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The Truth About Tytler

by Loren Collins

A democracy cannot exist as a permanent form of government. It can only exist until the voters discover that they can vote themselves largesse from the public treasury. From that moment on, the majority always votes for the candidates promising the most benefits from the public treasury with the result that a democracy always collapses over loose fiscal policy, always followed by a dictatorship. The average age of the world's greatest civilizations has been 200 years.

Great nations rise and fall. The people go from bondage to spiritual truth, to great courage, from courage to liberty, from liberty to abundance, from abundance to selfishness, from selfishness to complacency, from complacency to apathy, from apathy to dependence, from dependence back again to bondage.

Who penned the above words? If one were to put one's faith in the reliability of the internet, the obvious answer would be Alexander Tytler. Or Alexander Tyler. Or Arnold Toynbee. Or Lord Thomas Macaulay. Or...

The truth is that despite their frequent use, the author(s) of the above quotes are unknown. With regard to the first quoted paragraph, the Library of Congress' Respectfully Quoted writes, "Attributed to ALEXANDER FRASER TYTLER, LORD WOODHOUSELEE. Unverified." The quote, however, appears in no published work of Tytler's. And with regard to the second, the same book says "Author unknown. Attributed to Benjamin Disraeli. Unverified."

Yet despite this factual uncertainty, these quotes are not only frequently attributed to Tytler, but just as frequently employ his antiquity as a means of enhancing their reliability. I myself was misled for years before being informed of their "unverified" status.

Thus, I attempted to trace the origins of these quotes, as best I could. For the first quote, ending in "dictatorship," I have chosen to adopt the title "Why Democracies Fail," or WDF for short, which is perhaps the most common title given the quote. The last sentence of the first paragraph does not appear alongside the earliest instances of the quote. For the second quote, I have chosen to use the title "Fatal Sequence," or FS, which was the name given to it in a 1989 newspaper.

The earliest usage I have discovered of "Why Democracies Fail" is from May 3, 1959. It appeared on page 35 of The New York Times Book Review, in the "Queries and Answers" column. The relevant portion of the column, which was first among that day's queries, read as follows:

F.R.K. wants to know where the following paragraph was taken from: "A Democracy cannot exist as a permanent form of government. It can only last until the citizens discover they can vote themselves largesse out of the public treasury. After that, the majority always votes for the candidate promising the most benefits from the public treasury with the result that the Democracy always collapses over a loose fiscal policy, to be followed by a dictatorship, and then

Democracy always collapses over a loose fiscal policy, to be followed by a dictatorship, and then a monarchy."

One must imagine, then, that the quote predated May 1959, as it is doubtful that F.R.K. was inquiring of a quote of his own creation. However, no answer to this query was provided in the columns of the following weeks, although New York Times readers appeared quite able in citing sources for obscure poems and quotes. Professor Tytler's name was nowhere to be found.

Tytler's name is again absent when the quote was used in a Sep. 27, 1961 speech by John E. Swearingen. Rather, Swearingen attributed the quote to a much more famous historian:

In a quotation attributed to the French author, Alexis de Tocqueville, the dangers of loose fiscal policy were stated as follows: "A democracy cannot exist as a permanent form of government. It can only exist until the voters discover they can vote themselves largess out of the public treasury."

The first instance I have found that credits Professor Tytler came almost 3 years later. On March 5, 1964, a taped speech of Ronald Reagan was played for the crowd at a Barry Goldwater rally in Manchester, New Hampshire. The quote was printed on the first page of the next day's Manchester Union Leader, under the article title "Roar Approval of Barry." The article states that Reagan attributed the quote to "Fraser Tytler." Reagan used the quote again on June 8, 1965, at a testimonial dinner for Rep. John M. Ashbrook in Granville, Ohio:

"Perhaps what he had in mind was what Prof. Alexander Frazer Tytler has written, that a democracy cannot exist as a permanent form of government. It can only exist until the voters discover they can vote themselves largesse out of the public treasury. From that moment on the majority, he said, always vote for the candidate promising the most benefits from the treasury with the result that democracy always collapses over a loose fiscal policy, always to be followed by a dictatorship. Unfortunately, we can't argue with the professor because when he wrote that we were still colonials of Great Britain and he was explaining what had destroyed the Athenian Republic more than 2000 years before."

