures to whom we most often misattribute quotations. Those who are often quoted get regular credit for words they never said that "sound like" them. Liberal Democrats often credit Harry Truman with saying, "If you run a Republican against a Republican, the Republican will win every time." Although this certainly sounds like the feisty, fiercely partisan Democratic president, researchers at the Harry S. Truman Library can find no evidence that he ever said it.

Patterns of misattribution change with time and circumstances. As the prestige of another era's celebrities wanes, so does the practice of

putting words in their mouths. In recent years older flypaper figures such as Goethe, Pope, and Voltaire have had to step aside to make way for more recent ones such as Einstein, Gandhi, and Mandela. A quotation often attributed to Nelson Mandela takes this form: "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our Light, not our Darkness, that most frightens us." When any source is given at all, this is said to be from an inaugural speech by South Africa's two-term president. Aside from the fact that these words don't even sound like him, they do not appear in either inaugural address given by Mandela. On the other hand, those sentences can be found in the 1992 book *A Return to Love* by pop theologian Marianne Williamson.

This raises the issue of demographic status. Whom we want to have said something can depend fundamentally on whom we most admire. What sociologists call "reference groups" comes into play here. Corporate executives commonly credit motivational speaker Steven Covey with saying, "No one washes a rented car." Members of the chattering class, on the other hand, such as *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, attribute a more sweeping version of that comment—"In the history of the world no one has ever washed a rented car"—to Harvard president Lawrence Summers.

Geography is another important factor when credit for quotations is assigned. Who we think said something can be a function of where we live. In America, "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing" is routinely attributed to football coach Vince Lombardi. In England, it's credited to soccer coach Bill Shankly. "Golf is a good walk spoiled" is given to Mark Twain in the United States, author Kurt Tucholsky in Germany. Depending on one's country of residence, "Oh, to be seventy again" is thought to be the quip of American octogenarian Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., French Premier Georges Clemenceau, or Prussian Field Marshal Friedrich Graf von Wrangel.

Misattribution works best if the person quoted is not around to correct the record. Famous dead people make excellent commentators on current events. During George W. Bush's first term in office, a warning supposedly made by Julius Caesar raced around the Internet. This began, "Beware the leader who bangs the drums of war in order to whip the citizenry into a patriotic fervor. . . ." Barbra Streisand quoted Caesar's warning in a speech she gave to a Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee Gala. *Los Angeles Times* editorial cartoonist Paul Conrad attributed the advisory to William Shakespeare (presum-

ably because Shakespeare wrote the play *Julius Caesar*). There is no evidence that Caesar ever said such a thing. Certainly Shakespeare never wrote it.

Over time one gets a feel for which quotations are authentic and which phony. Those that are too elegant, too polished, too pithy are seldom genuine. Many familiar quotations are introduced with tip-off words and phrases indicating that a thought is secondhand ("in the old saying," "it's been said that," "as a poet once observed," etc.). In other cases quotations can be scrutinized much as an authenticator examines documents for evidence of forgery. Some are not characteristic of the person to whom they're attributed. Others are simply too neat and tidy to be plausible. Still more include words or concepts not common at the time they were supposedly said.

Quotations by Thomas Jefferson are especially susceptible to this type of verbal retrofitting. A congressional aide told me of quoting Jefferson about the ramifications of paying plumbers more than teachers, only to be informed that there were no "plumbers" as such in the third president's time. A spurious Jefferson warning about the power of banks includes the word "deflation," a term coined long after his death. Many so-called Jefferson quotations peddled on conservative talk shows support positions such as the right to bear arms, or the need to keep religion in public life, which were not Jefferson's issues. But it isn't just right-wingers who misquote Jefferson. In his best-selling biography of John Adams, historian David McCullough, without citing a source, wrote that Jefferson called Adams "the colossus of independence." As an impolite reviewer pointed out, and as McCullough later acknowledged, Jefferson said no such thing.

Quotes without citations should be treated with the utmost suspicion. When a quotation routinely shows up in compilations with no source, there probably is none. "Nice guys finish last," for example, spent so many decades associated with Leo Durocher that this attribution took on its own credibility, despite the fact that no one knew when or where Durocher said this (because he hadn't). Despite copious searching, the origins of the quotation most associated with Margaret Mead, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world," remain a mystery. When a source is cited for that quotation, it is always secondary. This is a risky type of ascription. Such sources sometimes cite yet another source that is one or more steps removed from a quotation's point of origin.

