

Non-allness, Exercise 4

Over the years your teachers have stressed that we cannot know it all. You also have learned that making generalized allness statements have little chance of accuracy, and frequently get us into trouble. If we say “Philadelphians like the Eagles,” we say everyone in Philadelphia likes the Eagles. Do you think there are some citizens who couldn’t care less, and some citizens who might even have an antagonistic streak?

Foolish statements like these are not limited to casual conversation, but infect the minds of political and military leaders, sometimes producing disastrous results. Below we have listed statements, which are not exact quotes, and sometimes combine statements made by two people. Look them over and prepare to comment on them in class.

“AMERICANS will never be content to sit around and watch shows in a plywood box. Television is just a fad that will go away.” Famous movie magnate.

“The AMERICAN ARMY is weak and ineffective, so let’s celebrate the holiday and have a big party.” Hessian officers, Trenton, New Jersey, December 25, 1776. (Quick, what happened?)

“The British aircraft industry is running out of aluminum and will not be able to produce the number of planes they need.” German high command, 1941. Undaunted, the British stretched their aluminum supplies by building the fastest light bomber of the war, the de Havilland Mosquito—made largely of wood.

“The AMERICAN PUBLIC is capable of managing their own investments.” A 2004 statement made by a famous economist, who conveniently ignored the record of 1,500,000 personal bankruptcies annually entered into by that same American public.

Do you ever say, “[*Ethnic group*] are by nature [*insert a trait*].” How do you know? Have you met all of them? Where did you get your information?

In each case, the speakers spoke as though they knew all there was to know. In each case they were incorrect. When you hear statements about “Americans,” think for a moment which Americans? White, black, Hispanic, rich, poor, city, rural. Do they all have the same values? Do they all think alike? Since we consider ourselves Americans, we tend to think that all Americans will think like we do. What even causes more trouble is equating the likes, dislikes, and mores of other cultures to ours. We need to maintain an awareness of the differences.

Can you think of any other stupid allness statements?