

Thomas Dixon's War Prayers

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Thomas L. Dixon is best known as the author of the racist novel *The Clansman* (1905), on which film director D.W. Griffith based his 1915 epic *The Birth of a Nation*. But in 1898, Reverend Thomas Dixon was pastor of the People's Church, a non-denomi-

national Protestant congregation in New York City. Just 34 years old during America's fateful summer of global conquest, he had already made his name with a speaking style so sensational that New York newspapers covered his sermons not only in the religion section but on the drama pages as well. If Dixon's preaching was energetic, his patriotism was full-throated, and he signed on as a "jingo" even before war came with Spain. From his pulpit issued earnest sermons on the nation's burdensome destiny and the gratitude sure to be forthcoming from every corner of Cuba and the Philippines; by year's end, he would be stumping for Theodore Roosevelt's gubernatorial campaign. Reverend Dixon's war prayers resound with the religious fervor for war that Twain so harshly satirized when he wrote "The War-Prayer" in 1905, and they remind us that American imperialism abroad thoroughly depended on racism at home.¹

Mark Twain probably never met Thomas Dixon, and Twain certainly did not hear any of Dixon's wartime sermons, since the novelist spent 1898 in Europe. Even had he heard them, he may not have much objected; Twain initially supported the Spanish-American War, writing from Europe that "I have never enjoyed a war ... as much as ... this one. For this is the worthiest one that was ever fought." Only over time, as U.S. occupation forces in the Philippines confronted Filipino resistance, and as Twain learned of the atrocities that some U.S. troops committed in the name of God and Country, did his bitter anti-imperialism emerge. So bitter, in fact, that *Harper's Bazaar* refused to print "The War-Prayer" when Twain submitted it in March 1905.²

The good reverend had no such trouble with publishers: a collection of Dixon's wartime sermons appeared in print in 1899, while his words still echoed off the back wall of New York's Grand Opera House where he had delivered them. *Dixon's Sermons* insisted on America's "divine mission." "God has ordained this Republic to a great work in the evolution of human history," he told his flock. Peppering the sermons with lurid propaganda tales of imperial Spanish atrocities, and turning for scriptural authority to Old Testament tales of the flight of the Jews out of Egypt, Dixon painted a picture of a nation of liberators doing God's work. "There can be no conflict," he thought, "between patriotism and Christianity." Soldiers are "the highest type of manhood"; the pacifist commits "treachery to the land that gave him birth." The sermons combine the fire and brimstone of old-time religion with the cool rationality of Social Darwinism and progressivism's messianic fervor. A curious mix of old and new—just like Dixon himself.³

Raised in Reconstruction-Era North Carolina, where he idolized an uncle who served as a Grand Titan of the Ku Klux Klan, Dixon headed to Baltimore in 1883 for graduate study in history. At Johns Hopkins, he befriended another young Southerner, Woodrow

Wilson, who would later reputedly remark that *The Birth of a Nation* was "like writing history with lightning. And my only regret is that it is all so terribly true." Dixon soon left Hopkins, though, to try his hand as an actor; from 1884 to 1886 he served a brief term in the North Carolina legislature, which he abandoned in turn for the ministry. The devoted Southerner ultimately made his home in New York City, where his earliest preaching caught the ear of fellow Baptist John D. Rockefeller. Emboldened by his growing popularity, frustrated with Baptist bureaucracy, and bankrolled by Rockefeller, Dixon started his own congregation in 1898.⁴

The coming of war that year gave Dixon evidence of "God's special providence," but also cemented the final brick in the wall of Redemption. "To-day there is no North, no South ... we are one people," he announced. Nor was Dixon alone in the notion. Soldiers sailed for Cuba singing both "Dixie" and "The Battle Hymn of the Republic"; at Atlanta's Peace Jubilee in December 1898, President William McKinley announced that "[s]ectional lines no longer mar the map of the United States." Like many of his contemporaries in the age of Jim Crow, however, Dixon's reunified wartime nation had little room for its black citizens.⁵

The link between the imperialism that Americans imposed abroad, primarily on people of color, and the ideology of white supremacy that structured social relations within the United States, remains elusive. Certainly, in an age that took racial hierarchy so seriously, white Americans easily turned ideas and institutions crafted with African Americans in mind to colonial ends in the Pacific and the Caribbean. But for many others—even many other white Southern writers and leaders Dixon knew—empire threatened the nation's whiteness. At the age of 74, Varina Howell Davis, the former First Lady of the Confederacy and, like Dixon, a transplant to Manhattan, urged readers of *The Arena* not to incorporate Filipinos into the nation, since "three quarters of the population is made up of negroes." In the Senate, South Carolina's John McLaurin noted that Southern history was "pregnant with lessons of wisdom ... in the Philippine matter"; John W. Burgess, whose revisionist histories of Reconstruction would shape Dixon's novels, thought 1898 an inauspicious "turning point in our political and constitutional history."⁶

