

MOTS
May 27, 2023
Quote of the Week

Q: “Rough men stand ready...”

“People sleep peaceably in their beds at night because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf.”

Is this something Churchill said? I see it frequently credited to him. Another version reads: “We sleep soundly in our beds because rough men stand ready in the night to visit violence on those who would do us harm.” — L.K., Dallas

A: Not Churchill, not Orwell

We feel sure Churchill would approve of the sentiment, having argued for a lifetime that liberty and peace are best maintained by preparedness. But we are unable to track this phrase to him through our digital scans of 80 million words by and about him. Though sometimes attributed to Churchill, it is more often assigned to [George Orwell](#). It hasn't been reliably tracked to Orwell either, though he wrote something similar.

Reader Steve Brantley referred us to Orwell's 1945 article, “Notes on Nationalism.” Here Orwell wrote that pacifists cannot accept the statement, “Those who ‘abjure’ violence can do so only because others are committing violence on their behalf.” Nevertheless, Orwell added, the truth of the thing was “grossly obvious.”

Reader Tom Kovatch furthered our search by advising us that the “rough men” quote might be “Orwellian Drift.” As with “[Churchillian Drift](#),” these are words placed in a famous person's mouth to make them more interesting. That led us to [Quote Investigator](#), an outstanding website which tracks quotations and exposes fake attributions.

Churchill to Orwell to Kipling

Quote Investigator offers a page of explanation tracking the Rough Men quote to a 1993 *Washington Times* column by film critic and essayist [Richard Grenier](#): “As George Orwell pointed out, people sleep peacefully in their beds at night only because rough men stand ready to do violence on their behalf.”¹ Of course, Orwell no more than Churchill ever said precisely that.

But Quote Investigator digs deeper, coming up with a parallel sentiment by [Rudyard Kipling](#), in his 1890 poem “Tommy”:

*I went into a public- 'ouse to get a pint o'beer,
The publican 'e up an' sez, “We serve no red-coats here.”
The girls be 'ind the bar they laughed an' giggled fit to die,*

...

***O makin' mock o' uniforms that guard you while you sleep
Is cheaper than them uniforms, an' they're starvation cheap;
An' hustlin' drunken sodgers when they're goin' large a bit
Is five times better business than paradin' in full kit.***²

Orwell, Quote Investigator tells us, referred to that poem in 1943:

A humanitarian is always a hypocrite, and Kipling's understanding of this is perhaps the central secret of his power to create telling phrases. It would be difficult to hit off the one-eyed pacifism of the English in fewer words than in the phrase, "making mock of uniforms that guard you while you sleep."³

Quote Investigator provides a vast subtext to the various appearances and credits of "Rough men stand ready" over the years, [to which we refer readers](#). They reliably conclude that this precise phrase was not uttered by anyone. But it was inspired by Kipling, paraphrased by Orwell, and, we think, in the Churchill spirit.

The complete text of "Tommy" can be found at: <https://www.poetry.com/poem/33632/tommy>

Shared Sentiments

While neither Churchill nor Orwell uttered the words, they held the same attitude toward the defense of liberty. In ordering a bombing attack on Germany in 1942, Churchill exclaimed: "*Let 'em have it. Remember this. Never maltreat the enemy by halves.*"⁴

As Andrew Roberts notes in his review of Thomas Ricks's [Churchill and Orwell: The Fight for Freedom](#):

Churchill and Orwell were both war correspondents, their prose styles partly conditioned by the urgent need to telegraph stories back from battlefields before being scooped by rivals. But it is very much in the political sphere that Ricks connects the two strangers—Churchill generally from the center-Right, Orwell from the Left—to make them what Simon Schama has called "the most unlikely of allies."⁵

Endnotes

¹ Richard Grenier, "Perils of Passive Sex," *Washington Times*, 6 April 1992, F3.

² Rudyard Kipling, *Departmental Ditties, Barrack-Room Ballads, and Other Verses* (New York: United States Book Co., 1890), 60.

³ George Orwell, *My Country Right or Left 1940-1943: Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, vol. 2 (1943; New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, (1971), 187.

⁴ Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, vol. 6, *Finest Hour 1939-1941* (Hillsdale, Mich.: Hillsdale College Press, 2011), 803.

⁵ Andrew Roberts, "[Churchill and Orwell](#)," Hillsdale College Churchill Project, 2017.