

Twain didn't originate this pithy saying, but simply cited it in his autobiography. He credited it to Benjamin Disraeli.²¹⁷

WAGNER QUOTE “Wagner’s music is better than it sounds.”

It was not Twain, but Edgar Wilson (“Bill”) Nye, who first made this remark about Richard Wagner’s music. Twain enjoyed quoting it, but gave full credit to Bill Nye, a humorous writer and lecturer with many admirers in late 19th-century America.²¹⁸

WEATHER QUOTE “Everybody talks about the weather, but nobody does anything about it.”

The famous weather quote first appeared in an editorial in the *Hartford Courant* for August 24, 1897: “A well-known American writer once said that while everyone talked about the weather, nobody seemed to do anything about it.” Charles Dudley Warner, a journalist who collaborated with Mark Twain on *The Gilded Age* (1873), wrote the editorial, and he may have meant Twain when he attributed the remark to a “well-known American writer.” But though Twain gave Warner the credit for it, it has been attributed to Twain himself ever since it first appeared, and in later years to Will Rogers. Twain’s own weather remark went like this: “If you don’t like the weather in New England now, just wait a few minutes.”²¹⁹

❁ Ulyanov, Vladimir Ilyich (See Lenin, Vladimir Ilyitch)

❁ Voltaire [Jean François Arouet] (1694–1778)

DEFEND-TO-THE-DEATH QUOTE “I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.”

This is one of the most famous quotations from Voltaire and one of the most popular quotations among American civil libertarians. But Voltaire never uttered these words; and there is no reason to suppose he ever attempted to fight to the death for Claude Adrien Helvétius, the French philosopher on whose behalf he is supposed to have made his celebrated statement.

The origin of the quotation has been traced to a book published in 1906 entitled *The Friends of Voltaire*, written by S. G. Tallentyre, the pen name of Evelyn Beatrice Hall. According to Evelyn Hall, in 1758 Helvétius published *De l'esprit* (On the Mind), setting forth the idea that selfishness and the passions are the sole mainsprings of human actions and that there are no such things as virtues and vices. Voltaire was not impressed with the book; but civil and ecclesiastical authorities were highly incensed by it. The book was condemned by the Parlement of Paris, attacked by the Pope, censured by the Sorbonne, publicly burned by the hangman, and its privilege of publication revoked. In great distress, Helvétius insisted he had written *De l'esprit* in perfect innocence and hadn't had the slightest idea of the effect it would produce. Parlement finally accepted his *amende*, but deprived him of a stewardship which he held at the time and exiled him for two years to Vore.

"What a fuss about an omelette!" Voltaire exclaimed when he heard about the book-burning. Evelyn Hall's account of the episode concluded: "'I disapprove of what you say, but I defend to the death your right to say it' was his attitude now." She did not say that Voltaire either uttered or wrote the statement; she simply summarized what she thought Voltaire's general attitude was and put it in quotes. Questioned about it in 1935, she explained: "I did not intend to imply that Voltaire used these words verbatim, and should be much surprised if they are found in any of his works."

The defend-to-the-death quotation, though spurious, probably summed up Voltaire's general attitude toward Hel-

vétius accurately enough, and there was no desire on Evelyn Hall's part to mislead anybody.²²⁰

❁ Washington, George (1732–1799)

ANTI-JEWISH QUOTE “They work more effectively against us than the enemy's armies. They are a hundred times more dangerous to our liberties and the great cause we are engaged in. It is much to be lamented that each state, long ago has not hunted them down as pests to society and the greatest enemies we have to the happiness of America—The Jews.”

This quote, popular among American anti-Semites, is a distortion of a statement Washington once made about speculators in currency during the American Revolution. “This tribe of black gentry,” he wrote, “work more effectually against us, than the enemy's arms. They are a hundred times more dangerous to our liberties, and the great cause we are engaged in. It is much to be lamented, that each State, long ere this, has not hunted them down as pests to society, and the greatest enemies we have to the happiness of America.” Washington was, in fact, utterly without religious prejudice. When he visited Newport, Rhode Island, in August 1790, he had a friendly exchange with the Jewish community there in which he declared that Government of the United States “gives to bigotry no sanction” and “to persecution no assistance.”²²¹

BIBLE QUOTE “It is impossible to rightly govern the world without God and the Bible.”

Washington was baptized in the Anglican (later Episcopal) church, served as a vestryman, attended church fairly regularly, and believed that religion was the foundation for morality, but he rarely mentioned the Bible in his letters and public addresses, and never said, publicly or privately, that