

Challenge Coin

Roman Mars: You might not remember December 22nd, 2017, as a particularly notable day, but I will always remember it as the day the world first saw Donald Trump's redesigned presidential challenge coin. Now, if you were unfamiliar with challenge coins, that's okay. I'm here to help. I have a whole story about them coming up. But a lot of people on Twitter know I know about challenge coins and that I care about them deeply. In fact, if you didn't serve in the military, there's a good chance you learned about challenge coins for the first time from my other podcast, 99% Invisible. 99% Invisible actually has its own challenge coin. So does Radiotopia. My association with challenge coins is strong. And because of that, I was forwarded the December 22nd Washington Post article about Trump's garishly over-the-top challenge coin by about 9,000 people. So, Elizabeth Joh is out of town. I'm still recovering from Christmas and tons of end of year business. So, on today's Trump Con Law, I want to play you the original 99% Invisible story about challenge coins. It'll be fun. Let's do it. This is What Trump Can Teach Us About Con Law--an ongoing series of indefinite length, where we usually take Trump tweets and use them to learn about the Constitution. But today, we're taking Trump's norm breaking challenge coin, and examining a cool military tradition that is generally hidden from the general public. Our friendly neighborhood law professor, Elizabeth Joh, is off this week. But I am still your fellow student and host, Roman Mars. This is 99% Invisible. I'm Roman Mars. I once went to a small business and tech conference in San Francisco. And among all the people hobnobbing in hoodies or khakis, a man emerged in full military attire. Dark green uniform with ribbons on his chest and tiny pins all perfectly affixed--crew cut--whole nine yards. He was a marine lieutenant colonel, and he was by far the most interesting person in the room. I was just glued to him. Anyway, as we parted ways, he handed me this coin-like thing. I mean, it was bigger than a coin. It was about an inch and a half in diameter, ornately decorated with the icon of the lieutenant colonel's unit, and heavier than anything I'd care to keep in my wallet. I felt incredibly honored, but I didn't know what it was or what the hell I was supposed to do with it.

Avery Trufelman: I also got a coin-like thing. It was from a tour guide at the Pentagon. I asked him what it was, and he was like, "Eh... It's just something we do."

Roman Mars: Producer Avery Trufelman.

Avery Trufelman: I told my housemate, Ben, about my coin, and he was like, "Oh yeah, I have one of those. It was my grandfather's."

Ben: Here it is.

Avery Trufelman: I woke Ben up before I came to work, so he sounds really sleepy.

Ben: So, his coin is from the 101st Airborne. It's got the 101st Airborne insignia and shows a couple of the places that they fought: Vietnam, World War II... On the back, it says, "Rendezvous with Destiny," which is their motto--their creed--I don't know.

Avery Trufelman: Did he ever tell you, like, about this?

Ben: I actually never met him. This is the only thing that I have of his.

Roman Mars: Avery and I figured out that these coins are called "challenge coins."

Avery Trufelman: And they are coins, but they're not currency. And they're not quite metals. Challenge coins are something different.

Kerry Foshier: Everything that I say here today is my own personal opinion and does not necessarily reflect the position of the Marine Corps.

Roman Mars: Roger that. Kerry Foster is not in the Marines.

Avery Trufelman: She is a cultural anthropologist at Marine Corps University. She's encountered challenge coins many times throughout her career.

Kerry Foshier: I would imagine that--except for the brand-new people coming in--everybody will know that they exist. The degree to which they are used varies a great deal.

Roman Mars: This can depend on which military branch you serve in and your rank, but it goes further than that.

Kerry Foshier: There are so many different uses--so many different kinds of things that the coins can symbolize depending on the context in which you're looking at them or somebody is giving them.

Avery Trufelman: Kerry says that one of the meanings of the coins is made apparent in the act of giving or exchanging them. The coins are literal tokens of gratitude, appreciation, love, or sympathy. They are a powerful and tangible form of connection within an institution that is not known for being very touchy feely.

Kerry Foshier: It can be difficult in certain contexts to express emotion, especially if it's across the ranks. And I do think that the coins are used in that way--as a physical symbol of affection or gratitude.

Avery Trufelman: So, across ranks, people might be given a coin for a job well done because there are only so many ways to show appreciation within the military.

Kerry Foshier: You can't give a person a raise. You can't give them a promotion. At least you can give them that symbolic indicator of our feelings about the work that you're doing.

Roman Mars: But of course, as Avery and I learned, these coins are occasionally given out to civilians.

Chris McGrath: Most of the time I would give a coin just to say thank you for helping me out.

Avery Trufelman: That's Chris McGrath. He's a Chief Petty Officer in the Navy.

Chris McGrath: And I collect and trade challenge coins.

Avery Trufelman: Chris says he gives coins out to coworkers--old friends--anyone who does him a solid.

Roman Mars: And for that reason, you end up finding these coins in places where you would not expect to find any connection to the military. You know, like, in the hands of wimpy podcasters like us.

Avery Trufelman: And the coins are a way to establish relationships outside of the institution.

