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Hold the fort idiom

Last week, I wrote about a couple of phrases that might not seem offensive on the surface but have the potential to make some people uncomfortable. Here’s my second post in what will be a series of words and phrases that sting. Often, such expressions are problematic not because they are obviously insensitive but because they’re accompanied by historical context that some might find unsettling.For example, “the United States is a nation of immigrants.” It’s an expression we’ve heard multiple times—because it’s true. This country was built on the backs of people who have come from all over the world. But the statement easily conceals another truth: Long before Europeans—or even Canadians—crossed oceans, rivers, and land, Native Americans had been living here. They are not immigrants, nor are they descendants of immigrants. So you can see why the expression might make some of them uneasy.As a group, Native Americans have suffered centuries of oppression. Despite what we all may have learned in third grade about a diverse array of people joyously sitting around a turkey, the reality is that the immigrants who first founded this nation didn’t exactly embrace the indigenous people they came upon. Whereas hundreds of years ago, the effects of colonization ravaged local tribes, today’s Native Americans are largely ignored by much of the American public. As if they aren’t part of the American public at all.Meanwhile, another idiom, “hold down the fort,” is also fraught with meanings that may not initially come to mind. Usually, the phrase refers to watching your home or workplace while someone is away. Historically, though, it alludes to guarding against attacking Native Americans.“As with any phraseology a “down” usage from 1951. It took Wilson Follet and Jacques Barzun fifteen years to condemn this phrase in their “Modern American Usage: A Guide” in 1966, saying “Many unschooled in the lore of battle hold an odd idea of forts. For more than a century, the idiom, commonly figurative, has been to hold the fort – that is, to retain possession of a place against all threat of contention.... Those who have taken to saying hold down the fort would never say hold down an odd idea of forts. Which seems to miss the point, since holding an idea differs significantly from holding a fort. The Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang notes the use, dating from the late 19th Century, of “hold down,” meaning to occupy a place, and A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English records the use from the same period with land claims. And no one finds strange the locution “hold down a job.” Using “down” may be a corruption of the original, but I don’t see how it’s based on a mishearing that would make it an eggcorn. Hold the fort and hold down the fort are variations of an idiom with its roots in the Middle Ages. An idiom is a word, group of words or phrase, or phrasal verbs that have a figurative meaning that is not easily deduced from its literal definition. These figures of speech often use descriptive imagery, common idioms are words and phrases used in the English language in order to convey a concise idea, and are often colloquialisms or descriptors that are spoken or are considered informal or conversational. English idioms can illustrate emotion more quickly than a phrase or expression that has a literal meaning, even when the etymology or origin of the idiomatic expression is lost. An idiom is a metaphorical figure of speech, and it is understood that it is not a use of literal language. Figures of speech have definitions and connotations that go beyond the literal meaning of the words. Mastery of the turn of phrase of an idiom or other parts of speech is essential for the English learner. Many English as a Second Language students do not understand idiomatic expressions that native speakers understand such as in a blue moon, spill the beans, let the cat out of the bag, chin up, eye to eye, barking up the wrong tree, bite the bullet, beat a dead horse, hit the nail on the head, kicked the bucket, blow off steam, jump on the bandwagon, piece of cake, hit the sack, and raining cats and dogs, as they attempt to translate them word for word, which yields only the literal meaning. In addition to learning vocabulary and grammar, one must understand the phrasing of the figurative language of idiomatic phrases in order to know English like a native speaker. It is possible to memorize a list of idioms, but it may be easier to pay attention to the use of idioms in everyday speech, where peculiar imagery will tell you that the expressions should not be taken literally. We will examine the meaning of the idiomatic phrases hold the fort and hold down the fort, where they came from, and some examples of their use in sentences.To hold the fort or to hold down the fort means to take care of business while the boss is away, to keep a process running while others are absent, to maintain the status quo while one is left in charge. For instance, an employee who keeps a dinner shift running in a restaurant while the manager is temporarily away may be said to hold the fort. A parent who supervises a group of children while the other parent runs to the store for supplies may be said to hold the fort. The idiom hold the fort began as a literal, military phrase, meaning to defend a fort while waiting for reinforcements or resupply. By the 1800s, the expression hold the fort took on a figurative meaning. The variation hold down the fort is an Americanism that came into use in the late 1800s-early 1900s, using the slang phrase hold down which meant to occupy. ExamplesThe Egbe Omo Yoruba encouraged South-west governors and stakeholders to hold the fort, arguing that “if Hisbah has been operating since 1999 and it is not deemed unconstitutional, Amotekun has a right to protect the people of Yorubaland from violent marauders who have not been effectively deterred by the existing federal security operatives.” (The Premium Times)Welcome back to Nellie and Daniel Davies, who attended Nellie’s eldest son’s wedding in the Philippines - leaving Mike at home to hold the fort. (The South Coast Herald)Pearl Jam step back into the spotlight after an eight-year hiatus with their upcoming studio album, Gigaton, that’ll take them all over Canada and the US this spring for the accompanying tour, while the South Korean juggernauts will take over the earlier part of the summer for their 17-date North American jaunt and McGraw will hold down the fort for the latter part of summer into September for his Here On Earth Tour. (Billboard Magazine)“Obviously we try to hold down the fort until those guys get back.” (Toronto Sun) « previous post | next post » “State