

# Quotable Harvard

Selected by FRED SHAPIRO / Illustrations by TOM MOSSER

Though he edited both the Yale Book of Quotations and the Oxford Dictionary of American Legal Quotations and is an associate librarian and lecturer in legal research at Yale Law School, Fred Shapiro, J.D. '80, attributes his interest in quotations partly to experiences he had while at Harvard Law School. "Far from a model student," he neglected his studies to haunt the Widener stacks, where he stumbled upon a collection of old books on sports and games and became interested in tracing the origins of common pastimes. That enabled him to "antedate" the earliest uses of many sporting words as given in the Oxford English Dictionary, and he became a significant contributor to the dictionary's Supplement. A few decades later, he decided to apply the historical methods used by the OED to the compilation of a comprehensive quotation dictionary, having noted that existing collections, such as Bartlett's Familiar Quotations, and Oxford's own Dictionary of Quotations seemed to do little research into the first occurrences of sayings that lacked well-known starting-points. For his own collection, he used traditional methods but was also "lucky enough to be compiling amid an explosion of searchable historical text collections and online tools such as Google Books, ProQuest Historical Newspapers, Newspaperarchive, and Eighteenth Century Collections Online." As a result, he says, his Yale Book of Quotations was able to "revolutionize our knowledge of quotation origins."

Now, as a "token of gratitude to the University that has assembled all those great old books

in the Widener basement," he has assembled 25 quotations by Harvard alumni. At the editors' urging, he eschewed the most famous alumni soundbites—"Ask not what your country can do for you..." "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself," "Speak softly and carry a big stick," "Taxation without representation is tyranny," "Love means never having to say you're sorry"—and emblematic Harvardisms like "You can always tell a Harvard man, but you can't tell him much." He chose less familiar examples that seemed provocative, amusing, or otherwise striking.

"Some may find the list below revealing of my biases," he writes. "In particular, there is a tendency toward liberalism. In my own defense I note only that it is not easy to find quotations of a conservative nature by Harvard people. There are some—such as 'Any one may so arrange his affairs that his taxes shall be as low as possible...there is not even a patriotic duty to increase one's taxes,' from *Learned Hand*, LL.B. 1896, or 'States like those [Iraq, Iran, and North Korea] and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, aiming to threaten the peace of the world,' by David Frum, J.D. '87, in a speech written for George W. Bush, M.B.A. '75—but they are few and far between. I leave it to others to explain what historical and sociological factors may underlie a Crimson slant to the left, or whether there is some inherent correlation between political and quotational innovation in general." ~The Editors



What is your

favorite quotation by a Harvard person, or about the University? Visit [harvardmag.com/quotations](http://harvardmag.com/quotations) to share your selection and see what other readers have submitted.



MARGARET ATWOOD

We may have democracy, or we may have wealth concentrated in the hands of a few, but we cannot have both.

—Louis D. Brandeis, LL.B. 1877, quoted in *Labor*, October 14, 1941

There may be said to be two classes of people in the world: those who constantly divide the people of the world into two classes, and those who do not.

—Robert Benchley, A.B. 1912, *Of All Things* (1921)

Nobody dies from lack of sex. It's lack of love we die from.

—Margaret Atwood, A.M. '62, Litt.D. '04, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1986)

I must study Politicks and War that my sons may have liberty to study Mathematicks and Philosophy. My sons ought to study Mathematicks and Philosophy, Geography, natural History, Naval Architecture, navigation, Commerce, and Agriculture, in order to give their Children a right to study Painting, Poetry, Musick, Architecture, Statuary, Tapestry, and Porcelaine.

—John Adams, A.B. 1755, LL.D. 1781,  
Letter to Abigail Adams, May 12, 1780

A memorandum is written not to inform the reader but to protect the writer.

—Dean Acheson, LL.B. '18,  
quoted in the *Wall Street Journal*, September 8, 1977



GERTRUDE  
STEIN

In the United States there is more space where nobody is than where anybody is. That is what makes America what it is.

