

I Will Send a Barrel of This Wonderful Whiskey to Every General in the Army

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Abraham Lincoln? Charles G. Halpine? Anonymous? Apocryphal?



Dear Quote Investigator: There is a brilliant anecdote about President Lincoln defending General Grant from an accusation of drunkenness. I have read conflicting statements about whether this anecdote is accurate. Perhaps you could examine this tale for the next Presidents' Day holiday?

Quote Investigator: The story of Abraham Lincoln's humorous response to criticisms of General Ulysses S. Grant's imbibing is famous. The earliest instance **QI** has found appeared in the New York Herald on September 18, 1863: ¹

After the failure of his first experimental explorations around Vicksburg, a committee of abolition war managers waited upon the President and demanded the General's removal, on the false charge that he was a whiskey drinker, and little better than a common drunkard. "Ah!" exclaimed Honest Old Abe, "you surprise me, gentlemen. But can you tell me where he gets his whiskey?" "We cannot, Mr. President. But why do you desire to know?" "Because, if I can only find out, I will send a barrel of this wonderful whiskey to every general in the army."

On October 30, 1863 a compact version of the story was printed in the New York Times: ²

When some one charged Gen. Grant, in the President's hearing, with drinking too much liquor, Mr. Lincoln, recalling Gen. Grant's successes, said that if he could find out what brand of whisky Grant drank, he would send a barrel of it to all the other commanders.

The text above was reprinted in other newspapers such as the Daily Constitutional Union of Washington D.C.³ and the Cleveland Plain Dealer of Cleveland, Ohio.⁴

This popular story has been disseminated in numerous books and periodicals from 1863 to the present day. But testimony regarding its originality and veracity is complex and contradictory. Some individuals have claimed that they heard the joke directly from Lincoln, and other individuals have stated that Lincoln denied telling the joke. In addition, critics have questioned the novelty of the jest.

Here are additional selected citations in chronological order.

Two humorous anecdotes have been proposed as precursors to the tale about Grant's whiskey. In 1668 the prominent poet and playwright John Dryden presented his comedy "An Evening's Love". Detractors complained to King Charles II that the work was plagiarized, but the monarch was unmoved by the criticism. Indeed, he only desired that those who accused Dryden of theft would steal works similar to Dryden's plays. Dryden himself presented this tale in the preface to the play when it was published several years later.^{5 6}

The second precursor anecdote centers on King George II of Great Britain who was planning to send General James Wolfe on a military expedition to Canada in the 1750s. An advisor to the King told him that Wolfe was a poor selection for such an important assignment because he was a madman. The monarch was unconcerned by this criticism. In fact, he desired that Wolfe transmit his supposed madness by biting some of the other generals.

The three anecdotes do have significant parallels. They concern a powerful authority figure and a favored individual who is performing a service for the authority. Critics point to a flaw in the favored person, and the authority then delivers a retort in which the supposed fault is comically flipped and depicted as a virtue.

Abraham Lincoln was familiar with the story about King George II and Wolfe according to a memoir of John A. Dahlgren who was the commandant of the Washington Navy Yard during the Civil War and who spoke with Lincoln on multiple occasions. An entry dated May 24, 1862 in the memoir states:^{7 8}

The President remarked yesterday that Shields was said to be crazy,

which put him in mind that George III had been told the same of one of his generals, viz., that he was mad. The king replied he wished he would bite his other generals.

Starting in September 1863 the tale of Lincoln and Grant's brand of whiskey was reported in newspapers in New York, Washington, D.C., Ohio and elsewhere. Here is a version published in 1864 in a book about General Grant: ⁹

Several gentlemen were near the President at the time he received the news of Grant's success some of whom had been complaining of the rumors of his habit of using intoxicating drinks to excess.

"So I understand Grant drinks whiskey to excess?" interrogatively remarked the President.

"Yes," was the reply.

"What whiskey does he drink?" inquired Mr. Lincoln.

"What whiskey?" doubtfully queried his hearers.

"Yes. Is it Bourbon or Monongahela?"

"Why do you ask, Mr. President?"

"Because, if it makes him win victories like this at Vicksburg, I will send a demijohn of the same kind to every general in the army."

His visitors saw the point, although at their own cost.

