



CHALLENGE COINS

Stephen R. McAllister

ORIGINS

I INTENDED TO WRITE this essay to explain the origin of “challenge coins.” But that proved impossible. There seems to be no definitive history, and certainly no documented facts, to establish when challenge coins first became a part of American history or why they did so. What is universally agreed and easily documented today is that they are ubiquitous, certainly in the military and law enforcement. But their use now extends well beyond those two institutions.

During my time as the U.S. Attorney for Kansas I came to appreciate the significance, beauty, and diversity of these coins. My District had a challenge coin, as did most United States Attorney’s Offices nationwide. I soon learned that our federal law enforcement partners – the ATF, DEA, FBI, IRS, Secret Service, and others had a wealth of coins and designs, as did many of our state and local partners. The Attorney General and the Deputy A.G. in the U.S. Department of Justice itself also had coins.

During the second half of my U.S. Attorney tenure, I became determined to collect and find a way to display the coins of *all* the U.S. Attorney Offices. With the help of U.S. Attorney Greg Scott of the Eastern District of California, I succeeded in amassing what I believe to be a complete collection of U.S. Attorney coins in existence as of early 2021. My goal of

Steve McAllister is the E.S. & Tom W. Hampton Distinguished Professor of Law at the University of Kansas. From January 2018 to February 2021 he served as the United States Attorney for the District of Kansas. During that time he supervised the design of two coins for his District.

displaying all those coins was realized earlier this year when the *Green Bag* released the *Challenge Coins of the U.S. Attorneys* jigsaw puzzle.¹

This quest prompted questions: When were challenge coins first invented? Who did so, and why? What is their history since then? The answers to those questions prove to be elusive, although there are several intriguing myths about the origins of challenge coins, both in American history and in more ancient times.

The oldest origin is attributed to the Romans, with the story being that soldiers who participated in a victorious battle were awarded cash bonuses in the form of coins, including perhaps a special coin to commemorate a particular victory.² If true, that special coin might be the ultimate ancestor to today's challenge coins.

Other myths include a World War I origin, World War II origins, and even a Vietnam War origin, the latter at least with respect to the notion of calling them "challenge" coins.³ I will simply describe each of these origin stories. I cannot verify any of them, which seems to be the uniform experience of historians and others who have tried.

The World War I origin story is that a wealthy commander in an air squadron ordered medallions struck in bronze for his entire unit, presenting a coin to each soldier. Shortly afterwards the commander's own aircraft was shot down by German fire and he was forced to land in enemy territory. The Germans captured him and took all his personal identification except for a small pouch he wore around his neck, in which he kept one of the medallions he had purchased for his unit soldiers. The commander escaped his captors and made his way to France. There, French soldiers questioned his provenance and identity, suspicious that he was an enemy spy. Only when he showed them the medallion did one of them recognize the unit insignia on the coin and vouch that the commander was an ally, not an enemy. This spared the commander much unpleasantness, and perhaps

¹ See Appendix A on pages 147-49 for small black-and-white images of the puzzle, which is large and colorful in real life.

² William J. Myers, *Meet the Challenge*, *The Numismatist* 63 (Apr. 2007).

³ See generally Katie Lange, *The Challenge Coin Tradition: Do You Know How It Started?*, DOD News (Oct. 8, 2017), <https://www.defense.gov/News/Inside-DOD/Blog/Article/2567302/the-challenge-coin-tradition-do-you-know-how-it-started/>.

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Challenge coins of the Judge Advocate, U.S. Army, at Fort Riley, Kansas (top), the Attorney General of the United States (middle), and the Deputy Attorney General (bottom).

worse — execution as an enemy spy. Instead, the story goes, the French soldiers gave him a bottle of wine for his troubles (no indication what kind of wine or from what area of France, but any French wine seems preferable to execution).

