



Bartlett's Familiar-to-Liberals Quotations

David Boaz

March 3, 2023

Somewhere along the way, *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* became the gold standard of quotations, the place anyone can go to confirm a quote and see the source. But like everyone else, I now look quotations up on the internet. So did the world need a new, 19th edition of *Bartlett's*?

It depends on what kind of ideological prism one uses to determine which quotes are most notable.

Past editors of *Bartlett's* proposed to include quotations that are “familiar” or “worthy of perpetuation,” though no such specific criteria are noted in the new edition released late last year. Those are subjective standards, of course. And with each edition, some quotations must be added, which requires trimming some older entries. The most familiar quotations in our language are almost certainly included, though past editors have noted the discovery of surprising omissions. Emily Morison Beck, who led the editing of the 14th edition in 1968, found that “But it does move” (Galileo) and “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (Santayana) had not been included before.

Readers might discover a pattern of omissions that is perhaps not surprising. The New York and Boston editorial team seem far more familiar with the words of liberal, leftist, and socialist sources than those of conservatives and libertarians. The publisher's note in marketing materials that that new sources in this edition include “Alison Bechdel, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Pope Francis, Atul Gawande, Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Hilary Mantel, Lin-Manuel Miranda, Claudia Rankine, Fred Rogers, Bernie Sanders, Patti Smith, and Malala Yousafzai.” That doesn't even count Greta Thunberg, the youngest person quoted in the new edition. All fine people, but they do tilt a bit leftward.

Over the past 40 years, since the rise of Ronald Reagan, Margaret Thatcher, John Paul II, and even Deng Xiaoping, the world has seen a turn toward markets and economic freedom (albeit with a fall in 2020 during the pandemic lockdowns). But the thinkers and leaders of that historic change are heavily underrepresented in *Bartlett's*.

F. A. Hayek, Milton Friedman, Ludwig von Mises, and Ayn Rand get four citations each, which is slightly better than the 1992 and 2012 editions. But Karl Marx (with Friedrich Engels), whose intellectual stock is surely declining, has risen from 18 citations to 23 in the years since the collapse of Soviet communism. At least William F. Buckley Jr., ignored until the 18th edition, is now represented with possibly his two most famous statements. (“National Review . . . stands athwart history, yelling Stop” and “I should sooner live in a society governed by the first two thousand names in the Boston telephone book than in a society governed by the two thousand faculty members of Harvard University.”)

When *The Penguin Dictionary of Modern Humorous Quotations* was published in 1994, P. J. O’Rourke had more entries than any other living writer. He wrote prolifically for 28 years after that, but *Bartlett’s* gives him only one citation. And it isn’t his classic quip, “Giving money and power to politicians is like giving car keys and whiskey to teenage boys.”

The omissions begin, literally, at the beginning. There’s nothing from 1 Samuel 8, the story of how God warned the people of Israel against creating a king. That passage endured in Western thought for two millennia, having been cited by Thomas Paine, Lord Acton, and Mises as a reminder of the danger of giving any one man supreme power.

Reagan, among our most quotable presidents, warrants 11 citations, up from three in the 16th edition. “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!” was added in the 17th edition, as both Adam Meyerson and I had recommended in critiques of the 16th.

Thatcher has four entries, up from three in the previous edition. But Barack Obama has 21, up from 12 in the last edition. Most of Obama’s quotes are long paragraphs, unlike the great majority of pithy lines from other sources.

One wonders if the editors just feel warmly toward him, even though he didn’t actually say anything memorable beyond his quip that rural Americans “cling to guns and religion” and his rejection of “red states and blue states.”

Bill Clinton gets six quotes and Hillary Clinton 14, most of them the kind of remarks for which they probably didn’t dream of being remembered. (John F. Kennedy warrants 29 quotes, pretty much all from formal speeches.)

One big change since the last edition: Donald Trump gets 23 entries. Unlike Obama, his sound like his own words, not his speechwriters’.

Liberal political philosopher John Rawls is included, but not his great critic Robert Nozick. Though looking for Nozick, I did find my good friend Grover Norquist: “My goal is to get [government] down to the size where we can drown it in the bathtub.”

One exception to this pattern is found on the Supreme Court: The quotable conservative Justice Antonin Scalia gets as many entries as Anthony Kennedy and the revered Ruth Bader Ginsburg combined.

Notably, *Bartlett’s* omits both Justice Anthony Kennedy’s observation that, “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning of the universe, and of

the mystery of human life,” and Scalia’s later mockery of it as the “sweet-mystery-of-life passage.” Clarence Thomas gets only his angry complaint about a “high-tech lynching” and not his *Kelo* dissent, in which he declared “Something has gone seriously awry with this Court’s interpretation of the Constitution.” But all the recent justices pale in comparison to the 29 citations from Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.

Despite the wealth of quotes *Bartlett’s* puts at one’s fingertips, the book’s structure makes it cumbersome and difficult to navigate. There are two obvious ways to arrange a book of quotations: by subject or by author. The former is useful if you’re looking for a quote to illustrate a point, and most similar books are arranged that way, including the estimable but dated *Great Quotations*, compiled by George Seldes, and H. L. Mencken’s *New Dictionary of Quotations*.

Bartlett’s and the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* are arranged by author. But why does *Bartlett’s* list the authors in chronological order, requiring the reader to check an alphabetical index first? It also devotes almost 500 of its 1,446 pages to an index of keywords. In the words of legendary quote machine Winston Churchill, the book, “by its very length defends itself against the risk of it being read.”

(Given the book’s wide swath of what editors consider “familiar,” Churchill’s wisdom sits alongside observations like “Don’t sell the steak, sell the sizzle,” “Keep on truckin’,” and “Me want cookie.”)

Bartlett’s was first published in 1855 by the Cambridge, Massachusetts, bookstore owner John Bartlett. Its success led him to join Little, Brown and Company and edit nine editions before his death in 1905. One thing it doesn’t do, though, is debunk bogus quotations; for that the careful reader can visit online sources such as the Spurious Quotations page at the Monticello website and quoteinvestigator.com.

It’s hard to define just which quotations are “familiar” and/or “worthy of perpetuation.” But editors making such choices should endeavor to make sure they’re not in a geographical or ideological bubble.

David Boaz is a distinguished senior fellow of the Cato Institute.