Even when a primary source is cited in a secondary work, without

examining that material one cannot be confident that the citation is accurate. Wrong chapters of books and inaccurate page numbers are routinely referenced, and wording is often garbled. Alternatively, a quotation will show up where it's said to have appeared, but prove to have no reliable citation, or none at all. In such cases it's the uninformed citing the ill informed. Phantom citations appear regularly, even routinely, and even in reputable works of reference. *The Cassell Companion to Quotations* cites a speech Mark Twain never gave as the source of a quotation by him. *Bartlett's* gives Eleanor Roosevelt's autobiography as their source for her attributed comment "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent." That remark does not appear in Roosevelt's autobiography, nor anywhere else that researchers have been able to discover. *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* cites a long-discredited source for their attribution of "Go west, young man, go west" to Horace Greeley. *Oxford*'s attribution of "There is one thing stronger than all the armies of the world: and that is an idea whose time has come" to Victor Hugo cites a nonexistent 1943 issue of the *Nation*. Their source for a Gandhi quotation is a book that says he made the remark while visiting England in 1930. Gandhi did not visit England in 1930.

These are just a few of the reasons that accurate ascription of quotations is such a slippery slope of scholarship. If reputable works of reference can't always be depended upon for the correct wording or attribution of their contents, is it any wonder that we get our quotations wrong at least as often as we get them right? Widespread, longtime assumptions about who said what are virtually meaningless. Familiar quotations are every bit as likely to be misworded or misattributed as ones that are more obscure, if not more so. Quotations that "everyone knows" someone said (but no one knows where or when) routinely turn out to be misquotations. Nor does the fact that words appear in print or pixels make them credible. A compilation of memorable quotations in *Newsweek*'s turn-of-the-century issue included several misquotations. In one case after another, a search for the source of a popular quotation dead ends with *Reader's Digest*. In earlier issues especially, verification of the many quotable quotes they published was not the *Digest's* strong suit.

The press in general is a shaky source of evidence about who said what. Anyone who's ever been quoted in a newspaper knows this to be true. The words he or she actually said may bear only a vague resemblance to the ones that appear in print. This is not necessarily due

to negligent reporting. The need to jot down thousands of words, then write them up quickly under deadline pressure, seldom permits word-perfect accuracy. In many cases the cruelest thing a reporter can do is quote a subject correctly, including all the "uhs, ums, you knows," digressions, run-on sentences, and examples of tortured syntax. While managing the inept New York Mets, an exasperated Casey Stengel once said, "Can't *anybody* play this here game?" After reporters gave the manager a hand with his grammar, "Can't *anybody* here play this game?" became one of Stengel's most famous lines.

Cleaning up diction while preserving meaning is a service to reader and subject alike. This can be a matter of judgment, of course. When a New Orleans reporter climbed aboard a Pullman car where Vice-President Jack Garner had retired for the night, and asked through the curtains of his sleeper compartment if he'd come out for an interview, Garner responded, "Hell, no; I ain't agonna get out of bed for anybody." The reporter so quoted the vice president in his copy. The next day he discovered that his paper's managing editor changed this copy to read, "No, indeed, I am not going to get out of bed for anyone." Garner's subsequent comparison of the vice-presidency to "a pitcher of warm piss" was changed to "a pitcher of warm spit" in the nation's newspapers. This prompted Cactus Jack to observe "those pantywaist writers wouldn't print it the way I said it."

In a case such as this, propriety may have been in the driver's seat. In too many others reporters alter subjects' words for their own purposes: to get a crisper comment, to illustrate a point they want made, or just to impress the guy at the next desk. (Among themselves they call this "sweetening" quotes.) Even before an interview begins, journalists sometimes have a clear idea of what comments they're looking for, and are not above steering their subject in the desired direction. In a pinch they will even suggest words for a subject to use, then report these words as if they were spontaneous. This is how "smoke-filled room," and "inoperative" made their way into the vernacular.

Pre-Internet, the prevalence of misquotation was self-limiting. The seed of a misquote that was planted in some speech, or piece of writing, or reporter's notes, could only grow fitfully in the arid soil of print on paper. Not so online. Like a verbal virus, any error committed on one website is quickly replicated on hundreds, if not thousands, more. While conducting exhaustive research on the origins of a popular quotation that cautions against "contempt prior to investigation," writer Michael StGeorge found over 4200 misattributions of the quote to

social philosopher Herbert Spencer, but only seven attributions to its actual author, theologian William Paley.

In the online era, a tsunami of resources for researching the origins of quotations has crashed on our shores. The reliability of these resources is another matter. Even though the Internet hosts thousands of websites devoted to quotations, these sites rarely concern themselves with accuracy. (Finding a quotation attributed to "Ralph Waldo Emmerson" on one such site does not inspire confidence.) Most simply cut and paste material from each other. That is why most quote sites are barely better than memory when it comes to verified quotations. At best they are good for leads. Moreover, when a source is given for a quotation, it can be less than dependable. Among other reasons, such sources are rarely ones that compilers have actually examined. More often they have simply recycled a citation found elsewhere on the Internet, just as they've recycled the quotation to which it refers.