Kerry Foshier: When these coins get sent out, they're a physical reminder of both the fact that the military is there, but perhaps more importantly, that it's not some faceless, monolithic structure sitting in the Pentagon. There are human beings involved, and they are human beings who can develop a professional and personal relationship with somebody outside the military.

Avery Trufelman: When I received my coin from the Pentagon tour guide, he just kind of unceremoniously handed it to me. But within the military, when a sailor or a soldier or a pilot or a marine gives a coin, they don't just hand it over. There's a traditional handshake.

Roman Mars: Of course, there is.

Chris McGrath: A handshake is used whenever someone is transferring one of the coins over. And essentially you have the coin, you know, sitting in the palm of your hand.

Avery Trufelman: And then with the coin in your palm, you firmly grasp the hand of the person you want to give the coin to.

Chris McGrath: And then you both flip your hands over, so it ends up in their hand.

Roman Mars: Chris has an amazing collection of challenge coins. Some don't look like regular coins at all.

Chris McGrath: I've got one here shaped like a ninja star. I've got another one shaped kind of like a crown. You know, this one is shaped like a cougar--profile view--but the teeth are open. And you can actually use it as a bottle opener.

Avery Trufelman: The bottle opener could actually be quite practical because in addition to being gifts and heirlooms and tokens of appreciation, challenge coins are used to play a drinking game. And if you're in possession of a coin, you can be in on the game.

Roman Mars: Jordan Haines, a veteran of the Air Force, plays like this.

Jordan Haines: If I was at a bar, I would have the coin in my pocket. And if I felt, you know, emboldened, I'd pull a coin out of my pocket. And I would throw it down on the bar. Or I might tap it.

Avery Trufelman: And maybe holler out, "Coin check!"

Roman Mars: And all his buddies and crew members would take out their coins.

Jordan Haines: We expect them to reply with their coin doing the same thing. So now you've got all this craziness going on because people are slamming the coins down and yelling out, "Coin check."

Avery Trufelman: And they go down the line, and each person pulls out their coin.

Jordan Haines: Hopefully what happens is somebody doesn't have their coin. And if they don't have the coin, then boom.

Roman Mars: The person without their coin buys everyone a drink.

Jordan Haines: But the person who does the coin check is liable for a round of drinks if everybody does have their coin.

Avery Trufelman: So, starting the coin check is also a gamble. And not all of the branches of the military are into the drinking game.

Kerry Foshier: I will say that I have not seen Marines initiate that kind of game. They would certainly participate if somebody from another service did that.

Roman Mars: But those who play the game are in it to win it. Some have their coins on them always.

Chris McGrath: That little useless coin pocket you have in your jeans. I've actually found a use for it, and it's for my challenge coin.

Jordan Haines: You got to be on your toes, you know? I mean, if you're in a shower, take your coin with you. If you're out running--whatever you're doing--you carry the coin with you. There could be a coin right here in the studio.

Avery Trufelman: As far as the history of challenge coins, there's sort of an apocryphal story that traces them back to World War I, when an American army officer supposedly had some special coins minted for his men. And then one of those men was captured by French soldiers who mistook him for a German. And then he used his coin to prove that he was an American.

Roman Mars: So, the coins have also always been about identity.

Kerry Foshier: They do tell a story about how the unit or organization wants to be perceived. What do they think are the most important things that they can communicate about themselves to an outside audience in a graphic form?

Roman Mars: And since identity in the military has a lot to do with hierarchy, there is also a hierarchy with challenge coins.

Chris McGrath: As you move up through the ranks, you know, the challenge coins become more essentially valuable because they're harder to get. It's harder to get a Chief of Naval Operations coin. It's even harder to get a Secretary of the Navy coin. It's incredibly hard to get a Presidential coin.

Roman Mars: Yes, the president has a coin. There's a really lovely video of Obama giving his coin to a woman who lost her brother in Afghanistan.

Avery Trufelman: And the military isn't the only institution to use challenge coins, although they were the first. Now, some police departments make coins and some fire departments. NASA gets coins. Minted sports teams have coins. Jimmy Buffett has a coin.

Jordan Haines: Jimmy Buffett, the singer. Yeah.

Avery Trufelman: That's Jordan Haines again. He's the one who told us about the drinking game.

Jordan Haines: A lot of these performers--if they're doing a USO tour, they'll have their coin with them in return to whoever presents them a coin.

Avery Trufelman: In addition to being a collector of coins, Jordan is actually in the business of making coins. He's made over 3 million of them, including Jimmy Buffett's.

Jordan Haines: I am the founder and CEO of coinforce.com.

Roman Mars: Coin Force is one of the private mints that designs and manufacturers challenge coins.

Jordan Haines: I'm holding a coin that I brought with me to the studio--a diamond shaped coin that we made for Astronaut Lindgren. It's got his name on it. Translucent. It's just this super awesome coin. My God, we do awesome work.

Roman Mars: You don't have to be a president or an astronaut or Jimmy Buffett. You too can have a coin. You can design your own and then just go online and order it. That's basically what the military does.

Avery Trufelman: Most of the time, a unit gets together and talks about what they want in their coin and then gathers the money for it themselves.