Also in 1864 a fictional portrayal of Lincoln was published in "The Life and Adventures, Songs, Services, and Speeches of Private Miles O'Reilly". The book was written by the journalist Charles G. Halpine, and it featured the invented comical exploits of Miles O'Reilly. In one episode, Lincoln hosted a banquet and offered his guests a choice of beverages that included a special brand of whiskey. The guest General Halleck was Chief of Staff of the Army. This scene reflected a humorous variant of the anecdote: ¹⁰

If you prefer whiskey, I have some that can be relied upon—a present from Mr. Leslie Combs. I call it 'Grant's Particular,' and Halleck is about issuing an order that all his generals shall drink it."

"With the news we have to-day from Chattanooga," said Gen. Halleck, gaily, "I think the country will endorse the order to which Mr. Lincoln has referred.

In 1870 a writer in the New York Times presented the tale of King Charles II and Dryden together with the story of Lincoln and Grant. He questioned the originality of the remark attributed to Lincoln, but he did not express skepticism about the attribution itself: ¹¹

It is rather dismal to think that there is after all nothing new under the

sun, but it is greatly to be feared that it is true. When President Lincoln was informed by an interviewer of the period that one of his Generals took too much whisky, he archly expressed the wish that somebody would send a barrel of the same sort to divers other of his commanders. We all hoped that the witticism was original. But, alas, Charles II had said something very like it before. Dryden tells us, apropos of his indecent play of "Evening Love," the plot of which he took from Calderon, that some one accused him to the King of plagiarism, but that the monarch "only desired that they who accused me of theft would always steal him plays like mine."

In 1872 a book about Ulysses S. Grant presented the whiskey story, but the tale was marked with a footnote that contained a description of the Wolfe anecdote. Clearly, the author wanted to notify readers of the parallels, but the book included no explicit criticism or skepticism on this topic: ¹²

It was about this time that an ardent temperance man, in speaking of Gen. Grant's successes to President Lincoln, repeated some of the stories in regard to Gen. Grant's habits; adding.—

"It's a pity he is such a drunkard."

Mr. Lincoln, who had never countenanced these attacks, asked,—

"Do you know what kind of liquor he drinks?"

"No, sir," was the answer; "and I don't know that that is essential."

*"The reason I asked," said Mr. Lincoln with a twinkle in his eye, but without moving a muscle of his face, "was, that, if I knew, I should like to send some of the same liquor to some of our other generals." **

** Some one was lamenting to old George II that the war-office had placed confidence in such a red-haired, daring, hot-brained young officer as Gen. Wolfe, and sent him to Quebec; adding, "Wolfe is mad, your Majesty."—"Is he?" said the king. "I wish he would bite some of my other generals."*

In 1877 the New York Tribune printed an article from a correspondent in Great Britain who described the two tales of Grant's whiskey and Wolfe's madness. An Englishman claimed that King George's retort was superior: ¹³

No story is quite new. Somebody was narrating the other day the well-known anecdote—well-known in America—of President Lincoln and Gen. Grant, apropos of the alleged whiskey-drinking of the latter; how President Lincoln asked what brand Gen. Grant drank, and expressed his desire to send a barrel of the same to his other Generals. An Englishman who heard the story declared that George III had said a better thing of the

same kind. When Wolfe was sent to Canada, his enemies said he was mad. "Then I wish," retorted the obstinate old monarch, "I wish he would bite some of my other Generals."

In 1882 "The Military Telegraph During the Civil War in the United States" by William R. Plum was published. This volume contained the earliest claim known to **QI** that Lincoln did not say the words attributed to him. The denial was sourced to Thomas T. Eckert, a Major specializing in military telegraph operations who eventually became a General: ¹⁴

Major Eckert asked Mr. Lincoln if the story of his interview with the complainant against General Grant was true. The story was: a growler called on the President and complained bitterly of General Grant's drunkenness. The President inquired very solicitously, if the man could tell him where the General got his liquor. The man really was very sorry but couldn't say where he did get it. The President replied that he would like very much to find out so he could get a quantity of it and send a barrel to all his Major Generals. Mr. Lincoln said he had heard the story before and it would be very good if he had said it, but he did not, and he supposed it was charged to him to give it currency. He then said the original of this story was in King George's time. Bitter complaints were made to the King against his General Wolfe in which it was charged that he was mad. "Well," said the King, "I wish he would bite some of my other Generals then."

