

The letters have inspired Gary and me to expand the library's Books in Prison program to include inmates like the two above who are doing life sentences or are on death row. We are also trying to identify groups who want to correspond with prisoners. At the beginning of the new project, Gary was writing personal letters to the prisoners, but we are now overwhelmed and can barely keep up with reading all the correspondence.

We are excited about the new book possibility. Every day is a delicate balance between keeping the library vital and active in providing an alternative to corporate news and keeping the prison projects going. But every jam-packed minute is more than worth the effort when we read and hear from patrons and prisoners who appreciate what we are trying to do.

DOCUMENTS

HISTORICAL ACCURACY AND THE WEB: A PLG-NET EXCHANGE

The following documents are the primary texts of an exchange on the PLG-net list concerning a perhaps-too-timely quote from Herman Goering on the nature of public/political persuasion and war – a topic with which many of us are engaged at present. It took place primarily between April 7th and April 9th, 2003. In all, there are nine parts to this “conversation” – which has been only lightly edited for flow, misspelling, taking out the notations peculiar to e-mails (like the address string, an occasional representation of a frowning face, etc.), and the lengthy repeating of attached messages when an item is being replied to. Thanks must go to Kathleen de la Peña McCook who wrote urging us to publish the exchange on the quote and Snopes, etc. in *Progressive Librarian* because she thought “it captures with clarity a critical point” for her M.L.S. students.

introduction and editing by John Buschman

I. From: Bill Shakalis
Subject: Quote sent around the High School List

Here's a great quote sent to a Boston area h.s. peace list. Anyone got a Ready Reference file on Herman Goering? Really: it would be best to have this quote authenticated.

Attached message:

I found a great quote and I made it into a flyer and am putting it in my school. I thought others might want to do the same:

“Of course the people don't want war. But after all, it's the leaders of the country who determine the policy, and it's always a simple matter to drag the people along whether it's a democracy, a fascist dictatorship, a parliament, or a communist dictatorship. Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack

of patriotism, and exposing the country to greater danger.” – Hermann Goering, Nazi Minister of Propaganda

II. From: Debbie Richards
Subject: Re: Quote sent around the High School List

This quote/image (the text on the jpg I just sent) is making the rounds in Boston today (I'm in Cambridge). If anyone can find the citation please do post it. Thanks.

III. From: Frederick W, Stoss
Subject: Re: Quote sent around the High School List

The Urban Legends site, Snopes, provides the following explanation of this True quote, with its attribution to the Post-WW II War Crime Trials at Nuremburg:

<http://www.snopes.com/quotes/goering.htm>

There is a VERY interesting history of this that it was updated last October (2002) with an original 1947 source of the text.

IV. Related posting to Intellectual Freedom Action News, forwarded to PLG-net:
From: Program Officer/Communications
American Library Association, Office for Intellectual Freedom

Urban Legends Reference Pages: Questionable Quotes: Goering <http://www.snopes.com/quotes/goering.htm>

Status: True

[Editor's note: At this point, a portion of the exchange focused on the Snopes.com website, reiterating that the Goering quote was not an urban legend, and defending the site as an authority on urban legends: "there may be problems with the [Goering] article, [but] it clearly says that this is a case of a genuine quote, and explains the context in which it was made."]

V. From: Mark Rosenzweig
Subject: Re: Quote sent around the High School List

Thanks to Debbie for finding the quote with the jpg. There is a major difference between this version and the one we received as making the rounds of school lists and flyers. First of all, the quote that was sent to us is incorrect in its attribution to Goering as "Minister of Propaganda." That was *not* one of his many portfolios. That notable role was held by Josef Goebbels, a very different, sinister and powerful figure in his own right in the leadership of the Nazi Party. Perhaps this has already been pointed out, but I haven't seen it.

So the present quote carries new fundamental misinformation in its very description of the alleged source, a basic element of the attribution in this case and of its assumed significance. Instantly that calls into question the accuracy of the quote that I believe would have been apparent to most people who had read any book about the Third Reich, the Nazis, the Second World War in Europe, or, for that matter, 20th century European history, not so long ago.