In addition to providing perhaps the earliest connection to Tytler, Reagan's words also offer the earliest reference to a particular inspiration for the quote, namely the "Athenian Republic" allegory which today is almost always attached to the quote. In a letter to the editor in the April 10, 1987 Seattle Times, where the writer said the quote was from Alexander Fraser Tytler's book "The Decline and Fall of the Athenian Republic," the earliest mention I have discovered of a source material for the quote. Today this book is the most common cited source for the quote, the title producing some 250 results in Google. Unfortunately, according to both WorldCat and the Library of Congress' catalog, Tytler never wrote a book by that title. The only book with a similar title is The Decline and Fall of Athenian Democracy, printing a lecture given by E.M. Blaiklock on Sep. 21, 1948.

Among the quote's appearances over the next few decades, one of note was in *American Notes & Queries* in Nov. 1964. "Confirmation and exact wording of the following quotation wanted," wrote S.B. Jeffreys, following the quote with "Am I correct in thinking that this was said in 1790 by Prof. Alexander Tytler, Professor of General History, University of Edinburgh?" No confirmation or exact wording was ever provided.

Perhaps the quote's current notoriety can be traced to its usage by P.J. O'Rourke in his 1991 book, Parliament of Whores (a book I otherwise highly recommend). Therein, O'Rourke wrote:

The eighteenth-century Scottish historian Alexander Tytler said: A democracy cannot exist as a

permanent form of government. It can only exist until a majority of voters discover that they can vote themselves largess out of the public treasury.

In a Usenet post by Tom Buckley on September 6, 1983, the passage was quoted and attributed to "Professor Alexander Fraser Tytler," making that perhaps the earliest posting of the quote on the Internet. Today, a Google search for "A democracy cannot exist as a permanent form of government" produces over 14,000 results. But a search for "followed by a dictatorship and then a monarchy," as appeared in the 1959 New York Times, produces only about a dozen results, most of which are either quoting this article or one other author.

Frequently, "Why Democracies Fail" is quoted alongside "Fatal Sequence," often as a single passage attributed to Professor Tytler/Tyler. But all indications point to the two having separate origins. Firstly, unlike "WDF," "Fatal Sequence" is attributed to a wide variety of authors. In addition to Tytler/Tyler or Anonymous, I have seen the quote credited to Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881), Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975), Ezra Taft Benson (1899-1994), Davis Paschall (1911-2001), Bernard Weatherill (1920-present) and Robert Muntzel (?-?). Secondly, while I have tracked both quotes back to the 1950s, the first instance I have found of them used together was in 1979.

The earliest instance of "Fatal Sequence" I have found was in an October 27, 1950 speech delivered by Eugene E. Wilson at a special United Nations Convocation at Hillyer College in Hartford, Connecticut. In that speech, Wilson had this to say:

The pessimistic viewpoint is set forth in the following anonymous statement:

From Bondage to Spiritual Faith From Spiritual Faith to Great Courage From Courage to Liberty From Liberty to Abundance From Abundance to Selfishness From Selfishness to Complacency From Complacency to Apathy From Apathy to Dependency From Dependency to Bondage

If the above is taken as a statement of natural law, then we are doomed. However, history records that early civilizations have often responded to a challenge and then gone on to a higher plane. In other words the expression is cyclic in character with different degrees of amplitude and different frequencies. My faith in the underlying character of the American people persuade me that, despite periods of weak leadership, we will check the downswing before it is too late.

Obviously, Wilson did not coin this phrase, nor did he care for its conclusion, so it must predate him by some period of time. That Wilson attributed it to an anonymous author does not aid in determining how old the quote might have been at that time, but it would tend to suggest that its creator was not particularly notable.

The earliest attribution I have found for this cycle is from Senator Strom Thurmond, in a speech to the Aberdeen Chamber of Commerce in Aberdeen, South Dakota, on January 9 1965.

I am reminded that the studies of R. G. LeTourneau show that the average age of the world's great governments has been 200 years, and that the general steps through which they progressed and regressed were: from bondage to spiritual faith; from spiritual faith to great courage; from abundance [sp] to liberty; from liberty to abundance; from abundance to complacency; from complacency to apathy; from apathy to dependency; and from dependency back again to bondage.

