

"The War-Prayer" in U.S. Popular Culture

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Since its publication, Mark Twain's short but brilliantly crafted story "The War-Prayer" has been an archetypal text for screenplays dealing with the horror of war, as well as a popular tool for advocates of non-violence or pacifism in the United States. Screenwriters use it as a dramatic vehicle to enrich the meaning of their screenplays and scripts, peace activists feature it at anti-war events and on the World Wide Web, and pacifist Christian sermons draw moral lessons from it. This essay examines how Twain's satirical story functions as a moral and ethical framework for pacifist discourse in contemporary American popular culture.

"The War-Prayer" constitutes part of the 1981 television film *The Private History of a Campaign That Failed* directed by Peter H. Hunt. (Based on Twain's short story of the same title, it was released in the VHS format in 2002). Set in the Civil War period, this eighty-nine-minute action/adventure movie focuses on a group of scared teenage soldiers, who go to the battlefield without proper training, without understanding the reality of war, and without understanding the reason for war. The film ends with the arrival of the ghost of Edward Herrmann at a church, who delivers Twain's "The War-Prayer" as an anti-war epilogue. Like the white-robed "lunatic" in Twain's story, Herrmann exposes the dreadful implications of a sermon delivered by a jingoistic, triumphalist preacher (Twain 425).

"The War-Prayer" was also an inspiration for the seventh episode of the sci-fi drama *Babylon 5*. Written by D. C. Fontana, author of *Star Trek: The Original Series*, it was originally televised on March 9, 1994, and has been produced in both VHS and DVD formats. The episode entitled *The War Prayer* takes place in the year 2258. A heavy five-mile-long outer-space way station created to prevent another war, Babylon 5 is a place where humans and aliens can work out their differences peacefully—a home away from home for diplomats, hustlers, entrepreneurs, and wanderers. Visited by various species, the station imposes one absolute rule for those who are onboard: no racism is allowed.

In this particular episode, the clandestine Home Guard, a militant pro-Earth organization popular on the planet Earth, launches a series of attacks on prominent aliens on the station, thereby threatening to dash humanity's last hope for peace. Babylon 5's Commander Jeffrey Sinclair (Michael O'Hare) counterattacks the Home Guard with the help of chief security officer Michael Garibaldi (Jerry Doyle), Lieutenant Commander Susan Ivanova (Claudia Christian), and other characters. In the film, there is an unmistakable

parallel between the Home Guard and the Ku Klux Klan in their violent racism.

In addition to its role in films, “The War-Prayer” has been an illustrative moral story for peace activists, especially since the outbreak of the U.S.-led war against terrorism in Iraq. It was featured on Sunday, September 11, 2005—the fourth anniversary of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States—as part of the 9/11 Riverboat Cruise for Peace. The Peace Economy Project (PEG)—a St. Louis-based nonprofit organization researching and publicizing the costs of a wartime economy and an unrestrained military-industrial complex—rented the Becky Thatcher riverboat for an afternoon of conversation, speeches, and a performance of Twain’s “The War-Prayer” along the Mississippi.

According to the report by Sylvester Brown, Jr., who attended the cruise as a guest speaker, the event drew peace activists from various walks of life. Among the notable participants were Byron Clemens, one of Twain’s distant cousins; Christian Woehr, assistant principal violinist with the St. Louis Symphony who specially composed a musical score for “The War-Prayer” and performed it with his student quartet; and Robert Henke, an associate professor of drama at Washington University in St. Louis, who powerfully recited Twain’s text. Brown offers his reflection on the event as follows: “Twain’s words reverberated in my head as I sat aboard deck of the boat named after one of his characters. Patriotic zeal, religious hypocrisy, precious life laid asunder in the name of fluid concepts like ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy.’ Thus was the world in Twain’s lifetime, thus is the world in mine.” (B1).

“The War-Prayer” is a frequently suggested reading on anti-war websites. In his essay “Mark Twain on War,” written for the Veterans for Peace Maine Chapter 001 Website, David Shippee draws a parallel between the 1905 United States administration with the post-9/11 George Bush-Dick Cheney administration: they are similar in their misguided sense of burden for the so-called uncivilized people of the world. Shippee recommends that Iraq War supporters read and reflect on “The War-Prayer”: “Anyone eagerly cheering the use of our weapons of mass destruction on Iraq, might first pray this prayer, so they too might realize the full measure of what the United States is doing there.”

Twain’s story has also inspired pacifist Christian denominations. The official website of the United Methodist Church lists “The War-Prayer” as one of several preaching resources for times of war or national crisis. Despite the disclaimer that these resources are offered only “as a service” and that the United Methodist Church’s Center for Worship Resources does not necessarily endorse any of these materials, the denomination’s position on war seems generally in line with what Twain says in “The War-Prayer” (“Preaching”). The church’s position on military service reads, “We deplore war and urge the peaceful

settlement of all disputes among nations. . . ." ("Military"). This statement is clearly based on the recognition of what Twain calls the "full import" of a war (Twain 424).

Meanwhile, in his sermon "Why a War Prayer?" the Unitarian minister David Pyle approaches Twain's story from a deistic perspective. According to him, "The War-Prayer" is a condemnation not of war per se but a petition to God for blessing the act of war. Although Pyle does believe in using military means for the protection and security of a nation, he also comments that, in times of conflict, humans should use their God-given capacity to think, act, and make judgments rather than selfishly invoking the name of God: "[I]f you need God's assistance to succeed in War (or any venture), then perhaps it is something that you do not need to undertake in the first place."

In his anti-war rhetoric, Twain recalls Henry David Thoreau, John Dos Passos, I.F. Stone, and Martin Luther King, Jr. A conscientious objector, Thoreau opposes the American war on Mexico in his "Civil Disobedience" (1849). *Three Soldiers* (1921), Dos Passos's novel set in World War I, exposes the brutal and dehumanizing impact of war on three ordinary soldiers. In his *I.F. Stone's Weekly* (1953-67) and *I.F. Stone's Bi-Weekly* (1967-71), Stone reveals the American government's lies about the Vietnam War including the Gulf of Tonkin incident. In "Beyond Vietnam" (1967), King opposes U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War based on moral, racial, and economic grounds. However, none of these writings seems to enjoy the popular appeal that "The War-Prayer" does. The stranger's witty deconstruction of the pastor's patriotic prayer is brief and powerful enough to make the reader reflect on the moral and ethical implications of war in one sitting.

Works Cited

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