This is one among many reasons that using a search engine to look for an accurately worded, correctly attributed quotation can be problematic. Most of what such a search turns up are variations on that quotation in different forms, attributed to various parties, but seldom with any reliable source cited (if any is cited at all). A few quotation websites do commit themselves to being as accurate as possible in the wording and attribution of their contents. When attempting to verify quotations by searching the Internet, one's challenge is to sort a small amount of such wheat from a suffocating amount of chaff.

An elite group of websites are less concerned with compiling quotations willy-nilly than with determining who actually said what. Librarians, lexicographers, and others do yeoman work in their online note-sharing about the origins of quotations. On and off the Internet, a small band of intrepid quote sleuths commit themselves to verifying quotations as best they can. (Since no term exists to depict the members of this band, I call them *quotographers*.)

When verifying quotes, consulting reputable works of reference is the best point of departure, but, as we've seen, not without pitfalls. *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* still reports that Leo Durocher said "Nice guys finish last," even though no serious quotographer believes this any longer. The two most recent editions of *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* include "A billion here, a billion there, pretty soon you're talking about real money," attributed to Everett McKinley Dirksen. No Dirksen expert has ever been able to confirm that the Illinois senator actually said this. (It's actually an old gag.) In some cases the two

premier quotation collections don't agree on the wording or origins of a given quotation. *Bartlett's* has Ulysses S. Grant *proposing* to fight it out on this line if it took him all summer, *Oxford* has him *purposing* to do the same thing. There is a reason for this—a discrepancy between Grant's actual battlefield dispatch and the one he recorded in his memoirs—in which *Bartlett's* gives the more reliable version. On the other hand, before William Safire brought the mistake to their attention, *Bartlett's* mistakenly included the word "ingloriously" in a Milton quotation, *Oxford* the correct word, "injuriously."

Any compiler of quotations is bound to make mistakes, of course. Getting some things wrong goes with the quote-compiling territory. Nonetheless, serious quote compilers owe readers their best shot at verifying their material. Where evidence exists, a quotation can be teased back more closely than ever to its origins in a book, article, speech text, media transcript, movie script, electronic recording, or other source. The Internet is not just a treasure trove of unverified quotations, but an extraordinary resource for determining the origins of quotations. Huge databases of digitized books, magazines, and newspapers dating back centuries are an invaluable aid in this process. With the help of such tools, "the chattering classes," often thought to be a modern phrase, can be found in an 1890 American magazine. "Show me the money!", credited by *Bartlett's* to filmmaker Cameron Crowe (*Jerry Maguire*), turns up frequently in press accounts of early-twentieth-century boxer parlance. "Make my day" and "a thousand points of light" make regular appearances in nineteenth-century American periodicals.

Based on such evidence, it is often possible to make a probable case about who said what, where, and when. In other cases one can nail down some evidence of provenance, but only some. The original wording or attribution of many a quotation is so lost in the mists of time that one can only consider various possibilities, then render a verdict in the same sense that a judge or jury does: based on *available* evidence. When verifying quotes, being able to say "case closed" with any finality is rare.

In some cases the original expression of a quotation in question seems to be apparent. When definite coinage cannot be established, the etymologists' concept of "earliest use" can be invoked, the first time a word, phrase, or quotation is known to have appeared in print. This is not always a straightforward process. For example, although the earliest known appearance in print of the phrase "the whole nine yards"

is in an 1855 account of shirtmaking, its first known appearance as slang is relatively recent: in a 1967 book about pilots in Vietnam.

"Earliest use" is perforce a tentative concept. One can only report the best information available at the time one is writing. It also is important to focus on examples of earliest *relevant* use, not simply random uses. Undoubtedly someone, somewhere, sometime said, "War is hell" before the American civil war, but quotographers are more concerned about whether Union General William Tecumseh Sherman himself ever uttered those three immortal words.

Quote verification is hell. You read that here first. It is also one heck of a lot of fun, among the most exciting challenges available to verbal sleuths in the modern era. But it's more than just fun. For the sake of our collective memory, it matters that we verify historically significant quotations. Determining who actually said what is a step toward self-awareness. Exploring not just the prevalence of misquotations but considering why they prevail can help us gain insight into our collective psyche. What makes us respond to apocryphal words at a given point in time? Why do we want noted figures to say things they didn't? Who do we want to have said what? These are revealing questions. Examining not only how we mangle quotations but why tells us something about ourselves we can learn no other way.