As Fred Stoss correctly points out, the quote has only indirectly been attributed to Goering, in the first place, based on a private conversation (eventually written up) by an individual, sympathetic interlocutor, not while Goering was in power, but while Goering was on trial for war crimes in Nuremburg and in prison there after the war, said, in context, supposedly by way of a rationalization of his alleged lack of direct responsibility for the crimes of which he and the rest were accused. It was not said in his strutting role as second in command to Hitler, as Minister of anything, but as a war crimes prisoner. In the original form dug up by Debbie (as opposed to the original item sent), at least the quote's attribution has Goeing correctly identified and not called the "Minister of Propaganda," simply. Perhaps, because that seems to "make sense" and, strengthens the irony a bit. And besides...what's the difference?

Since we have the link to the story of the quote's origin, my only other concern here is that it is somehow trivializing to allow to go unchallenged, as well, naming something like this an "urban legend" — as does the Snopes.com web page. That term has been distorted far beyond its reasonable use, over and over. The popular widespread misuse of the term by reference librarians in the US (urban and otherwise) is highly dubious. It is not a "legend," it is not "urban." In the form we received it on the librarian

lists, is an error (and not a trivial one), and passing it on contributes to ignorance, confusion, the acceptance of collective mental lassitude and the erosion of historical memory. Darkly, I consider it a manifestation of the American "Whatever!" syndrome, where if it is "in the ballpark" it is good enough, even if the ballpark is in the wrong city, at the wrong time, with different teams playing.

What's the big deal? How can we be trusted to authoritatively expose the lies of the US government about what's going on, say, in Iraq, when, in the course of our own enthusiasm for signs of opposition, we are not concerned with an obvious historical error in a supposedly clever historical analogy. To my mind, even among librarians, intellectual vigilance and scrupulousness is an important element of developing popular confidence in the anti-war position as something other than soft-headed and deluded, as it is painted often by its opponents. I would be glad to think that I wasn't the first or only one to express concern over this matter.

VI. From: Frederick W Stoss

Mark (and others),

You make a very good observation about the context of this as an Urban Legend. When I first saw the "hit" on the Snopes.com page, I almost immediately assumed the quote was false, as I have seen *extremely* few "True" stories on this or other similar attempters-at-dispelling-the-big-lies-we're-led-to-believe-are-true. I would therefore assume some larger volumes to eventually appear in the future as the lies of the administrations of recent decades will (eventually) be laid bare for all to see and analyze (e.g., the Viet Cong sunk our boats, guns-for-oil was fun, I did not have sex with that woman). It is another quirk of the times that there are those in Europe making the analogy between the current Iraq-thing with events in Europe prior to the start of WW II, except Bush is the analog to Hitler.

VII. From: Mark Rosenzweig
Subject: Re: Quote sent around the High School List

No blame is intended. Here are my three points, the last re: "urban legends" is the only one, which, I would think, is controversial and possibly more broadly interesting.

1. The statement, if indeed it was made by Goering in those words, or made at all, is only known to us by its appearing as a reconstruction by a single witness speaking with H.G. in unusual circumstances (a prison cell conversation) and written down as a "quote" much later.

1.1 It is, therefore, unsubstantiated, and, while it has, with interpretation, the earmarks of a rationalization of Goering's in prison, it can hardly be used with authority to represent a direct statement of the views of Goering in his own words as might a letter, or a public statement, or a stenographic record, or a private diary, or a public speech, or a press interview, or a wire recording or a sound film.

1.2 Putting it back in this context is not merely a pedantic nicety, but reveals that if such a statement were made directly by Goering in these or other words, it would have most likely been to try to show how his view was very much consonant with a commonplace view of high military officers and theorists of his time (and, we might add, thereafter as well). The statement is remarkably un-Goering-esque.

1.3 The original quote, therefore, should be considered "anecdotal," attributed to its actual source, the fellow who actually wrote these words and claimed they were Goering's, and furthermore they should be cited as "attributed to Goering" (i.e. as remarks in conversation with an official observer while in prison) or cited as coming from the book which was published much later in which these remarks are noted.

2. The problem is compounded. Goering did not say these words, if he said them at all, as "Minister of Propaganda", as is asserted in one of the items being circulated and, in fact, his position in the Nazi regime is being confused consequentially with Goebbels, himself a major figure in the Nazi leadership, who was, in fact always its, Minister of Propaganda.

3. What actually puzzles me most is this. How did this quote come to be adjudicated in terms of "urban folklore"? That is not the usual bar before which such a matter is validated. Who claimed it was so-called "urban folklore" in the first place?

