

The Sermon on The Mark

Barry CRIMMINS

To grasp how hard it is to express antiwar sentiment in mainstream America, consider this: Mark Twain couldn't get “The War-Prayer” published while he was alive.

Even worse, it wasn't just any Mark Twain who couldn't get this crucial tract into print. It was 70-year-old Mark Twain. Legend emeritus Mark Twain. The Mark Twain who had done world concert tours performing symphonic oratory to rapt overflow audiences. It was steamboat captain, journalist, essayist, minter of maxims, travel-writer beyond compare and author of novels who will live until *the damned human race* inevitably eliminates itself, Mark Twain who could not get “The War-Prayer” published.

Many of Samuel Clemens's very important political works have been dismissed by scholars and critics who've attempted to transmogrify his natural grief over personal loss into a sad and public departure from reason. And why was he crazy? Because (among other injustices) he railed against the needless infliction of violence upon the cannon fodder dispatched to fight needless wars—as well as the grief and suffering of their loved ones, caretakers and survivors. Pretty crazy, huh? For such a weak argument, it certainly has been durable: it began while he was alive remains in disservice today.

Obviously Twain's life was full of grief because Twain was a human and sooner or later being a human is going to hurt—a lot. Twain lost dear friends, parents, siblings, children and his wife over a span of decades. Twain's personal suffering undoubtedly helped fuel the extremely lucid outrage he eloquently expressed in "The War-Prayer" but it was first and foremost the work of a great student and teacher of, and participant in, history.

Nevertheless his publisher passed when Mr. Clemens submitted this mordant satirical indictment of the militaristic lunacy, public cowardice and religious hypocrisy that, to paraphrase the great man, precedes war, *must* precede war, cannot help but precede war. How much shame did that publisher swallow when he said "no thanks" even after reading the following from the Prayer's preface?

. . . the half dozen rash spirits that ventured to disapprove of the war and cast a doubt upon its righteousness straightway got such a stern and angry warning that for their personal safety's sake they quickly shrank out of sight and offended no more in that way.

The cock had crowed three dozen times on Twain before "The War-Prayer" was rejected so perhaps the publisher was simply considering his own personal safety's sake. Newspaper and magazine editorialists, political cartoonists and public speakers that aimed lemmings cliff-ward with thunderous pro-war messages had already all but shouted Twain from the stage. He was admonished to return to his role as the humorous yarn-spinner whose true messages were easier to miss.

Twain was savaged for not meeting expectations. They wanted to laugh and instead were challenged to think. And feel. And then maybe laugh. He was joking in his "Seventieth Birthday Speech" when he said "I am not here to deceive; I am here to teach." But in "The War-Prayer" he wasn't kidding—he was teaching advanced truth, insight, compassion and sanity. As one who'd single-handedly seen more of the world than most of his critics combined, he understood deteriorating global and national circumstances and wrote with passion and vigor in an attempt to save what he himself would soon lose: life.

"The War-Prayer's" custard-pie in the face of piety in the name of mass murder didn't strike many of his critics the right way. Just squarely. Perhaps they were upset over the cleaning bills. The grief/loss-of-reason dispensation Twain's detractors employed to keep so much of his later work *sitting in darkness* duplicitously urged us to remember, "His earlier works were great and so let's recall the happier Mark Twain."

And slowly, that is what he became. The carefree man who wrote lighthearted tales like *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*—

they were perfect vehicles for Mickey Rooney and Bing Crosby to rollick across the silver screen into provide distraction from the grim realities of a world of economic depravity and militaristic expansion. Hollywood rewrote a happy ending for 1949's *Connecticut Yankee* because it would have been un-American to have Bing sing and dance his way through a stark warning about the technological depravity of new and more awful killing machines —especially at the dawn of the nuclear era and the mushrooming munitions profiteering it promised. Worst of all was a ridiculous bio-pic called *The Adventures of Mark Twain*, in which Frederic March chose to depict Clemens as a wide-eyed rube who couldn't understand why anyone took much notice of the tales he scribbled. By the time I was growing up in the 1960's Twain had been robotized and turned into an attraction on Disneyland's Main Street. He's held the position for half a century.

Despite repeated attempts to sanitize Mark Twain's already pure messages, some of us still read his works that sass the ever-oppressive status quo. A status quo that's been unbearable for a landslide majority of human beings ever since Twain took up their cause long ago. His allegedly glum summations have provided booster shots of hope at the most unexpected times. When "The War-Prayer" was discovered by my generation during the Vietnam War, we found someone we could trust who was over 30. Over 130!

"The War-Prayer" is the final word on war. It truly is a holy work because it peacefully resists the frothing madness required to stand on an altar to promote war. It mocks the brainlessness of nationalism and challenges people of any land to take a truly brave stand by separating themselves from the parochial mob to join anyone from anywhere smart and courageous enough to work toward resolving differences with reason rather than violence.

Even after learning how he was muffled, if not silenced, and knowing that many of the great works of his later life are still universally dismissed, even though mostly unread, I chose a course that even the premiere navigator of American letters couldn't safely negotiate. But as they like to say in the war movies, I'd go to hell for that guy. Although it's more fun going with him and so that's why I always tuck a volume or two of Twain into my suitcase before I hit the road to take my argument for the improvement of the human condition onto the stage, page or airwaves.

I'll never achieve even a fraction of what Mark Twain accomplished but I can aspire to emulate his bravery when it comes time to be one of "*those rash spirits that ventured to disapprove of the war and cast a doubt upon its righteousness.*" Since first reading "The War-Prayer" I have wandered in a "*wilderness of flags*" for over 35 years. I have performed and written material in the ever-darkening shadow of a Stars and Stripes that

has been dragged through the mud, blood and treachery of one unjust war after the next. At times I've inoculated myself from an audience's silence and/or jeers by thinking, "*It was believed afterward that the man was a lunatic, because there was no sense in what he said.*" My audiences just wanted some laughs, but not the kind that come from understanding the buffoonery, arrogance and depravity that's led to wars from Southeast Asia to Central America to the Middle East. Damned expectations!

It is a joyous and rare day when another "War-Prayer" passage does not impale my heart, "*..tear their soldiers to bloody shreds with our shells; help us to cover their smiling fields with the pale forms of their patriot dead; help us to drown the thunder of the guns with the shrieks of their wounded, writhing in pain; help us to lay waste their humble homes with a hurricane of fire; help us to wring the hearts of their unoffending widows with unavailing grief; help us to turn them out roofless with little children to wander unfriended the wastes of their desolated land in rags and hunger and thirst, sports of the sun flames of summer and the icy winds of winter, broken in spirit, worn with travail, imploring Thee for the refuge of the grave and denied it—for our sakes who adore Thee, Lord, blast their hopes, blight their lives, protract their bitter pilgrimage, make heavy their steps, water their way with their tears, stain the white snow with the blood of their wounded feet!*"

There's never a day when I fail to think of the author of the greatest spiritual offering since the Sermon on the Mount and realize that regardless of what a century of jingoists would have you believe, Mark Twain was anything but a lunatic, because there was perfect sense in what he said.