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## Checking Sources

There are a lot of quotes from history that gun rights activists pass around that are amazing, astonishing, or fascinating. Unfortunately, amazing, astonishing, or fascinating, isn't enough; the quotes also need to be accurate. This isn't just a problem for gun rights activists, either. Gun control activists make the same mistake (with different "quotes" of course).

I would guess that almost all political activists, at one time or another, fall into this trap. Someone gives you a *splendid* quote from some important political figure, like this one from George Washington:

“Firearms stand next in importance to the Constitution itself. They are the American people’s liberty teeth and keystone under independence. The church, the plow, the prairie wagon and citizen’s firearms are indelibly related. From the moment the Pilgrims landed, to the present day, events, occurrences, and tendencies prove that to ensure peace, security, and happiness, the rifle and pistol are equally indispensable. Every corner of this land knows firearms, and more than 99 99/100 percent of them by their silence indicate they are in safe and sane hands. The very atmosphere of firearms everywhere restrains evil interference -- they deserve a place of honor with all that’s good. When firearms go, all goes -- we need them every hour.”

It sounds like something that Washington would say about gun ownership—or at least it sounds like something that you *think* Washington would say, so you use that quote in a letter to the editor, or in a public speech.

“Houston, we have a problem.” No one can find this quote in any collection of Washington’s papers, in any official documents, or in any biographies. I have seen it attributed to a speech to the First Congress, Second Session, but if Washington said it there, it doesn’t appear to have been recorded in any of the official records of the First Congress. I have also seen it attributed to Washington’s Second Inaugural Address, but it isn’t in either of his Inaugural Addresses, or any other president’s inaugural addresses.<sup>1</sup>

There are parts of that “quote” that sound very wrong for the time. The “99 99/100 percent” is an odd construction from eighteenth century America, which tended not to use fractional percentages. The expression, “safe and sane hands” also sounds suspiciously modern, and, “When firearms go, all goes...” seems peculiar, since there was simply no discussion of prohibiting private ownership of guns at the time George Washington lived.

So you used this very questionable quote in a letter to the editor, or before a city council. The next thing you know, some gun control activist points out that the “quote” you used is false. Now, this doesn’t happen very often, because gun control activists usually don’t know enough American history to spot a bogus quote. But if it does happen, you are going to look very stupid.

Another famous quote about gun control is this one attributed to Adolph Hitler: “1935 will go down in History! For the first time, a civilized nation has full gun registration! Our streets will be safer, our police more efficient and the world will follow our lead to the future!”

This quote isn’t phrased in Hitler’s style. Another problem with it is that while significant changes were made in German firearms laws in 1928 and 1931 (under the

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<sup>1</sup> Davis Newton Lott, *The Presidents Speak: The Inaugural Address of the American Presidents from*

Weimar Republic), and in 1938 (under the Nazis), it doesn't appear that any significant change in registration requirements occurred in 1935. Another problem is that the 1928 and 1931 weapons laws were aimed at the Nazis and the Communists, so it doesn't seem likely that Hitler would crow about the success of the laws originally intended to disarm Hitler's thugs.<sup>2</sup> Finally, this "quote" breaks many rules, including the prohibition on starting a sentence with a number, and capitalizing "History." This suggests that this "quote" didn't come out a scholarly work. Don't use it! The Nazi weapons laws described in the book "*Gun Control*": *Gateway To Tyranny* are verifiable.

There is another version of the quote floating around that purports to give a source out of the *Berliner Tageblatt* (a newspaper of the time). Several people (including a pro-gun friend, fluent in German, who was living in Germany at the time), have checked the date given. Nope. Nothing there like that quote. It's bogus. We don't need to use questionable quotes from Hitler.

So, how do you know if a historical quotation that someone has emailed you, or put on a flyer, is accurate? Historians and others who work in the academic world have come up with some methods for catching problems like these. These approaches don't work perfectly, but they help.

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*Washington to Kennedy* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1961).

<sup>2</sup> Jay Simkin and Aaron Zelman, "*Gun Control*": *Gateway to Tyranny* (Milwaukee, Wisc.: Jews for the Preservation of Firearms Ownership, 1992). This publication includes the full text of the various Weimar Republic and Nazi firearms control laws and regulations, in German and English translation. While Jews for the Preservation of Firearms Ownership (JPFO) uses heavy-handed rhetoric at times, they have provided a valuable service by publishing this work. Their rhetorical excesses are somewhat understandable, considering the method by which the Nazis used gun control as one part of rendering German Jews incapable of defending themselves.

