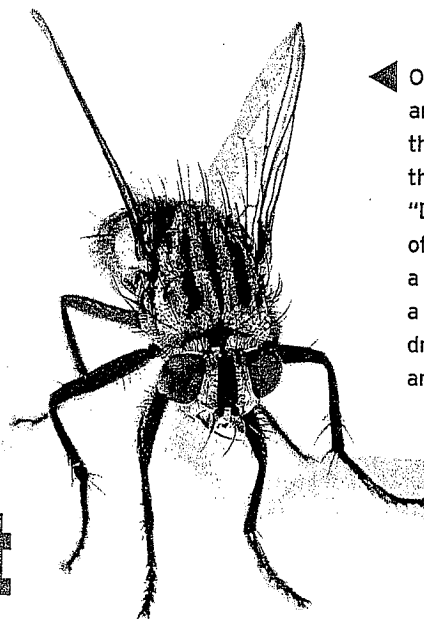


The Fly in the Ointment



◀ Ointments have been used since ancient times to soothe or heal the skin. The idiom comes from the Bible (Ecclesiastes 10:1): “Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savour [smell].” Today, a “fly in the ointment” means a drawback, a small but irritating annoyance that spoils the whole.

Every idiom has a tale to tell—often rooted in history

BY ALESSANDRA POTENZA & KATHY WILMORE

An idiom is a phrase that means something entirely different from its literal meaning. For example, when someone tells you not to “spill the beans,” they’re asking you not to reveal a secret—with no actual beans involved. The expression likely comes from ancient Greece, where people cast their votes by dropping beans into a jar (white beans for “yes,” black beans for “no”). If someone knocked over the jar and spilled the beans, the secret vote would be revealed.

“Spill the beans” and many other idioms originated in historical events; others are derived from literature, mythology, and the Bible. English has thousands of idioms, some of which may be Greek to you (an idiom from Shakespeare’s 1599 play *Julius Caesar*, meaning something you can’t understand).

To prevent idioms from being your Achilles’ heel (see below), here are some common ones, their origins, and current meanings.

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Bite the Bullet

Before anesthetics became common in the early 1900s, a soldier wounded in battle would be given a bullet to bite down on so he wouldn’t scream out in agony. Now, this idiom means to be tough in the face of difficulty or pain.

John Hancock

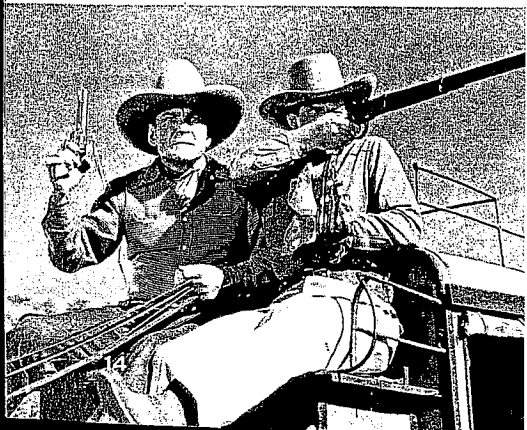
John Hancock was the first leader of the American Revolution to sign the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia in 1776. He did it with such a bold flourish that his name is hard to miss. By the 1800s, “John Hancock”

had become an idiom for a person’s signature, as in, “Put your John Hancock here.”

Achilles’ Heel

Achilles is one of the great heroes of ancient Greek mythology. When he was a baby, his mother held him by

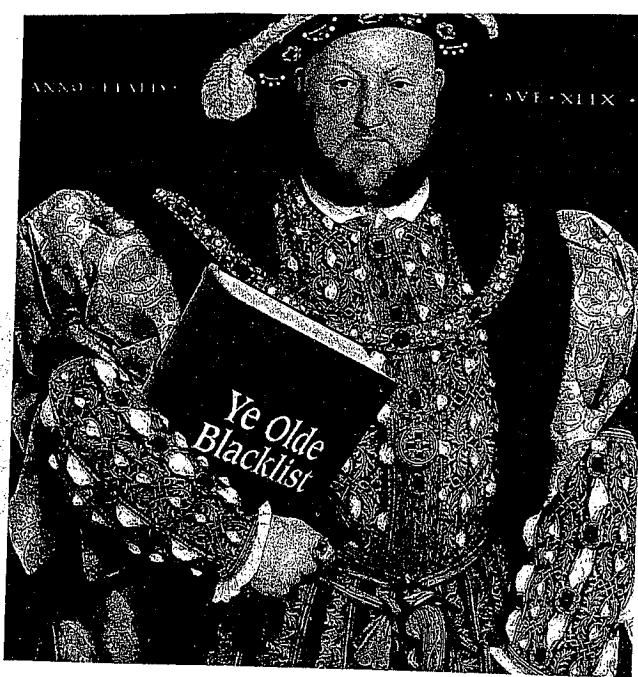
the heel and dipped him into the Styx, a river with special powers, to make him immortal. But years later he was killed in the Trojan War when an arrow struck the one place the water hadn’t touched: his heel. Today, “Achilles’ heel” means a weakness or flaw.



