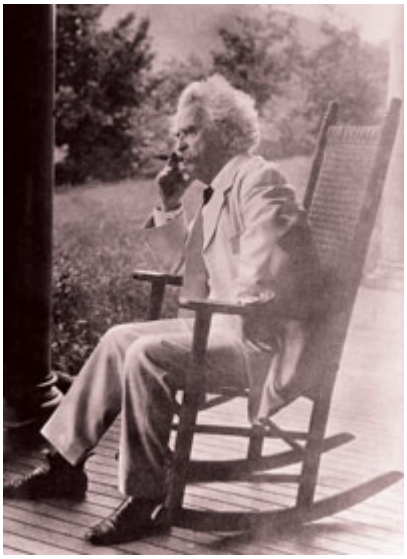
Written by **Jack Kenny** on December 30, 2010

Mark Twain's Tabooed Talk



It is sometimes said regretfully that many Americans today get their "slant" on the news from TV's late-night comedians. But today's "baby boomers" and Generation X-ers and Y-ers are not among the first Americans to find their politics strained through the filter of humor. More than a century before Jay Leno, Jon Stewart, and Stephen Colbert began coming into people's living rooms via broadcast and cable television, Samuel Langhorne Clemens, known to readers around the world as Mark Twain, was infiltrating the same sanctuary via newspapers, magazines, and books. In a 2008 article for Time magazine, humorist Roy Blount, Jr. showed just how topical, yet timeless, Twain's humor was and is.

In *King Leopold's Soliloquy*, Twain's scathing 1905 satire on the Belgian occupation of the Congo, Blount found the kind of criticism that might have been aimed a few short years ago at a U.S. government embarrassed by the photographs of abuse at the American-run Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. Twain imagined the frustration the Belgian King must have felt when photographers discovered natives of the Congo whose hands had been cut off by their Belgian captors. (In the days before the coming of the camera, the King could avail himself of what became known in our Watergate era as "plausible deniability.")

"Then all of a sudden came the crash!" Twain's Leopold laments. "That is to say, the incorruptible Kodak — and all the harmony went to hell! The only witness I have encountered in my long experience that I couldn't bribe." At least King Leopold didn't have to worry about a WikiLeaks exposing his skullduggery on the Internet.

"Whether Twain was talking about racism at home, the foreign misadventures of the Western powers or the excesses of the era of greed he initially flourished in after the Civil War," Blount wrote, "his target was always human folly and hypocrisy, which turn out to be perennial topics for further study."

On the centenary of the author's 1910 death, the University of California Press late in 2010 released the first of three volumes of Twain's expanded biography, including material the author himself decreed should not be published until he had been dead for 100 years.

"From the first, second, third and fourth editions all sound and sane expressions of opinion must be left out," Twain instructed his heirs and editors in 1906. "There may be a market for that kind of wares a century from now. There is no hurry. Wait and see."

Some of those opinions might still be regarded in some quarters as something other than "sound and sane." Twain referred to American soldiers in the Philippines as "our uniformed assassins," though his invective was more often and more appropriately aimed at the government that sent them there. Still, it

is not hard to imagine the outrage that description would provoke were it uttered today about our troops in Afghanistan or Iraq. Bill O'Reilly would likely have Mark Twain hauled off his set at Fox News, perhaps in one piece, if Twain dared to enter the "No Spin Zone." And there would be a predictable and understandable uproar if Twain's version of the Thanksgiving holiday were taught in our public schools:

> Thanksgiving Day, a function which originated in New England two or three centuries ago when those people recognized that they really had something to be thankful for — annually, not oftener — if they had succeeded in exterminating their neighbors, the Indians, during the previous twelve months instead of getting exterminated by their neighbors the Indians. Thanksgiving Day became a habit, for the reason that in the course of time, as the years drifted on, it was perceived that the exterminating had ceased to be mutual and was all on the white man's side, consequently on the Lord's side, consequently it was proper to thank the Lord for it.