The JPFO insists that the following information be included whenever this work is cited: 2872 South Wentworth Avenue, Milwaukee, WI 53207, (414) 769-0760.

One hint that a quote is either wrong or unverified is that after the quote, you get just a name, or just a name and a year. Historians have a very detailed way of identifying from where a quote came, known as a *citation*, *endnote*, or *footnote*. Instead of just a name, or a name and a year, you get a detailed description of the location of the quote. This will usually include an author's name, and a title for the book or magazine.

For a book, the *citation* will usually tell you in what city the book was published, who the publisher was, what year the book was published, and the pages that contain the quote. For a magazine, this will be the title of the article, the date on which the magazine was published, and the pages that contain the quote. Having an exact location helps; it means that whoever copied this quotation had some training in how to cite a source. This gives us at least the strong possibility that whoever copied this quotation knew what he was doing.

The World Wide Web is a powerful source of information; some of it is even correct. Part of what makes the World Wide Web such a wonderful technology is that *anyone* can put up a web page. Unfortunately, that means that a lot of web pages concerning history contain errors, misquotations, and sometimes, outright lies.

In some cases, the people that put up these web pages were relying on the quotes and citations that have appeared here in *Shotgun News*—and some of these quotes were incorrect. Rest assured, these filler quotes have been corrected in issues from July, 2002 onward—but a lot of people have used those sometimes incorrect quotes on their web pages, assuming that they were correct. (If you are one of those people—you might want to see if the quote has changed in this edition of *Shotgun News*.) Searching the World Wide Web for quotes is easy; making sure that the quotes are correct is a lot harder.

As a general rule, if a quote appears on a web page that is part of a university or college electronic text library, it is probably correct. If the quote comes from the web page of a student there, it *might* be correct. If the quote comes from a professor's web page, it is more likely to be correct. If a quote appears as part of a page that is trying to make a point about gun control (either for or against it), it is wise to try and check that quote against other sources. If a quote appears as part of a general collection of historical information, it is probably accurate.

Here is a list of web sites that I consider completely reliable:

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amlaw/lawhome.html>: Library of Congress's *A Century of Lawmaking For a New Nation: U.S. Congressional Documents and Debates, 1774-1873*. This is a powerful research tool. It lets you search for particular words or phrases in *Journals of the Continental Congress*, *Annals of Congress*, *Statutes at Large*, and dozens of other primary source documents.

<http://memory.loc.gov/>: The Library of Congress's *American Memory: Historical Collections for the National Digital Library*. This is an amazing collection of documents and photographs that you can search by word or phrase. This is how I found a 1789 Philadelphia ad for hand grenades!

<http://memory.loc.gov/const/fed/fedpapers.html>: The Library of Congress's *The Federalist Papers*. There are a number of places on the World Wide Web where you can find the Federalist Papers, but this collection is searchable, and the Library of Congress is a very trustworthy source. No gun control advocate is going to argue that the Library of Congress has an axe to grind about gun control.

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/gwhtml/gwhome.html>: The Library of Congress's collection of George Washington's papers. This is searchable by word or phrase.

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/mtjhtml/mtjhome.html>: The Library of Congress's collection of Thomas Jefferson's papers. This is searchable by word or phrase.

<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/jefferson/quotations/jeff1500.htm#Arms>: The University of Virginia's collection of Jefferson quotes about the right to bear arms.

<http://www.mdarchives.state.md.us/megafile/msa/speccol/sc2900/sc2908/html/index.html>: The State of Maryland's online, searchable version of *Archives of Maryland*. If you are interested in Maryland history, there is no finer web site to visit.

<http://www.colonialct.uconn.edu/default.cfm>: *The Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut, 1636-1776* online. It isn't searchable, but it does have the index from the printed set, and you can display individual pages.

<http://www.hti.umich.edu/>: The University of Michigan's Humanities Text Initiative contains the full text of Roy P. Basler, ed., *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln* (1953), which is searchable by word or phrase; and a searchable digital collection of 8500 books and 50,000 journal articles from the nineteenth century.

<http://personal.pitnet.net/primarysources/>: *The American Colonist's Library* is a collection of primary sources for American history.

<http://www.claytoncramer.com/primary.html>: Of course, my web site has a collection of primary source documents and links.

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