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Misquoting People, Changing History

Quoting a famous person, the Bible, or even a movie is a common tactic to make a point or win an argument. But sometimes the quotations can be taken out of context, misattributed, or in some cases just made up.

As the joke goes, Thomas Jefferson once warned us to be careful of quotations found on Facebook or Twitter.

Of course, some — probably most — of those who quote a famous person inaccurately or falsely are simply repeating what they have heard. Even honest scholars can fall for the misquote. But others knowingly misquote, or take a quote out of its proper context, to score a political point.

In other words, they lie.

For the sake of historical accuracy, we should strive to quote historical individuals — as well as persons living today — correctly, because not doing so leads to many questionable quotations, some of which we review in this article.

Although “quotation” is a noun and “quote” is a verb, the shorter “quote” is often used popularly, and that is the word I shall use.

Politics and religion are two of the biggest topics about which we often see questionable quotes. For example, atheists like to cite any supposed anti-Christian quote they can find from one of the Founding Fathers. A favorite of the atheist crowd is their quoting John Adams as saying, “This would be the best of all possible worlds if there were no religion in it.”

Actually, in a letter to Thomas Jefferson in 1817, Adams despaired of religious arguments he had listened to by making the attributed statement, but then added, “Without religion, this world would be something not fit to be mentioned in public company — I mean Hell.” In other words, he made the statement in order to refute a world devoid of religion, not to support such a world.

George Washington is often referred to as a deist — a person who believes in a Creator God who does not intervene in human affairs. In other words, a deist would be a person who rejects the fundamentals of the Christian faith, because the Incarnation of Jesus Christ is a very great intervention in the world. One of the favorite quotes offered as proof of this is from the treaty the Washington administration concluded with the Muslim nation of Tripoli in 1796: “The government of the United States is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion.” But all the treaty was saying was that the United States had no official state religion, and therefore it was not going to go to war against any other nation on religious grounds.



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Misquoted: John Adams is often quoted as saying he believed the world would be better off without religion, but he wrote a letter to Thomas Jefferson in which he credited religion with improving life on earth.



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Enemies of the Christian faith misuse this statement to make it appear that Washington was denouncing the Christian culture of his own country. On the contrary, Washington made multiple public statements over the course of his life indicating that he was a Christian, not a deist. One example was his assertion that God had intervened to secure American independence from the British Empire. "I am sure there never was a people who had more reason to acknowledge a divine interposition in their affairs, than those in the United States." He even had a Bible verse placed on his tomb that celebrated the hope of the resurrection of Christian believers.

Christians have likewise fallen for false quotes that seem to advance their worldview, such as those supporting the falsehood that evolutionist icon Charles Darwin converted to Christianity on his deathbed, expressing regret that he had "expressed my theory of evolution as I have done." But, alas, there is no record that he ever said any such thing.

De Tocqueville and Burke

Among the most famous quotes supporting the benefits of Christianity is a statement attributed to Alexis de Tocqueville. This young Frenchman came to America in the 1830s to get a closer look at the young American nation, which was fascinating to Europeans. After spending several months in the United States, he wrote a book on his observations entitled *Democracy in America*.

De Tocqueville is often quoted as saying that he looked all over for the source of America's success, including the halls of Congress, the vast farmland, and the growing factories. According to the oft-cited quote, he finally concluded that the answer was to be found in its churches: The secret to America was its "goodness," and "as long as America remains good, she shall remain great. When she ceases to be good, she shall cease to be great."

Unfortunately, although this quote no doubt expresses a great truth, it is not found in any of the 700 pages of de Tocqueville's book. However, it should be added that it does express his opinion that Christianity was a profound positive influence over American society and public affairs.

He wrote, "There is no country in the world where the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of man than in America; and there can be no greater proof of its utility and its conformity to human nature than its influence is powerfully felt over the most enlightened and free nation of the earth."

To illustrate his contention, he compared the American Revolution with the French Revolution, noting how the French Revolution had done so much damage to French society. He asserted that *hatred of Christianity* was a main cause of the French Revolution, which was "profoundly anti-religious."

