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Mark Twain's "The War-Prayer"—Reflections on Vietnam and Iraq

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Although he penned the words a century ago, if Mark Twain had been alive in 1970, or were alive today, he could as easily, and with the same ironic illumination, have written "The War-Prayer." Why? Because Twain would certainly have thought that the Philippines became Vietnam and have become Iraq—with regard to the role played by the United States. Twain would have wanted to convey his anti-chauvinistic, anti-war message with the same poignantly convincing force these decades later as he did in the early 20th century.

As Twain's minister uses God and religion to rally his flock in support of war, a pale man walks up and nudges him aside. In contrast, the pale man urges the congregation to realize the horrible reality for which they are, in fact, praying. With his words, he illustrates the violence and death that stem from believing that righteousness and God are always the natural companions of one's own views and actions.

Through the pale man, the reader is told, "If you would beseech a blessing upon yourself, beware! lest without intent you invoke a curse upon a neighbor at the same time." He continues:

"Grant us the victory, O Lord our God!" That is sufficient. The *whole* of the uttered prayer is compact into those pregnant words. Elaborations were not necessary. When you have prayed for victory you have prayed for many unmentioned results which follow victory—*must* follow it, cannot help but follow it.

The "unmentioned results" are destruction, blood, and death for other peoples, races, and nations. The pale man rhetorically lets the congregation know what in fact they are actually asking for when praying for victory:

O Lord, our God, help us to 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! We ask it, in the spirit of love, of Him Who is the Source of Love, and Who is the ever-faithful refuge and friend of all that are sore beset and seek His aid with humble and contrite hearts. Amen.

Twain is helping us, really urging us, to recognize that extreme self-righteousness, which flows so naturally from xenophobic nationalism, makes one oblivious and blind to the results of war. Americans knew almost nothing with regard to the impact upon the Filipinos of the presence of American military forces in the early 20th century, and in spite of television, embedded reporters, and the internet, most Americans are today equally unaware of the horrors that the American invasion has inflicted on millions of Iraqis. With God and Religion with the United States in the Philippines a hundred years ago and still with America today in Iraq, there is no need to consider others, no need to contemplate the possibility that they too have lives and hopes. That they too feel pain, bleed, and die.

I saw this reality only too well in a photography show in the spring of 2006 at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography. The photographs depicted Vietnam from 1954-1975, the war years. They were taken mostly by North Vietnamese photographers with some also by South Vietnamese and Japanese with a couple, as well, by American photographers. The photos illustrated all sides of the war, and included shots of four different armies: NVA (North Vietnamese Army); ARVN (Army of the Republic of Viet Nam); NLF (National Liberation Front); and American soldiers.

In the photo promoting the exhibit, a strong young Vietnamese woman is holding a long shot gun, over her back, looking over her right shoulder. There were scenes of Northern propaganda, young women posing with guns and rifles on guarded boats, a young woman guarding a large "American enemy" in Hanoi. A shot of the ARVN's clothes and shoes shed on the highway. Shots of the desperation of those fleeing defeat and imprisonment.

All sides suffering: everything my native country and its people endured, all the blood that has spurted from her womb and wounds. This was in fact, a civil war: the Soviet Union and China had provided the North with ammunition and guns; the United States provided troops, advisors, ammunition and guns to those in the South. I was reminded of the desperation my family and I had fled. Fires, napalm, Agent Orange deforestation by American forces to force out the NLF. Everybody was fighting for an idea, a cause. The north supported by the Soviet Union and China, for Communism; and the south, supported

by the United States, and some of its allies, against Communism.

I was moved by the photos' visual record of the destruction of Vietnam. Although Twain was speaking of the American involvement in the Philippines in his short-story, he could easily have been speaking of these photos and the conflict in Vietnam. The whole country was a battlefield, ravaged by destruction from the NVA, NLF, the ARVN, and the non-Vietnamese, primarily American, armies.

As a Vietnamese-American, who left Saigon with my parents for the States as a child, I understand this only too well. Vietnam, particularly, has had to fight invading armies for over a thousand years, living through war after war with the Chinese, Japanese, and French. This almost endless fighting through the centuries has formed much of the character of the Vietnamese people, indeed has instilled an inner toughness that in some respects is quite in contrast to the peoples of much of the rest of Southeast Asia. Women, as well, were involved and affected, learned to shoot and certainly learned to die.

Being a refugee with my family in the United States, I was saved from having to live in post-war Vietnam, saved from the ravages of Agent Orange, saved from the suffering the new Communist regime would have caused my family. My father was an Officer and surgeon in the ARVN. If we had stayed behind, he would have been imprisoned, certainly mistreated, and my mother, also a medical doctor, would have had to fend alone for herself and her five children. In fact, in many ways, she had already been doing just that as my father was for years on the front line sewing up bodies that had been destroyed on battlefields. Certainly, my father and the "pale man" would understand one another quite well.

Mark Twain's Minister and George W. Bush also would have known one another quite well. Certainly, the Minister believed, with a belief built on faith, in the propriety and righteousness of his words and suggested actions. And, certainly, as many have noted, President Bush sees the United States and his actions and policies as embodying God's will.

As did the Minister, Bush obviously believes that God is with him and with the United States—in Iraq and, indeed, wherever Bush decides to deploy America's unrivaled military might.

Remarkably, and sadly, "The War-Prayer" is as meaningful today as when written a hundred years ago. Perhaps copies should be sent to all of the world's leaders today, and certainly, Twain, who in many respects is the quintessential American writer, would have wanted many copies sent to the White House and today's President, who, of course, considers himself to be the quintessential American.