—Gertrude Stein, A.B. 1898,  
*The Geographical History of America* (1936)

Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things....We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas, but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate.

—Henry David Thoreau, A.B. 1837,  
*Walden* (1854)

What we've got here is failure to communicate.

—Frank Pierson '46,  
screenplay for *Cool Hand Luke* (1967)

Not even a Harvard School of Business can make greed into a science.

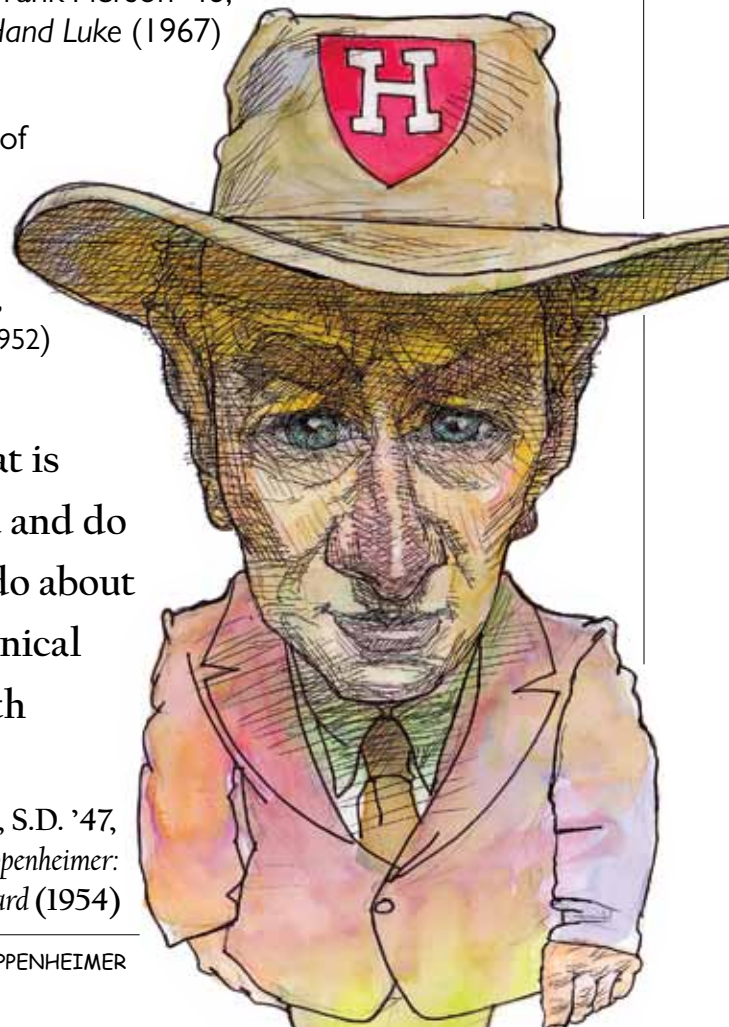
—W.E.B. Du Bois, A.B. 1890,  
Ph.D. 1895,  
*In Battle for Peace* (1952)

When you see something that is technically sweet, you go ahead and do it and you argue about what to do about it only after you have had your technical success. That is the way it was with the atomic bomb.

—J. Robert Oppenheimer '25, S.D. '47,  
quoted in *In the Matter of J. Robert Oppenheimer: USAEC Transcript of Hearing Before Personnel Security Board* (1954)



FRANK  
PIERSON



J. ROBERT OPPENHEIMER



JOHN UPDIKE

To say that war is madness is like saying that sex is madness: true enough, from the standpoint of a stateless eunuch, but merely a provocative epigram for those who must make their arrangements in the world as given.

—John Updike '54, Litt.D. '92, *Self-Consciousness* (1989)

Taxes are what we pay for civilized society.

—Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., A.B. 1861, LL.B. 1866, LL.D. 1895, *Compañía General de Tabacos de Filipinas v. Collector of Internal Revenue* (dissenting opinion), 1927



TOM LEHRER

In my youth...there were certain words you couldn't say in front of a girl; now you can say them, but you can't say "girl."