Man of faith: George Washington is often labeled a deist — a person who does not believe God intervenes in human affairs — but the reality is that Washington credited the Lord with saving America during the War for Independence. (Neuroshock/adobe stock)



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De Tocqueville was struck by the “religious atmosphere” of America. “In France I had seen the spirit of religion moving in the opposite direction to that of freedom. In America, I found them intimately linked together in a joint reign over the same land.” He noted that because of the influence of Christianity on American society, few laws were needed to restrain human vices, whereas in his country, with less Christian influence, laws against such things did little good.

His assertion was that religion (by which de Tocqueville meant the Christian religion) “should be considered the first” of America’s “political institutions.”

Again, while the famous quotation attributed to de Tocqueville is inaccurate and should not be used, it does express his line of thinking.

“The only thing necessary for evil to triumph, is for good men to do nothing” is a famous quote attributed to the noted English statesman Edmund Burke. Like the de Tocqueville quote, this is more a paraphrase of something that Burke said in a speech he gave in Parliament in 1770: “When bad men combine, the good must associate; else they will fall, one by one, an unpitied sacrifice in a contemptible struggle.”

Misquoting Scripture

The book that was most found in American homes in the early years of the Republic was the Bible, and as such, it was regularly quoted. People of that day were able to grasp allusions to biblical passages because it was so widely read among the population.

Unfortunately, as English playwright William Shakespeare said, the devil can quote Scripture for his own purposes, and the Bible is often misquoted to score points in a debate. Some of these misquotes have little negative impact on society, such as “cleanliness is next to godliness” — which is not found in the Bible, but was an assertion by John Wesley, the founder of Methodism.



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Other misrepresentations of Bible passages can perpetuate false ideals. “God helps those who help themselves” is a false quotation, for example. Actually, the Scriptures are quite clear that human beings need God’s help in many things, most importantly salvation.

Another misquote from Scripture is the distortion that “money is the root of all evil.” Actually, the citation, found in Paul’s first letter to Timothy, is, “For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.” (1 Timothy 6:10, New American Standard Bible.)

Unfortunately, the distortion is often used to question the merits of free-market capitalism with its profit motive.

Many people who misquote the Bible no doubt do so sincerely. Likewise, popular culture is awash in quotes that are not malicious, but are nevertheless inaccurate. Sherlock Holmes, for example, never said, “Elementary, my dear Watson” in the stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle; Humphrey Bogart never said, “Play it again, Sam,” in the iconic movie *Casablanca*; and Darth Vader never said, “Luke, I am your father” in *The Empire Strikes Back*. (What Bogart’s character, Rick, said to the piano player was, “You played it for her, you can play it for me,” and Vader said, “No, I am your father.”)

Not surprisingly, unlike these rather harmless movie and literature misquotes, false quotes used in political discourse can have very serious adverse effects.

Lie: “Let Them Eat Cake”

Among the most viciously untrue quotes is that attributed to the French Queen Marie Antoinette during the bloody French Revolution. Supposedly, when informed that the peasants “had no bread” and that they were starving, the queen callously responded, “Then let them eat cake.” (“Cake” refers to an enriched bread considered a luxury food, favored by the aristocracy.)

This is all most people today know about the Austrian-born wife of Louis XVI, and it is blatantly untrue. In fact, it stands almost directly opposite of anything she ever did say. As historian Nesta Webster wrote in *The French Revolution: A Study in Democracy*, all sorts of pamphlets were distributed in France by the enemy Prussian government and leftist secret societies before and during the revolution, casting Marie Antoinette as a particularly immoral person.

While characterized at the time (and today) as uncaring and callous to the sufferings of the poor of France, the real Marie Antoinette was much different. She actually lodged and fed 12 poor families at her own expense. She founded the Society of Ladies of Maternal Charity. Another time she stopped her carriage for more than an hour to aid an injured person, and waited until a surgeon was located.