Skewering Imperialism

Killing, Twain wrote in his short story *The Chronicle of Young Satan*, is "the chiefest ambition of the human race and the earliest incident in its history." Yet he was not a pacifist. He wrote favorably of the French Revolution, which in the name of liberty devoured it, and in his own time favored the Japanese in the Russo-Japanese War. Though he was later a founding member and vice president of the Anti-Imperialist League, he was initially a supporter of the U.S. role in the Spanish-American War, applauding it as a means of freeing Cuba. "Old as I am, I want to go to the war myself," he wrote in a letter from Vienna. "And I should do it, too, if it were not for the danger."

But he believed his country — or, more precisely, his government — had gone astray, both morally and geographically, when it used the war over Cuba as the occasion for also taking the Philippines from the Spanish colonists and then denying the Filipinos their promised independence. Benevolent American rule would "uplift and civilize and Christianize" the poor natives, a pious President McKinley declared. In fact, most of the "little brown brothers" McKinley wished to "Christianize" were Catholics. And the Filipinos, with ideas of their own about liberty and independence, revolted against their new overlords. During the war that followed, Twain bitterly denounced America's "land-stealing and liberty-crucifying crusade."

"I am an anti-imperialist," the author told reporters on his return to the States. "I am opposed to having the eagle put its talons on any other land." His description of the nation's first overseas imperialist adventure reads like a retrospective of the Vietnam War or the promised "cakewalk" in Iraq. We had, he said, "got into a mess, a quagmire from which each fresh step renders the difficulty of extraction immensely greater."

While he deplored the slaughter going on in the name of civilization, "uplift," and, especially, Christianity, Twain had particular contempt for "the water cure," a method of "enhanced interrogation" we now know as waterboarding. The purpose, then as now, was to get the subject to reveal information his captors believed he was withholding.

"To make them confess — what?" Twain thundered in an argument strikingly similar to one often heard today. "Truth? Or lies? How can one know which it is they are telling? For under unendurable pain a man confesses anything that is required of him, true or false, and his evidence is worthless."

If it is surprising to find echoes of today's controversies in the polemics of 100 years ago, we can be reasonably certain that Twain's views were no less controversial in his own time. The fact that he was the world's best-known and much-loved humorist did not make his anti-establishment essays and

speeches any less loathsome to men who wielded great power to their own advantage and, so they imagined, their nation's advantage. When the United States, in a coalition of Western nations, invaded China to put down the Boxer rebellion in 1900, Mark Twain conspicuously did not "support the troops."

"It is all China now and my sympathies are with the Chinese," he wrote. "I hope they will drive all the foreigners out and keep them out for good." Twain's views on that subject inspired President Theodore Roosevelt in 1901 to label the esteemed author a "prize idiot."

No doubt many Americans agreed with the popular young President. Many of Twain's opinions were too much for his contemporaries. "None but the dead are permitted to tell the truth," he lamented. Even at the height of his undisputed talent, he encountered rejection from fearful editors, and at the peak of his popularity, he dared the scorn of both press and public. He was, not surprisingly, as contemptuous of the gatekeepers of acceptable opinion and lions of the "fourth estate" as many Americans are today. "The awful power, the public opinion of a nation," he wrote, "is created in America by a hoard of ignorant, self-complacent simpletons who failed at ditching and shoemaking and fetched up journalism on their way to the poorhouse."

Twain submitted his now-famous "War Prayer" for publication in 1905, but its graphic description of the realities of war made it, in the judgment of *Harper's Bazaar* editor Elizabeth Jordan, unsuitable for publication in that genteel journal. It was eventually published posthumously in 1923 in what Ron Powers, author of *Mark Twain: A Life*, describes as a "bowdlerized form." Little was heard of it from then until the Vietnam War era, when, Powers noted, "war protestors read it aloud in coffee-house protests and mailed it around to one another." It has since taken on new life in cyberspace as antiwar bloggers have circulated it through the Internet.