—Tom Lehrer '47, A.M. '47, G '66, quoted in the *Washington Post*, January 3, 1982

Meek young men grow up in libraries, believing it their duty to accept the views, which Cicero, which Locke, which Bacon, have given, forgetful that Cicero, Locke, and Bacon were only young men in libraries, when they wrote these books.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, A.B. 1821, LL.D. 1866, *The American Scholar* (1837)

Go to where the silence is and say something.

—Amy Goodman '84, on accepting an award for coverage of the 1991 massacre of Timorese by Indonesian troops, quoted in the *Columbia Journalism Review*, March/April 1994

Presidents of two different oil companies.

—Bob Shrum, J.D. '68, on the Republican Party's idea of diversity on their ticket, quoted in the *Los Angeles Times*, July 27, 2000

Poetry is what is lost in translation. It is also what is lost in interpretation.

—Robert Frost, class of 1901, Litt.D. '37, quoted in Louis Untermeyer, *Robert Frost: A Backward Look* (1964)



AMY GOODMAN

Writing is easy. Just put a piece of paper in the typewriter and start bleeding.

—Thomas Wolfe, A.M. '22, quoted in Gene Olson, *Sweet Agony* (1972)

What pornographic literature does is precisely to drive a wedge between one's existence as a full human being and one's existence as a sexual being.

—Susan Sontag, A.M. '57, Litt.D. '93, "The Pornographic Imagination" (1967)

The king was pregnant.

—Ursula Le Guin '51, *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969)

What religion a man shall have is a historical accident, quite as much as what language he shall speak.

—George Santayana, A.B. 1886, Ph.D. 1889, *The Life of Reason* (1905)

Summer afternoon—summer afternoon; to me those have always been the two most beautiful words in the English language.

—Henry James, Law School 1862-63, Litt.D. 1911, quoted in Edith Wharton, *A Backward Glance* (1934)

Although the special manifestations of religion may have been absurd (I mean its creeds and theories), yet the life of it as a whole is mankind's most important function.

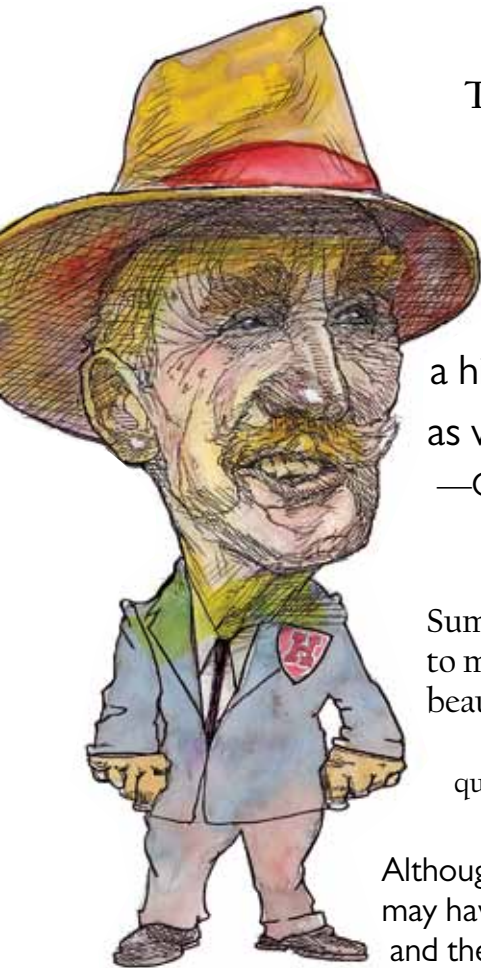
—William James, M.D. 1869, LL.D. 1903, Letter to Frances Morse, April 13, 1900

A democracy—that is, a government of all the people, by all the people, for all the people.

—Theodore Parker, Divinity School 1836, speech at Anti-Slavery Convention, Boston, May 29, 1850

All the security around the American president is just to make sure the man who shoots him gets caught.

—Norman Mailer '43, quoted in the *Sunday Telegraph*, March 4, 1990



GEORGE SANTAYANA



THOMAS WOLFE