In the May 1889 issue of "Lippincott's Monthly Magazine" the author William S. Walsh claimed that the whiskey anecdote was actually invented by Charles G. Halpine. ¹⁵

In the October 1889 issue of "The Illustrated American" Walsh repeated his claim, and this time he gave a date of 1864 for the setting of the fictional anecdote. Unfortunately for Walsh's thesis the whiskey anecdote was already in circulation by September 1863. ¹⁶

Recall that a citation in 1864 was discussed previously in this article. The 1864 cite presented a variant of the whiskey anecdote that had been created by Charles G. Halpine.

Finally, in the 1892 book "Handy-Book of Literary Curiosities" the author Walsh presented an extended discussion about the anecdote, and he shifted the setting of the tale to 1862:

¹⁷

There is a popular tradition to the effect that Lincoln, when informed that General Grant drank too much whiskey, retorted, "Tell me what brand it is, and I'll send a barrel to each of the other generals." But, in truth, these words were a mere fabrication: they were put into Lincoln's mouth by

Miles O'Reilly (Charles G. Halpine) in a burlesque report of an imaginary banquet supposed to have been held at Delmonico's in the year 1862. They ran through the press as Lincoln's ipsissima verba, and to this day it is hard to make people father them on the real author.

The sentiment was anticipated by Bishop Wilberforce. At a railway-station the latter met a clergyman who was taking charge of a very difficult rural deanery. "Mr. T—," cried the bishop, in loud tones, "I am very glad to have an opportunity of speaking to you. I hear great things of your zeal and success as rural dean." "Well, my lord," was the reply, "I believe some people are under the impression that I am somewhat mad." "All I can say, then, is I wish you would bite all my rural deans." Exactly the same story has been fathered on George II, who expressing admiration of Wolfe, was informed that the general was mad. "Is he so?" cried his majesty; "then I wish he would bite some of my other generals." And again, when Mr. Tazewell, of Virginia, was told that John Randolph was mad, he replied, "I wish he would bite me!"

In 1895 "Abraham Lincoln: Tributes from His Associates" was published, and it contained a section by Alfred B Chandler who was President of the Postal Telegraph Company. Chandler included a discussion of the whiskey anecdote, but the text closely matched that given in the 1882 citation above which presented the testimony given by Major Thomas T. Eckert.¹⁸

In 1907 John Eaton who was a teacher and superintendent of the freedmen for Grant released a memoir that discussed the whiskey anecdote. Eaton claimed that Lincoln told him the tale in July 1863. This date was before the earliest known newspaper reports:¹⁹

At another time he interrupted his inquiries to ask if Grant had told me of the raid made upon him — the President — in Washington. I replied that I had not heard of it.

"Well," said Mr. Lincoln, "you know a raid in Washington is different from what you military men mean by a raid. With you it is an attack by the enemy,—the capture of soldiers and supplies; with us it is an attack by our friends in Congress seeking to influence a change in policy. A company of Congressmen came to me to protest that Grant ought not to be retained as a commander of American citizens. I asked what was the trouble. They said he was not fit to command such men. I asked why, and they said he sometimes drank too much and was unfit for such a position. I then began to ask them if they knew what he drank, what brand of

whiskey he used, telling them most seriously that I wished they would find out. They conferred with each other and concluded they could not tell what brand he used. I urged them to ascertain and let me know, for if it made fighting generals like Grant, I should like to get some of it for distribution."

In conclusion, **QI** believes that the available evidence does not allow a solid resolution. Lincoln apparently was familiar with the Wolfe anecdote, and it is plausible that a delegation visited the President and requested the dismissal of General Grant for excessive drinking. Lincoln's knowledge of the Wolfe story would have made it easier for him to construct the clever riposte about sending whiskey to his other generals. In addition, some military men claim that they heard Lincoln tell the anecdote. This combination makes the tale of Lincoln's clever remark credible.

On the other hand, there is no direct contemporaneous testimony of Lincoln delivering the anecdote. Newspaper accounts of the tale in the 1860s were all anonymously sourced. Supporting testimony emerged in the 1880s, but opposing testimony also emerged in the 1880s. It is plausible that some journalist or author used the Wolfe tale as a template to construct a new humorous anecdote about Lincoln and Grant. The tale may have been sent to newspapers that were eager to print stories about Lincoln's cleverness. So perhaps the anecdote was a fraud. Apologies to readers who want a decisive answer.