Chris McGrath: So, we're not using taxpayer dollars. It's all by our own, for our own. So, we are fundraising internally, or we're doing car washes...

Avery Trufelman: Because coins are not in the budget, there's no set procedure for making them and no rules, which means the design process is very informal.

Chris McGrath: Nine times out of ten in the Navy, someone takes that sketch, they use clipart, put it into PowerPoint, and then send it off to the manufacturer.

Roman Mars: PowerPoint. Microsoft PowerPoint.

Chris McGrath: PowerPoint is installed on every government computer. And for us, it's free.

Avery Trufelman: And then Jordan at Coin Force--or whoever the manufacturer is--will take that mockup and finish a final design on real, professional grade software.

Jordan Haines: A design studio does not use PowerPoint to design a challenge coin.

Roman Mars: Oh, that's a relief.

Avery Trufelman: The individual coins take on a whole new meaning when a bunch are displayed together. And a lot of military folks make elaborate displays or even custom furniture to show off their collection.

Roman Mars: Of course, some displays are much simpler. In Clinton's presidential portrait, he's posing in front of his collection of challenge coins, and they're in a simple wooden display.

Avery Trufelman: But these coin displays are not, like, a flashy show of achievement at all.

Kerry Foshier: It becomes less a display of "look at me" and more a display of a lot of long, quiet, hard work over the course of decades.

Roman Mars: The coins show all the professional and personal relationships established over the course of a career. So, if you're in the Army and have coins from the Air Force in your collection, it shows that you've collaborated across military branches, which can be really hard to do. The coins are physical proof of hard-fought relationships.

Avery Trufelman: To me, the coins are full of interesting contradiction. They're a combination of gravitas and tradition with levity and joy. Like, my friend Ben--if he wanted--could go take that heirloom of his grandfather's time in World War II and Vietnam and go win a beer with it.

Kerry Foshier: You might not do those two things with the same coin. Some people might, but that's just one of the lovely contradictions that you find all over military life.

Avery Trufelman: In a world as regulated and rigorous as that of the United States military, the coins have this fluid quality about them. There are different coin check rules for different branches. The coin's use in popularity varies. The history doesn't have a set telling. The design doesn't have set rules.

Kerry Foshier: There is obviously a very regimented, very structured, very rule-bound aspect to the military. But challenge coins and a lot of other things that are routine parts of daily military life mitigate that structure.

Roman Mars: Challenge coins are a reminder of the human elements of the massive U.S. military--a reminder that some servicemen constantly carry.

Jordan Haines: I've been coin checked at airports and coin checked at trade shows. I've been coin checked everywhere. Now my home is off limits. Don't be, like, crawling up my balcony at 3:00 a.m. to do a coin check on me on my property. But you catch me outside of my property, then, you know, game on.

Roman Mars: There's no way I'm climbing up on that dude's balcony at 3:00 a.m. This episode of 99% Invisible was produced by Avery Trufelman with Katie Mingle, Sam Greenspan, and me, Roman Mars. Since literally thousands of you asked, I'm going to tell you what I think of the Donald Trump challenge going right after this. So, it turns out it isn't just constitutional norms that Trump likes to break. He also likes to break the norms of taste, good design, and tradition. The new Trump Challenge coin dispenses with the presidential seal and replaces it with a similar looking eagle image. But the head of the eagle is pointed in the opposite direction for some reason. And it has Donald Trump's signature across the bottom. Instead of "E Pluribus Unum," it says, "Make America Great Again." Then it says, "Donald Trump" again on a ribbon that extends below the traditional circle of the coin. The coin is twice as thick as the most recent presidential challenge

coins. And instead of the muted colors, you know, befitting a dignified office, this coin is gold--a very, very cheap looking gold. So, in terms of taste, I consider the coin an impeachable offense, and I will draw up the articles of impeachment myself. Just give me a call. However, I also must consider this from a design perspective. And the key question in design is does the thing do what it was designed to do? And in that sense, one could argue that the Donald Trump challenge coin is perfectly designed. It completely reflects the taste and style of Trump and his presidency in every way. It is in-your-face and untraditional. I find it unbelievably ugly and tacky, and I don't like the ribbon protruding from the bottom of the circle--but it's kind of fitting because, you know, the man himself wears this wide shiny tie and it comes down way too low. So much like the red MAGA hats that became icons--which I found so terrible--it does its job. And in a way, you have to admire it, and... Nope. I can't do it. It's awful. Burn it all down. That's it. Oh, God... Oh, God... Happy New Year, everybody. Trump Con Law is produced by Elizabeth Joh and me, Roman Mars. You can find us online at trumpconlaw.com, on Facebook, and on Twitter. The music in Trump Con Law is provided by Doomtree Records, the Midwest Hip-Hop Collective. The music in the challenge coin episode of 99PI is listed out on the 99PI website. You can find out all about Doomtree Records, get merch, and learn about current tours at doomtree.net. We are a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX, supported by the Knight Foundation and donors who are listeners just like you. We'll be back with a traditional Trump Con Law episode next time. Happy New Year.