3.1 Isn't it implicitly an odd question "Is this true or is it 'urban folklore'?" as if that is an exhaustive distinction? If it is not refuted as urban folklore by Snopes.com would it likely be true? The truth of a proposition "This is a quote of Herman Goering" ought not be decisively determined in

a framework of “urban folklore, true” versus “urban folklore, false.”

3.2 I know that it is a widely held view among US reference librarians that any story which is spread about which is not true, whether it is about a computer virus or a concentration camp, can be called “urban folklore.” I think that is a complete distortion of the original meaning of the term, which, if it had any distinct usefulness and clear meaning, is now transmuted through its misuse into something entirely different.

3.3 “Check Snopes.” The usefulness of Snopes.com on the web may in fact itself be the ultimate “urban legend” and it is unfortunate from a social science point of view that the character of legends is being confused with lies and errors and misconceptions and misquotations. This is not only not useful, it is intellectually and culturally destructive.

VIII. From: John Buschman
Subject: Quote and getting Goeringed

I think Mark’s points are well taken, and I would like to supplement them with two things. First, Neil Postman has long argued that television (and by extension, I would argue that this applies almost equally to the web) is most dangerous not when it entertains, but when it pretends to educate. The Snopes.com site was most useful in ferreting out my mistake on the National Public Radio hoax (“On NPR’s Morning Edition last week, Nina Totenberg said that if the Supreme Court supports Congress, it is in effect the end of the National Public Radio {NPR}, NEA & the Public Broadcasting System {PBS}. PBS, NPR and the arts are facing major cutbacks in funding...” — and my willingness to believe the story. (Debbie Richards wrote that “This is a very old urban legend from 1998. You can read about it at <http://www.snopes.com> Urban Legends Reference Pages.”) Amusing? Yes. Was my being corrected by Snopes.com mildly informative and useful? Sort of. Mark’s points about the real nature of the Goering “quote,” its dubious non-debunking on the web, its mistaken attribution of the title of Goering (if indeed it is a quote), and its context as a “real” fact within the genre of urban legends are all correct, and make Postman thesis very clearly and point by point. Librarianship did not become debased by radio, television, or film — and we should not allow the web to do so either (and yes, those media are the correct grouping in which to lump the web). I’ve long argued that, as a profession, we are mysteriously naive and willing to put an incredible amount of faith in what is actually a rather fragile and evolving and expensive technical system. I’ve long argued that, if we really

want to make that technology useful, we should evaluate it as critically as we have expensive print resources and the balance of collections. On the whole, across the profession, we don’t.

Second, I hear from reference librarians every day (and I experience it myself): library users and students simply turn away from any question that requires a bit of thought, effort, research, and thinking. Literally, if they can’t find it on the web, then it is a question not worth investigating. Our little Goering foray and the real situation and history behind it are highly instructive. Without real library values, our Goering quoted would have been “verified” as “fact” by Snopes.com. And that would have been that. Standing on form and defending the web in the face of what Mark laid out is, I hate to say it, anti-intellectual. If we are to have any real role that is worth the while (and yes, actually progressive), we may have to go back to something like the old scolding role we’ve run away from. Yes, we just might not be able to be so hip and cool *and* be progressive: knowing real things takes a bit more work and thought than surfing the web, and if we don’t actually say that and reinforce it in our libraries, we aid and abet shallow postmodern media/advertising culture — and cut more away from what is left of democracy. Thanks to Mark for pointing out that the actual circumstances of the Goering quote — however inconvenient — are still important.

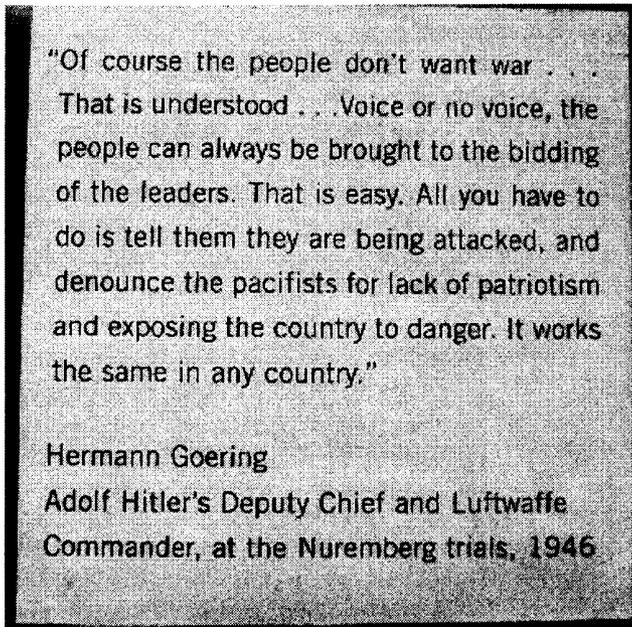
IX. From: Fiona Bradley
Subject: Re: Quote and getting Goeringed