The story concludes with the commander returning to his unit and impressing on all his soldiers their obligation to *always* carry the unit medalion. If anyone doubted a colleague's commitment, they could "challenge" another soldier and ask to see their coin. If the challenged soldier failed to produce the coin, he was obligated to buy a drink for the soldier who challenged him.⁴ This tradition is known today as "calling for the coin," or a "coin check."

There is a fair amount of commentary that dates American challenge coins to the World War II era, but without any real documentation. One story, or theory, is that they were used by Office of Strategic Services agents in Nazi-held France, where they were a means of identifying agents as American (and thus French allies). Other theories involve various conventional military units.⁵ What seems perhaps a consensus position, however, is that American challenge coins existed during World War II.⁶

Another story is that the coins originated with, or were at least were revived by, American Special Forces units in the 1960s. One claim is that a member of the 11th Special Forces Group took old coins, had them over-stamped, and then presented them to unit members in the early 1960s.⁷ Another is that Col. Vernon Green, commander of the 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne), had a special coin struck for his troops in 1969.⁸ Adding to this story, some claim the 10th Special Forces Group was the first military

⁴ *Id.*; Medalcraft.com, *The History Behind Challenge Coins*, <https://www.medalcraft.com/products/challenge-coins/>.

⁵ Myers, *Meet the Challenge*, *supra* note 2.

⁶ One of the oldest American challenge coins that we know actually exists is the coin of Colonel William "Buffalo Bill" Quinn, who had coins made for his infantry regiment in the Korean conflict in the 1950s. These coins are rare, but there are multiple examples in private collections. *Military Challenge Coin History*, UnitCoins.us, <http://www.unitcoins.us/custom-challenge-coin-guide/military-challenge-coin-history>.

⁷ Lange, *The Challenge Coin Tradition*, *supra* note 3.

⁸ Myers, *Meet the Challenge*, *supra* note 2; *Special Forces Coin Rules and History*, Wayback Machine, http://www.sfalx.com/h_coin_rules_and_history.htm.

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Challenge coins of the Heart of America Regional Computer Forensics Laboratory (top), the North Central America Region of the DEA (middle), and the Wichita Field Office of the ATF (bottom).

unit to mint a coin, and the only U.S. military unit to do so until the mid-1980s, when challenge coins became common throughout the military.

The final origin story is that the “challenge” aspect of such coins developed during the Vietnam War. According to this story, the “challenge” began in Vietnam when a bar serving Army infantry challenged any “outsiders” attempting to enter the bar. Outsiders had to buy drinks for the entire bar if they could not prove they had been in combat. Reportedly, “[t]he ‘proof’ started with enemy bullets, then got a little out of control with grenades, rockets, and unexploded ordinance. So a coin-sized item emblazoned with the unit’s insignia became the accepted form of proof.”⁹

As best I can determine, U.S. Attorney Offices’ challenge coins originated after 2000, sometime during the presidency of George W. Bush. Although I have no documents or other evidence to support this conjecture, one might reasonably wonder whether the rise of U.S. Attorneys’ challenge coins post-2000 might connect with law enforcement efforts following 9/11. It is not implausible that the efforts of the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Attorneys in those years spurred U.S. Attorney’s Offices to adopt the challenge coin tradition, with its strong patriotic roots and goals of promoting mission and esprit de corps.

No U.S. Attorney was able to provide me with an earlier provenance for their District’s coin. And that era is when the District of Kansas first adopted and produced a coin. Since then, over 90% (but not yet all) of the United States Attorney Offices have created and used one or more challenge coins.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE COINS

Challenge coins today have significance for a variety of reasons. First and foremost, they “instill unit pride, improve esprit de corps and reward hard work and excellence.”¹⁰ They are a symbol of “camaraderie.”¹¹

⁹ Lange, *The Challenge Coin Tradition*, supra note 3; see also Rob Lammle, *A Brief History of Challenge Coins*, Mental Floss, <https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/12630/brief-history-challenge-coins> (observing that what started out as a “bullet challenge” in the Vietnam War era “escalated to .50 caliber bullets, anti-aircraft rounds, and even artillery shells in an effort to one-up each other” before Command banned the practice and live ammunition was replaced by limited edition coins).