Writing in *Marie Antoinette: The Journey*, historian Antonia Fraser directly challenged the myth that the French queen had said, “Let them eat cake.” Fraser said that Marie “would have been far more likely to bestow her own cake impulsively upon the starving people.” Historian Jacques Barzun likewise challenged the myth, explaining that “Let them eat cake” had been attributed to another aristocratic woman two generations *earlier*, and that may have also been a made-up quote.

Hardly a harmless movie misquote, this popular misconception of the French queen as uncaring contributed greatly to her death on the guillotine, setting off the infamous Reign of Terror — and it continues to unfairly darken her reputation to the present day.



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Innocent: Perhaps no historical figure in European history is more unfairly maligned than Marie Antoinette, the queen of France who died on the guillotine during the Reign of Terror of the French Revolution.

Ruining Careers

Other such fake quotes may not have led the victim to the guillotine, but may have decapitated political careers. When Pat Buchanan was running for president in 1996, his political enemies dusted off one of his old syndicated columns and announced that the conservative stalwart had once written, “Hitler was a great man.”

Actually, Buchanan had written a column warning that today we know of Hitler’s monstrous crimes, but before World War II, many Germans mistakenly thought Hitler was a great man. Buchanan certainly did not think that Hitler was a great man. Such distortions can hardly be accidental.

Another politician whose career was hampered by a liberal press was Dan Quayle, who was vice president under George H.W. Bush. Bush dispatched Quayle on a mission to South America, which led to reports that Quayle had said, “I was recently on a tour of Latin America, and the only regret I have is that I didn’t study Latin harder in school so I could converse with those people.”

Of course, the people in the nations south of the Rio Grande do not speak Latin, but rather the popular languages that emerged from Latin, such as Spanish and Portuguese. Had Quayle actually said what was attributed to him, he would have been justly ridiculed for his ignorance.

But he never said any such thing. Representative Claudine Schneider of Rhode Island, a fellow Republican, was told by Quayle at a Republican event that he was impressed that she could speak French very well, whereupon Schneider told the Latin America story as a joke, adding at the end of the story that it was a joke. She never meant for it to be taken as fact — because it was not.

Nevertheless, media outlets such as the *Chicago Tribune*, *Newsweek*, and *Time* reported that Quayle had actually made such a silly statement. Despite its total concoction, this “joke” is now taken as truth by many Americans.



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Andrew Jackson and John Marshall

The use of fake quotes is, of course, not new in American politics. President Andrew Jackson is often quoted as saying he would defy a Supreme Court decision involving the Cherokee Indians. He supposedly said, “John Marshall [the chief justice who wrote the decision known as *Worcester v. Georgia*] has made his decision. Now let him enforce it!” But he never said that.

There was nothing in the decision for Jackson to enforce, as the ruling was not directed at him, but rather at the Georgia Superior Court. It directed that court to order the release of some Christian missionaries, including Presbyterian minister Samuel Worcester, who had refused to follow Georgia laws while on Indian land. The men were subsequently released.

This quote is based on the popular but incorrect belief that Jackson hated American Indians. He even allegedly said, “The only good Indian is a dead Indian.” (He did not say that; in fact, Jackson adopted two Native American children as his own.)

Trump: “Very Fine People on Both Sides”

Because racism and antisemitism are so generally reviled today, accusations involving misquotes about race are a common weapon used in modern political warfare. This usually involves insinuating that someone is sympathetic to the Ku Klux Klan, the National Socialists (Nazis), or skinheads, or that someone is guilty of the vague charge of “white supremacy.”

Perhaps the most glaring example of this was the aftermath of the infamous 2017 incident in Charlottesville, Virginia, in which President Donald Trump was unfairly cast as somehow favoring the KKK, Nazis, and white supremacists.

The genesis of the charge was when some peaceful protesters planned to oppose the removal of a statue honoring Confederate General Robert E. Lee. Unfortunately, some neo-Nazis and white supremacists took the opportunity to graft themselves into the protest. While the original protesters had obtained a permit for their event, the neo-Nazis had not. And neither had some radical leftist protesters, who also showed up at the event to protest the white supremacists.

This led to a violent confrontation in which a young woman, Heather Heyer — one of the individuals there protesting peacefully in favor of taking the Lee statue down — was killed by a white supremacist who drove his car into a crowd.