Racism thus suffused U.S. anti-imperialism as much as it pervaded its opposite. But letting Mrs. Jeff Davis speak for the South, and highlighting racism's "antagonistic, not harmonious" relationship to imperialism—as recent scholars have done—risks erasing the sheer enthusiasm for empire that led white Southerners such as Dixon to cross the lines of region and party and embrace the nation's supposed global destiny. When Dixon preached one week on "The Anglo-Saxon Alliance" in world affairs, and offered a meditation on Southern race relations in "A Friendly Warning to the Negro" the next, white supremacy

could mesh easily with imperial ambition.⁷

By 1899, Dixon found he could reach more people by delivering his sermons on the lecture circuit than by tending a congregation. He crisscrossed the country, collecting \$1000 a speech; in this golden age of the Chautauqua, as many as five million people may have heard Dixon speak. Already he was at work on a novel: soon after the first was between covers, he began making movies, in search of an even wider audience. His forward-looking vision was full of the boosterish patriotism that Twain found in every “six-dollar sub-editor” of wartime newspapers. Within a few decades, those small-town papers declined, to be replaced by global news syndicates, radio preachers, and the Hollywood studio system. A historian, an actor, a legislator, a minister, a novelist, and a filmmaker, Dixon straddled the centuries, combining gauzy Old South nostalgia, the sanctimonious pieties of John D. Rockefeller, the forward-looking enthusiasm of Social Darwinism, and the vibrant new world of the mass media.⁸ Maybe something like this irritated Mark Twain as he penned “The War Prayer” in 1905, the same year that Dixon wrote *The Clansman*. In his essay, Twain sneered at pastors who “preached devotion to flag and country, and invoked the God of Battles, beseeching His aid in our good cause in outpourings of fervid eloquence which moved every listener”—which is precisely what Dixon’s sermons did. “There are divine things,” Dixon once preached, “and they are packed in every bullet that speeds death to the foe.” Twain’s parable tells of “an aged stranger” who appears in a wartime church to unmask the hypocrisy involved in praying for bullets and death. But the stranger’s warning goes unheeded: “It was believed, afterwards, that the man was a lunatic, because there was no sense in what he said.” That could have been a line from Dixon, who boasted that “[b]efore the colossal [*sic*] figure of this great soldier how pusillanimous seems the whine of the moral idiot who declares that struggle for right in war is only savagery.”⁹

Idiot or lunatic, what’s the difference?

Notes

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¹ The fullest biographical account of Thomas L. Dixon is Raymond Allen Cook, *Fire from the Flint: The Amazing Careers of Thomas Dixon* (Winston-Salem, N.C.: John F. Blair, 1968), supplemented by the essays in Michele K. Gillespie and Randal L. Hall, eds., *Thomas Dixon Jr. and the Birth of Modern America* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2006).

² Jim Zwick, “Mark Twain and Imperialism,” in *A Historical Guide to Mark Twain*, ed. Shelley Fisher Fishkin (New York: Oxford UP, 2002), 227-55 (Twain quote on pp. 236-37).

- ³ Thomas Dixon, Jr., *Dixon's Sermons: Delivered in the Grand Opera House, New York, 1898-1899* (New York: F. L. Bussey, [1899]), 1, 2, 32, 35, 34.
- ⁴ Woodrow Wilson, quoted in Cook, *Fire from the Flint*, 170; David Stricklin, "'Ours Is a Century of Light': Dixon's Strange Consistency," in Gillespie and Hall, *Thomas Dixon*, 105-23, outlines the contours of Dixon's complex relationship with Baptism.
- ⁵ Dixon, *Dixon's Sermons*, 77, 145; McKinley, quoted in Michelle A. Krowl, "'In the Spirit of Fraternity': The United States Government and the Burial of Confederate Dead at Arlington National Cemetery, 1864-1914," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 111, no. 2 (2003): 152. More generally, see Edward L. Ayers, *The Promise of the New South: Life after Reconstruction* (New York: Oxford UP, 1992), 328-34; David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2001), 345-54; Willard B. Gatewood, Jr., comp., *"Smoked Yankees" and the Struggle for Empire: Letters from Negro Soldiers, 1898-1902* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1971); Cecilia Elizabeth O'Leary, *To Die For: The Paradox of American Patriotism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999), 137-49.
- ⁶ Mrs. Jefferson Davis, "Why We Do Not Want the Philippines," *The Arena* 23 (1900): 1-4; McLaurin, quoted in Eric T. L. Love, *Race over Empire: Racism and U.S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2004), 190; John W. Burgess, *Recent Changes in American Constitutional Theory* (New York: Columbia UP, 1923), 1.
- ⁷ Love, *Race over Empire*, xi. An important early explication of this view appears in Christopher Lasch, "The Anti-Imperialists, the Philippines, and the Inequality of Man," *Journal of Southern History* 24 (August 1954): 319-31. Outlines of an alternative view linking racism and imperialism are sketched in Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1980); Walter A. Williams, "United States Policy and the Debate over Philippine Annexation: Implications for the Origins of American Imperialism," *Journal of American History* 66 (March 1980): 810-31; and Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002). In fact, imperialism could amplify domestic U.S. racism. Samuel K. Roberts argues that after 1898, Dixon "reversed his earlier sympathetic views toward Negroes and launched a vitriolic crusade." Roberts, "Kelly Miller and Thomas Dixon, Jr. on Blacks in American Civilization," *Phylon* 41 (2nd Qtr. 1980): 203.
- ⁸ Cook, *Fire from the Flint*, 68; Twain, "As Regards Patriotism," in Mark Twain, *Collected Tales, Sketches, Speeches, and Essays, 1891-1910* (New York: Library of America, 1992), 476.
- ⁹ Twain, 652, 655; Dixon, *Dixon's Sermons*, 33, 35.