¹⁰ Lange, *The Challenge Coin Tradition*, supra note 3.

¹¹ Emily Baumgartner, *Morale, Allegiance and Drinking: How Military Challenge Coins Evolved*

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Challenge coins are often presented to individuals outside an agency or department who have performed services of considerable significance to support the mission and efforts of agency or department awarding the coin. Thus, challenge coins often are a form of “reward” for exceptional efforts that go above and beyond. There are no particular rules about who may be awarded challenge coins, nor are there rules about how presentations are made. One tradition some follow is to present the coin in the palm of the hand while shaking hands with the recipient.¹² Internally, coins may be traded by agents, officers, and attorneys seeking to build their collections and foster good relationships. I have many coins I did nothing to earn except be U.S. Attorney.¹³

In my own situation, I awarded coins to folks with exemplary service to the U.S. Attorney’s Office, for example, a prosecutor retiring or departing to other endeavors. I also awarded coins to civilians who were exceptionally brave or courageous. Memorably, I presented a coin to a young lady who was the victim of sexual exploitation. I thought she deserved a coin for her courage in testifying at the defendant’s sentencing. In spite of being ostracized by her own immediate family for coming forward with serious allegations of sexual misconduct by an authority figure, this young woman found her voice and made it heard. She courageously and calmly told a very painful and traumatic story that ensured the defendant spent time in prison. She did not wilt under uncomfortable and pointed cross-examination by defense counsel; she stood her ground with dignity and poise. As she debriefed after the hearing with the lead prosecutor on the case and victim-witness professionals, I presented her with a District of Kansas challenge coin and explained to her why I was doing so. She was beaming from ear-to-ear after receiving the coin and understanding its significance.

Challenge coins are not expensive per coin, but not cheap either. They “can cost \$5 to \$10 each, so agencies can spend thousands of dollars on the tokens each year.”¹⁴ The costs – though truly minimal in the greater scheme

and Spread, New York Times (Apr. 11, 2018).

¹² Lammle, *A Brief History of Challenge Coins*, *supra* note 9.

¹³ Many in the military and law enforcement seek and collect the coins. As one historian put it, “[i]f you walk into a high-ranking service member’s office with a big magnet, chances are you will die.” *Id.*

¹⁴ Baumgartner, *supra* note 11. My experience is that elaborate, wonderful challenge coins can

of government – have even attracted the attention of Congress.¹⁵ To avoid any potential issues, some entities purchase coins with private funds.¹⁶

THE UNITED STATES ATTORNEY COINS

When I began my quest to collect U.S. Attorney Offices' (USAO) coins for the *Green Bag* puzzle project, I discovered that not every District had a challenge coin, although the vast majority did. This project also appeared to spur some USAOs without a coin to create one. By the time I finished collecting coins, I'd identified coins from 87 of the 94 Districts¹⁷ (one had a lapel pin, which is reproduced in the puzzle). Thus, challenge coins are nearly universal across the USAOs. And they provide, one might say, "A Portrait of America."

For USAO coins, what I call the "tails" side is remarkably uniform, with virtually all displaying the U.S. Department of Justice official seal and motto. There are only two exceptions.¹⁸ The main variations on the "tails" side are the colors chosen for the border and background. Over 75% of USAO challenge coins use a combination of blue and gold, with blue usually the predominant color. A handful use white, and just a few use red or black. In any event, this relative uniformity of the "tails" side of the coins is why the *Green Bag* puzzle utilizes mostly the "heads" side of the coins.

The "heads" sides demonstrate the true glory of USAO challenge coins and the genius of their creators. They present the colorful quilt of American

be produced for less than \$5 per coin, but doing so usually requires ordering a significant volume of coins, at least several hundred and perhaps 1,000 or more.