Department: ‘Hold down the fort.’ other common phrases could be offensive”. Fox News 6/31/2012: Watch your mouth — everyday phrases like “hold down the fort” and “rule of thumb” are potentially offensive bombshells. At least according to the State Department. Chief Diversity Officer John Robinson penned a column in the department’s latest edition of “State Magazine” advising readers on some rather obscure Ps and Qs. Here’s Mr. Robinson’s column, “Wait, What Did You Just Say?”, from the July/August 2012 edition of State Magazine. Robinson gives five examples of expressions that can give offense: “Black and Tan”, “hold down the fort”, “going Dutch”, “rule of thumb”, and “handicap”. The first one is straightforward, as explained by Maura Judkis, “Black and Tan” shoes force Nike apology”, Washington Post 3/15/2012: Nike thought the unofficial name for the shoe [released in honor of St. Patrick’s Day] ... referred to the drink, which mixes a pale ale beer and a dark beer — but it also is a name for a violent paramilitary group that suppressed the Irish during their war of independence in the early 1920s. In the Belfast Telegraph, Ciaran Staunton, president of the U.S.-based Irish Lobby for Immigration Reform, asked, “Is there no one at Nike able to google Black and Tan?” The other four examples, however, seem to be somewhere between dubious and silly. Here’s what Robinson says about “Hold down the fort”: How many times have you or a colleague asked if someone could “hold down the fort”? For example, “Could you hold down the fort while I go to...” You were likely asking someone to watch the office while you go and do something else, but the phrase’s historical connotation is to some negative and racially offensive. To “hold down the fort” originally meant to watch and protect against the vicious Native American intruders. In the territories of the West, Army soldiers or settlers saw the “fort” as their refuge from their perceived “enemy,” the stereotypical “savage” Native American tribes. As far as I can tell, “Hold down the fort” is a relatively recent variant of “Hold the fort”. According to this page at cyberhymnal.org, the hymn “Hold the fort, for I am coming” was written in 1870 by Philip P. Bliss, ...after hearing Daniel Whittle relate the following incident from the American civil war: Just before [William Tecumseh] Sherman began his famous march to the sea in 1864, and while his army lay camped in the neighborhood of Atlanta [Georgia] on the 5th of October, the army of Hood, in a carefully prepared movement, passed the right flank of Sherman’s army, gained his rear, and commenced the destruction of the railroad leading north, burning blockhouses and capturing the small garrisons along the line. Sherman’s army was put in rapid motion pursuing Hood, to save the supplies and larger posts, the principal one of which was located at Altoona Pass. General Corse, of Illinois, was stationed there with about fifteen hundred men, Colonel Tourtelotte being second in command. A million and a half rations were stored here and it was highly important that the earthworks commanding the pass and protecting the supplies be held. Six thousand men under command of General French were detailed by Hood to take the position. The works were completely surrounded and summoned to surrender. Corse refused and a sharp fight commenced. The defenders were slowly driven into a small fort on the crest of the hill. Many had fallen, and the result seemed to render a prolongation of the fight hopeless. At this moment an officer caught sight of a white signal flag far away across the valley, twenty miles distant, upon the top of Keneasaw Mountain. The signal was answered, and soon the message was waved across from mountain to mountain: “Hold the fort, I am coming. W. T. Sherman.” Cheers went up; every man was nerved to a full appreciation of the position; and under a murderous fire, which killed or wounded more than half the men in the fort—Corse himself being shot three times through the head, and Tourtelotte taking command, though himself badly wounded—they held the fort for three hours until the advance guard of Sherman’s army came up. French was obliged to retreat. According to They Never Said It, this message was invented by reporters, no more trustworthy then than now, who combined two dispatches (“Hold out!” and “I am coming”) into one (“Hold the fort! I am coming”). But in any case, it referred to holding the fort against Confederate soldiers, not against Native Americans. There are some prior — entirely compositional — uses of the phrase, e.g. in An History of the Life of James Duke of Ormonde, 1736: That the Lord Esmond Governor of the fort of Duncannon, having agreed with the Irish for a Cessation of a few days on some other pretence, sent a person of trust to the Treaty in the beginning of September, with letters of credence; on the back of which that person certified under his hand, that the store there was so exhausted, and the Officers and soldiers in garrison had already suffered so much extremity through want, that it was not possible for him to hold the fort above ten or fourteen days longer, and therefore earnestly desired, either immediate supplies, or that some speedy course might be taken for the preservation of that important place. Or, found in a search of COHA, two examples from an 1827 novel The Buccaneers by Samuel Judah: It was a summons from the new governor, that those who held the fort should straitways come forth and deliver it up peaceably to his possession; otherwise they should be held as traitors to the king ... I do not hesitate to say that his holding the fort against his Excellency Colonel Sloughter, the governor, is an open and intended act of rebellion for which alone the severest punishment that can be inflicted he deserves to suffer ... There are 20 other examples before 1900, a plurality of them being references to the hymn, and none of them referring to Native Americans. As for the “hold down the fort” variant, I was not able to find any evidence of an origin related to Indian wars, or even of any significant amount of use in that connection. The earliest example that Google Books knows about seems to be in a 1946 edition of Billboard magazine, in the Coimlen You Know section: The earliest example in the ProQuest Historical Newspapers seems to be an article from the LA Times on April 24, 1927, which begins Two of the best bantamweights in the country will hold down the fort at the Hollywood American Legion Stadium Friday night. Midget Mike O’Dowd of Columbus, O., will fight it out with Bad News Eber of Montreal, Can. The next oldest citation is from the Washington Post, July 31, 1927: One month more an the theater comes into its own. 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