Notes:

1. 1863 September 18, New York Herald, The President's Habeas Corpus Proclamation and the Act of Congress on the Subject, Quote Page 6, Column 4 and 5, New York. (GenealogyBank) ↗
2. 1863 October 30, New York Times, Blair's Bitters, Quote Page 4, Column 4, New York. (ProQuest) ↗
3. 1863 November 2, Daily Constitutional Union (Evening Union), Blair's Bitters, Quote Page 1, Column 5, Washington D. C. (GenealogyBank) ↗
4. 1863 November 2, Cleveland Plain Dealer, Ultra Temperance, Quote Page 2, Column 3, Cleveland, Ohio. (GenealogyBank) ↗
5. 1725, The Dramatick Works of John Dryden, Esq, Volume 2, "Evening's Love: or, The Mock Astrologer", Preface, (Unnumbered Page), Printed for Jacob Tonsor, London. (Google Books full view) (The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography states that a printed edition of the play was available by 1671. The joke appears in the preface of this 1725 edition, but QI does not know the earliest date of appearance of the joke) link ↗
6. 2009, Online Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Entry on "John Dryden (1631–1700)" by Paul Hammond, Oxford University Press, (2004; online edition Oct 2009) (Accessed February 17, 2012) (This reference was used to check dates and

the name of the play) [link](#) ↩

7. 1882, Memoir of John A. Dahlgren: Rear-admiral United States Navy by Madeleine Vinton Dahlgren, Entry dated May 24, 1862, Quote Page 370, James R. Osgood and Company, Boston, Massachusetts. (Google Books full view) [link](#) ↩
8. 1996, Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln, Compiled and edited by Don E. Fehrenbacher and Virginia Fehrenbacher, Section: John A. Dahlgren (1809-1870), Quote Page 128, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California. (Verified on paper) [link](#) ↩
9. 1864, General Grant and His Campaigns by Julian K. Larke, Quote Page 312, Published by J. C. Derby & N. C. Miller, New York. (Google Books full view) [link](#) ↩
10. 1864, The Life and Adventures, Songs, Services, and Speeches of Private Miles O'Reilly by Miles O'Reilly (Pseudonym of Charles Graham Halpine), Quote Page 168, Carleton Publisher, New York. (Google Books full view) [link](#) ↩
11. 1870 February 28, New York Times, Interviewers, Quote Page 4, Column 5, New York. (ProQuest) [link](#) ↩
12. 1872, Life and Public Services of Ulysses S. Grant: From His Birth to the Present Time by Charles A. Phelps (Charles Abner Phelps), Quote Page 168, Lee and Shepard Publishers, Boston, Massachusetts. (Google Books full view) [link](#) ↩
13. 1877 July 6, New-York Tribune (New York Herald-Tribune), British Topics: Home and Foreign Affairs by G.W.S., Quote Page 1, Column 5, New York. (GenealogyBank) (The original text says "George III" though "George II" is correct) [link](#) ↩
14. 1882, The Military Telegraph During the Civil War in the United States by William R. Plum (William Rattle Plum), Volume 2, Chapter 18, Quote Page 332, Published by Jansen, McClurg & Company, Chicago, Illinois. (Google Books full view) [link](#) ↩
15. 1889 May, Lippincott's Monthly Magazine, The Incredibility of History by W. S. Walsh, Start Page 734, Quote Page 739, J. B. Lippincott Company, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. (Google Books full view) [link](#) ↩
16. 1890 October 4, The Illustrated American, Edited by Maurice M. Minton, Books and Literature by William S. Walsh, Start Page 25, Quote Page 28, Column 1, George Kirchner & Company, New York. (Google Books full view) [link](#) ↩
17. 1892 Handy-Book of Literary Curiosities by William S. Walsh, Quote Page 428, J. B. Lippincott Company, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. (Google Books full view) [link](#) ↩
18. 1895, Abraham Lincoln: Tributes from His Associates, Reminiscences of Soldiers, Statesmen and Citizens, Section: As Lincoln Appeared in the War Department by Alfred B Chandler (President and General Manager, Postal Telegraph Company), Start Page 214, Quote Page 219 and 220, Thomas Y. Crowell & Company, Boston, Massachusetts. (Google Books full view) [link](#) ↩
19. 1907, Grant, Lincoln, and the Freedmen: Reminiscences of the Civil War by John Eaton and Ethel Osgood Mason, (Time-frame of interaction with Lincoln: July 1863), Quote Page 90, Longmans, Green, and Co., New York. (Google Books full view) [link](#) ↩
20. 1996, Recollected Words of Abraham Lincoln, Compiled and edited by Don E.

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