¹⁵ Congress at times has been critical of spending government money to produce challenge coins, but more recently some members of Congress appear to have endorsed and adopted the challenge coin tradition. See Jim Saksa, *Coin Check: Military tradition finds quarter on Capitol Hill*, Roll Call (Nov. 11, 2021) (observing that challenge coins "have spilled out across the Capitol's hallways like change from a broken piggy bank," and at least "10 members – all veterans by Call's count – hand out their own, personalized coins").

¹⁶ Baumgartner, *supra* note 11.

¹⁷ There are 94 USAO Districts, but only 93 U.S. Attorneys, because one U.S. Attorney serves two Districts – the District of Guam and the District of the Mariana Islands.

¹⁸ And the exceptions are quite interesting and impressive. One, the Western District of Texas, contains an image of the state capital building with the cities where the USAO District offices are located; the other, the Northern District of West Virginia, displays an image of mountains and sunlight in vivid colors.

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culture in considerable magnificence, dignity, and even joy. Some common themes appear, but the USAO coins display wonderfully unique and creative images and representations. These include and reflect locally significant geographical features, specific locations, state resources, culture, history, symbols, and people.

One relatively common image is a map of the District. Some coins use a gold outline of the District filled with one color, while others fill the outline with an American flag in the background, and a significant number include divisions or stars or other means within the outline to identify and represent the multiple office locations within a District. Flags are common features, often as part of the background. The American flag is prominent, of course, but the relevant state flag also appears with some frequency.

Several coins include the U.S. Attorney “shield” – the official Department of Justice emblem for USAOs – on one side of the coin. Other images that appear more than once include the scales of justice, Lady Justice, a motto (of the relevant state or perhaps words created by the USAO itself), and an “established” date for the USAO.

The USAO coins are remarkable for their individuality, character, and beauty. A few examples:

- Eastern District of California – El Capitan and Half Dome at Yosemite National Park.
- Districts of Guam and the Marianas Islands – local flora and traditional architecture.
- District of Maryland – a crab.
- District of Oregon – Mount Hood.
- Western District of Washington – Mount Rainer, the Space Needle, and a salmon.
- District of Kansas – an ornate box turtle.¹⁹
- District of South Dakota – one coin featuring the buffalo, and another featuring Mount Rushmore.
- Central District of California – Hollywood.
- Eastern District of New York – the Brooklyn Bridge.
- Middle District of Tennessee (which includes Nashville) – the Man in

¹⁹ The state reptile and a symbol for “the slow but steady pace of justice.”

Black, Johnny Cash himself.

CONCLUSION

The USAO challenge coins tell a story of America. In a variety of settings challenge coins now further the missions of their creators, often reinforcing pride in those missions, with coins serving as goodwill ambassadors and collegiality builders. Whatever their origin, they have become a staple of the American military and law enforcement communities. Challenge coins create as well as commemorate history.