Thurmond not only provides LeTourneau's name, but also makes the earliest use of the "average age" sentence which has since become a common partner to both WDF and FS. On November 9, 1967, J.K. Stern gave a speech that used the "average age" line again in conjunction with FS, but he attributed the combined quote to Arnold Toynbee.

Also in November 1967, *American Notes & Queries* printed the cycle quote as a query, with the curious submitter saying it was attributed to Robert Muntzel, but a source was sought. No source was ever provided. Then in April 1979, the queries column of *American Notes & Queries* included the earliest combined form of all these quotes (WDF + average age + FS), with the submitting librarian saying that it was attributed to Alexander Fraser Tytler, but they had been unable to verify that. No verification was ever provided in following issues.

In his 1983 book *It's Your Choice*, Warren T. Hackett quoted Arnold Toynbee as saying the following:

"The release of initiative and enterprise made possible by self-government ultimately generates disintegrating forces from within. Again and again, after freedom brings opportunity and some degree of plenty, the competent become selfish, luxury-loving and complacent; the incompetent and unfortunate grow envious and covetous; and all three groups turn aside from the hard road of freedom to worship the golden calf of economic security. The historical cycle seems to be: from bondage to spiritual faith; from spiritual faith to courage; from courage to liberty; from liberty to abundance; from abundance to selfishness; from selfishness to apathy; from apathy to dependency; and from dependency back to bondage once more."

Interestingly, Hackett apparently said that Toynbee was elaborating on the statement of "Alexander Tyler." This is the earliest instance I have found of that misspelling, which has since become so commonplace that I suspect attributions to "Tyler" now outnumber those to "Tytler." Furthermore, this is word-for-word the same as the language used by Henning W. Prentis in a speech on June 5, 1951, who made no reference to Tytler or Toynbee.

On December 28, 1987, a letter in the Wall Street Journal quoted the whole passage, and said it was from a lecture by "a history professor by the name of Sir Alex Fraser Tytler (1714-1778)." Thus a source material is finally provided, but as Tytler's actual birth and death years were 1747 and 1813, the reliability of the letter-writer may be reasonably doubted.

Today, a Google search for "from bondage to spiritual faith" produces over 12,000 results. Well over half of those appear in conjunction with the "Why Democracies Fail" quote.

Who, then, is the author of these quotes? Even after all of my research, I am afraid I still cannot say for certain. But perhaps some conclusions may be drawn.

Each quote can be traced back at least as far as the 1950s, but only with anonymous attribution. Specific attributions, such as those to Tytler, only came later. And, of course, the quotes cannot be found to have appeared together until the 1970s. Each quote has been the subject of authorship inquiries in *The New York Times* and *American Notes & Queries*, both of which are notoriously good at verifying authorship of works, but neither of which could provide an author for these quotes.

Some readers may wonder why I chose to quote variations so frequently, and to go into such detail when a shorter examination would do. I had three reasons for this. First, I did a lot of research, and I didn't want to cut too much of my work. Second, I wanted to put any doubts about my thoroughness to rest. And third, through my quoting and detailing, I hoped to illustrate exactly how fluid these quotations have been over the past half century. New words are added, old

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ones disappear, and attributions and contexts change. That's not typical of a quote that has a definitive and reliable source; it's much more common with proverbs.

These facts lead me to suspect that these quotes were probably coined by separate individuals in the first half of the twentieth century. The authors were most likely not famous persons or respected scholars, but rather just private political thinkers who got their words in print, and whose words then happened to strike a chord in others. The passage of time merely encouraged quoters to attach an author's name that strengthened the authority behind the words.

And that is where the vice of misattribution lies. Perhaps the words speak the truth of democratic governments; or perhaps they do not. But either way, attributing the words to a scholar who never spoke them is to lend to them an authority and reliability that they do not deserve. Anonymous quotes, which these almost certainly are, should not be given fictitious attributions merely to lend credence to the messages they impart. To do so is to favor persuasiveness over accuracy, and to sacrifice truth for the sake of image.