John (and others),

One of the problems with the net is the lack of tools to evaluate what is found there. There’s only a very small body of literature devoted to evaluation based on author, date, etc., etc. While I love the Internet because anyone can be on it, if only there was some way of making everyone put in the date when they write a page at the very least. But there’s no stopping a bull that has escaped the gates, and after-the-fact measures like XML are not going to change the way people do their websites.

Some writers have studied the way people use the Internet and found that people use a completely different information seeking behaviour than they would use if they were looking up a book. The question is of course, why this is so. I wonder if there was a similar change in searching strategy between when people used card catalogues and OPACs. You know what I

think one of the problems is? When using a card catalogue you really had to think about what terms you were going to use. Now with OPACs and search engines, you're bound to turn up something on a search no matter what word you use. And once again we march into the land of controlled indexing and the debate over whether terms should be derived from set lists (like LCSH) or from the item itself. So maybe someone should devise a search engine that takes the keywords on webpages and categorises them according to standard subjects (with greater flexibility than the current subject headings allow of course) to force a more structured searching approach?



"Of course the people don't want war . . . That is understood . . . Voice or no voice, the people can always be brought to the bidding of the leaders. That is easy. All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked, and denounce the pacifists for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger. It works the same in any country."

Hermann Goering
Adolf Hitler's Deputy Chief and Luftwaffe
Commander, at the Nuremberg trials, 1946

The silent agitator-like sticker reproduced above was found on a lamppost on Broadway and 114th Street in New York City on October 18 or 19, 2002. The quote attributed to Hermann Goering is actually from Gustave Gilbert, a psychologist who visited Goering in his prison cell during the Nuremberg Trials. After his visits, Gilbert would record these conversations, which he eventually published in *Nuremberg Diary* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Co., 1947). Mark Rosenzweig provides the following as a correct citation for the quote:

Gilbert, G.M., *The Nuremberg Diary*, New York: Signet, c1961, p. 255-56.

POETRY MATTERS! On the Media Persecution of Amiri Baraka

Poetry is dangerous. What makes Amiri Baraka's "Somebody Blew Up America" so provocative is that the poem traces a trajectory of human atrocity and culpability without accepting the premise (so widely held in the U.S. after September 11, 2001) that the lives of certain sets of victims are intrinsically more valuable than others. In doing so, Baraka interrogates the arrogant, naive, and dangerously reductive rationales frequently used to explain and promote the perpetual U.S. War Against Terrorism.

Little wonder, then, that Baraka was singled out for hysterical censure last fall by the corporate news media's in-house bullies and ideological pitbulls, the vast majority of whom rarely discuss poetry on their evening cable television news programs.

Particularly disturbing about the Baraka affair was the conspicuous silence of those who are normally quick to defend poetry and intellectual freedom. The cancellation of the White House's "Poetry and the American Voice" symposium in February – First Lady Laura Bush's pre-emptive attack on dissent – triggered far-flung antiwar poetry actions that attracted some news coverage. Why, then, was there almost never a mention of those who defended Baraka for the same reasons of civil liberty that they backed poets writing and reading against the invasion of Iraq? Neither the Pen Club nor the National Writers' Union, for example, uttered a word in Baraka's support.

The "Poetry Matters!" declaration (reprinted here) originally appeared on the Surrealist Movement's website (and was posted on such websites as the Library Juice free speech forum, the Black World and Autonomedia websites, and the anti-racist/anti-fascist One People's Project. Alas, internet searches show that bigoted, reactionary screeds charging Baraka with "hate speech" are far more numerous.

In the new millennium, free speech for poets is more precarious than ever.

introduction for PL by Don LaCoss

POETRY MATTERS!

Poetry Festivals don't usually trigger hate campaigns or Red Scares, but this year's Geraldine Dodge Poetry Festival at Waterloo Village in Stanhope, New Jersey, proved to be different. There, on September 19th, Amiri Baraka read his poem "Somebody Blew Up America." The applause was thunder-