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APPENDIX A

Challenge Coins of the U.S. Attorneys

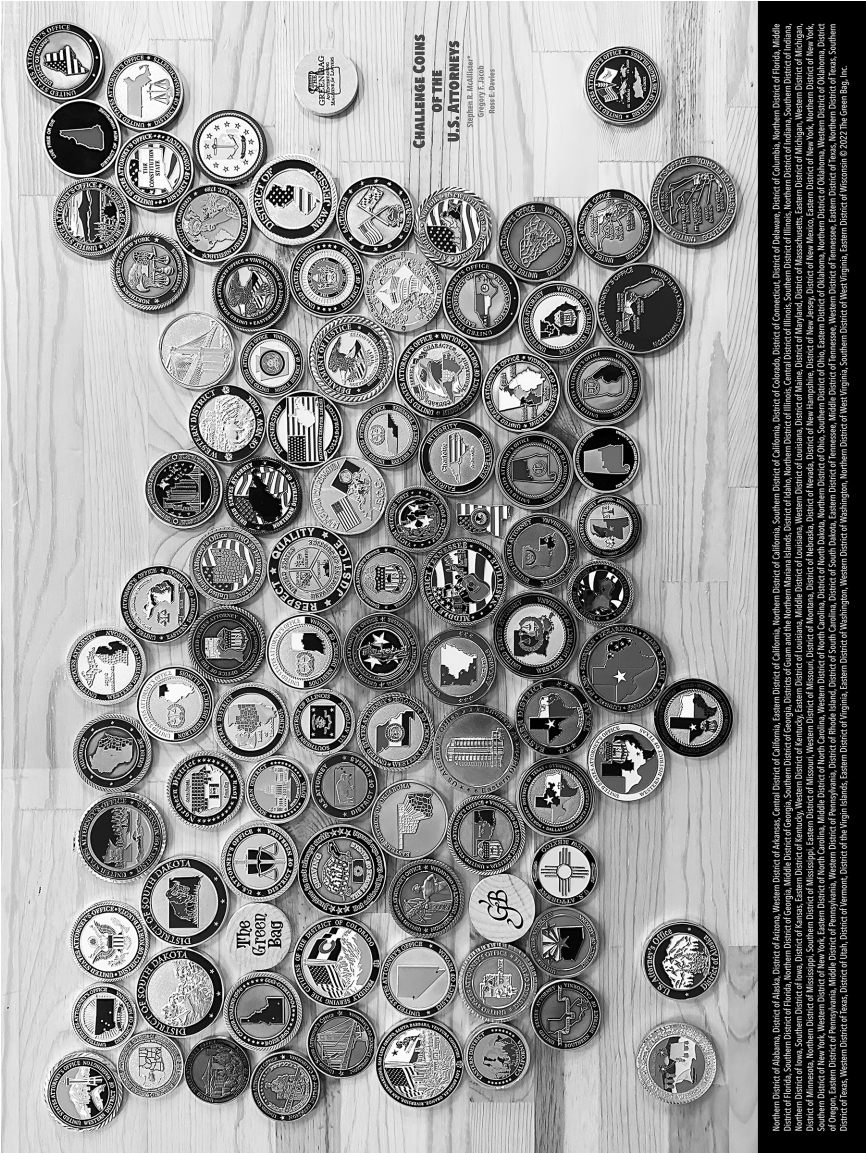
by

Steven R. McAllister

Gregory F. Jacob

Ross E. Davies

(the original is a full-color, 18 x 24-inch, two-sided jigsaw puzzle)

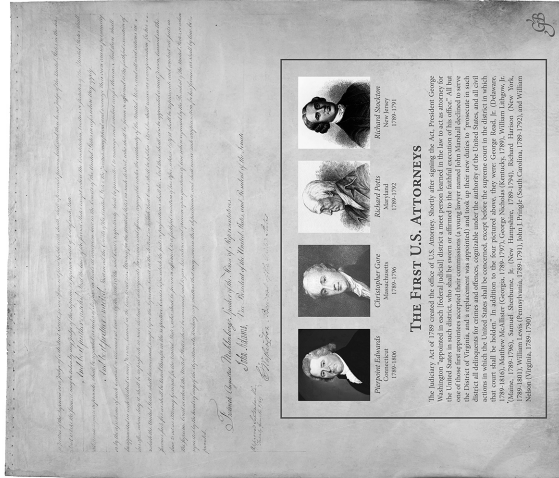


The front of the puzzle features images of all known challenge coins of the U.S. Attorneys, laid out in an approximate portrayal of the U.S.A.

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Congress of the United States, begun and held at the City of New York on Wednesday the fourth of March one thousand seven hundred and eighty nine. An Act to establish the Judicial Courts of the United States.

The back of the puzzle features images of the Judiciary Act of 1789, and a partial transcription thereof.

[illegible]