Trump responded to questions about the violent and deadly event, and his comment that there were “some very fine people on both sides” was quickly taken out of context and distorted to show that Trump supported neo-Nazis. Of course, Trump was talking about the nonviolent protesters on both sides, not the violent protesters on both sides. He even explained, “and I’m not talking about the neo-Nazis and the white nationalists, because they should be condemned totally.”

Out of context: Many modern political figures have been misquoted, perhaps none more so than former President Donald Trump. Those who continue to repeat the false narrative that Trump has defended KKK members and neo-Nazis are either ignorant or mendacious. (AP Images)



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As Trump explained to the press, “You had a group on one side that was bad. And you had a group on the other side that was also very violent.... You had a group — you had a group on the other side that came charging in without a permit, and they were very, very violent.”

He added, “I’ve condemned neo-Nazis. I’ve condemned many different groups, but not all of those people were neo-Nazis, believe me. Not all of those people were white supremacists by any stretch. Those people were also there, because they wanted to protest the taking down of a statue.... So, this week, it’s Robert E. Lee, I noticed that Stonewall Jackson’s coming down. I wonder, is it George Washington next week? And is it Thomas Jefferson the week after? You know, you really do have to ask yourself, where does it stop?”

Trump then noted that “some rough, bad people, neo-Nazis, white nationalists, whatever you want to call ‘em” had crashed the event. “But you had a lot of people in that group that were there to innocently protest and very legally protest, because you know, I don’t know if you know, but they had a permit. The other group didn’t have a permit.”

Despite the fact that Trump clearly was not calling the white supremacists and neo-Nazis “fine people,” that is how most of the media reported it. The Independent even ran a piece warning, “Emboldened by Trump, will they again resort to violence, attacking those who are different? Will we see an American Kristallnacht [when Jews in Germany saw homes and businesses destroyed by angry Nazi mobs]?”

It is not surprising that those on the Left lie to advance their political agenda, but even some Republicans such as House Speaker Paul Ryan called Trump’s statements “moral ambiguity when we need extreme moral clarity.”

Ryan could have read that Trump had said, “Racism is evil. And those who cause violence in its name are criminals and thugs, including the KKK, neo-Nazis, white supremacists, and other hate groups that are repugnant to everything we hold dear as Americans.” How Ryan could call that statement “moral ambiguity” is incredible.

Even CNN’s Jake Tapper, hardly a Trump apologist, said Trump had in fact condemned neo-Nazis at Charlottesville. FactCheck.org also concluded that Trump had condemned both white supremacy and neo-Nazis. In *USA Today*, James Robbins wrote that Trump’s “both sides” remarks were “miscast,” and “quickly became a tool to denounce the president and stoke racial division.”



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Despite this clear and convincing evidence that Trump did not praise the neo-Nazis or white supremacists in Charlottesville, Joe Biden used the false charge that he did so to launch his presidential campaign for 2020. And he holds to that assertion even today, despite the record being quite clear that his whole presidential bid was based on a lie.

Many more examples of using fake quotes could be given, but suffice it to say that such use has happened in the past, is happening today, and no doubt will continue to happen in the future.

Those of us who favor our limited, constitutional government need to use every morally respectable resource to advance the cause of freedom. For example, we should draw attention to Joe Biden's absurd statement that Franklin Roosevelt went on television and discussed the stock market crash of 1929. First of all, TV was still a decade away from its commercial debut, and secondly, Roosevelt would not be discussing anything on TV or radio as president until he took office in 1933. The public should know that Biden makes stuff up.

But our side should not manufacture quotes, or take quotes out of context. Not only do the ends not justify the means, but if we use a quote that is not correct, whether through ignorance or mendacity, we run the risk of being caught and actually hurting our cause. We need to call to account those who concoct quotes or use them out of context to take away our freedom, but not put out fake quotes ourselves. Even if Trump, Buchanan, or Quayle is not our favorite politician, Biden and others should not be allowed to push their left-wing agenda forward through falsehoods.



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