Ride Shotgun In the days of the Wild West, traveling by stagecoach was dangerous—it took long hours, if not days, to go from town to town, and bandits and Indians often carried out attacks. To provide protection, an armed man rode next to the driver. Today, “riding shotgun” can mean accompanying someone to protect them, or just sitting in the front passenger seat of a vehicle.

Pie in the Sky

In 1911, a member of the Industrial Workers of the World, an American labor union, wrote a song that included this line: “Work and pray, live on hay, you’ll get pie in the sky when you die.” “Pie” meant decent working



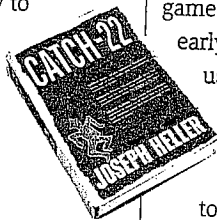
Blacklist England's King Henry VIII (1509-47) wasn't the first person to keep a list of names of people who displeased him. But in 1536, his agents began writing the names of people to be punished—fairly or not—in a black book. Today, saying that you've been blacklisted means you're disliked, out of favor, or in big trouble.

During the Cold War in the 1950s, the harsh reality of blacklists became clear again when Senator Joseph McCarthy accused many Americans of being Communists. Guilty or not, they were blacklisted—marked as people employers shouldn't hire.

conditions and good wages, which workers wanted while they were alive, not after they died. Today, "pie in the sky" is a wish or a promise that is highly unlikely to come true.

Catch-22

In the 1961 novel *Catch-22*, by Joseph Heller, the term referred to a fictional Air Force rule: A pilot who requested a mental evaluation for insanity—hoping to be sent home from battle—was considered sane enough to continue flying because he had made such a request. The expression caught on and now means a no-win dilemma or paradox.



Rain Check

In the 1800s, when baseball games were rained out, spectators received a rain check for admission to a future game at no extra cost. By the early 1900s, the term was used for other kinds of entertainment and, later, for coupons allowing customers to buy a sold-out item for the sale price at a later

date. Today, a "rain check" also means a promise that an unaccepted offer will be acted upon in the future: When you cancel plans with a friend, you might ask for a rain check.

Bury the Hatchet

In early America, warring American Indian tribes declared peace by burying hatchets, tomahawks, or other weapons to show that the fight was over. By the end of the 1800s, "bury the hatchet" meant settling any kind of argument and making peace.

Divide and Conquer

This idiom is a translation of the Latin maxim "divide et impera." It is traditionally attributed to Julius Caesar (100-44 B.C.), the Roman general who greatly expanded the ancient Roman Empire. The expression referred to Rome's military strategy of breaking up its enemies' alliances to weaken and conquer them. First appearing in English in the 1600s, "divide and conquer" now means to win by getting one's opponents to fight among themselves.

Read the Riot Act

In 1714, Britain's Parliament issued a law aimed at dispersing mobs protesting against George I (1714-27), the

Pass the Buck

Card players in the 1800s sometimes passed around a piece of buckshot (a shotgun pellet) to remember whose turn it was to deal the deck. Today, "pass the buck" means to shift blame or responsibility onto someone else. In 1949, "The buck stops here" was made famous by a sign that President Harry S. Truman (1945-53) kept on his desk in the White House. It means "I take full responsibility."



unpopular new king. The Riot Act said that if 12 or more people gathered "illegally, riotously, and tumultuously," a magistrate could command them to break up—or else face punishment—just by reading the opening words of the Riot Act. Since the early 1800s, to "read someone the riot act" has meant to warn anyone who's misbehaving to cut it out—or else. •

Cold Fish In 1610, William Shakespeare wrote *The Winter's Tale*, a play mixing tragedy and comedy. In one scene, Autolycus, a villain, talks about a ballad that includes the lyrics, "It was thought she was a woman, and was turned into a cold fish." The line now describes a hard-hearted, unfeeling individual.