Creating Wonder With Wit

Wit, observed G.K. Chesterton, "is a sword; it is meant to make people feel the point as well as see it. All honest people saw the point of Mark Twain's wit. Not a few dishonest people felt it." But it was not just the dishonest or the dull-witted that Twain skewered with his satirical swift sword. He claimed that most men, himself included, are moral cowards, and he found it ironic that the virtues of freedom were most often and most loudly praised by those who least favor their exercise. An unconventional Presbyterian, Twain was not above paying a left-handed compliment to God in order to castigate both the timidity and the intolerance of his countrymen.

"It is by the goodness of God," he wrote, "that in our country we have those three unspeakably precious things: freedom of speech, freedom of conscience and the prudence never to practice either of them." Scorn and ridicule are not always adequate to silence unwelcome opinion, he acknowledged, but they are often the only weapons available.

"If the man doesn't believe as we do, we say he is a crank and that settles it," he wrote in *Following the Equator*. "I mean it does nowadays, because now we can't burn him."

At its most humorous, his wit always had some bite to it, as when he proclaimed George Washington "ignorant of the commonest accomplishments of youth. He could not even lie." The low esteem in which the American public now holds the Congress of the United States would surely not have surprised Twain, who surmised there was "no distinctively American criminal class except for Congress." Nor would the present-day concern over the shortcomings of our public schools. "In the first place God made idiots," he surmised. "That was for practice. Then he made school boards."

"He is very much in the same position as myself," wrote British playwright George Bernard Shaw. "He

has to put matters in such a way as to make people who would otherwise hang him believe he is joking." Few would have thought Twain joking, and some might have wished to hang him, if they had read his plain-spoken complaint, included in the new *Autobiography*, that "our people have no ideals now that are worthy of consideration; that our Christianity which we have always been so proud of — not to say vain of — is now nothing but a shell, a sham, a hypocrisy; that we have lost our ancient sympathy with oppressed peoples struggling for life and liberty; that when we are not coldly indifferent to such things we sneer at them, and that the sneer is about the only expression the newspapers and the nation deal in with regard to such things."

The author of such passages might seem a different fellow altogether from the humorist who responded good-naturedly to a premature obituary, noting, "Reports of my death are greatly exaggerated." Perhaps by happenstance, perhaps by design, we have allowed the humor to overshadow and soften the sharp edge of his social criticism. Twain became "Colonel Sanders without the chicken, the avuncular man who told stories," Powers told the *New York Times* in an interview in 2010. "He's been scrubbed and sanitized, and his passion has been kind of forgotten in all these long decades. But here (in the previously unpublished works) he is talking to us, without any filtering at all, and what comes through that we have lost is precisely this fierce, unceasing passion."

Hal Holbrook, who began his one-man show *Mark Twain Tonight!* in 1956, has been unearthing various levels of Twain's wit and unique storytelling talents for more than half a century. In an article included in *The Mark Twain Anthology*, Holbrook wrote that it was during an historic battle over school integration in 1957 that he began to incorporate Twain's political and social commentary into his shows.

"Until then I had been trying to put together a funny show, born in a nightclub," the actor recalled. "But when President Eisenhower called out the troops to put down the racial explosion at Central High School in Little Rock, Mark Twain's social conscience began to cast its shadow over me." As it happened, he was scheduled to do his show near Little Rock shortly after the riots occurred. "I did not yet have material in my repertoire that specifically commented on racial injustice," Holbrook wrote. "All I had was the Sherburn-Boggs selection from *Huckleberry Finn*, which ends with Colonel Sherburn's blistering speech to the mob that has come to lynch him. Although a white man is speaking to a white mob, Mark Twain is making a thinly veiled statement about the Ku Klux Klan. The portrait of sudden violence in the shooting of Boggs, of ignorance and the mob mentality that sweeps people along was eerily appropriate to this modern-day crisis in Little Rock, and Twain's setting did happen to be a town in Arkansas. So that was the selection I chose to deliver."

Holbrook later worked into his routine what Twain called the "Silent Lie" of remaining quiet in the face of grave injustice. When he did his show in Prague, Holbrook recalled, two brave souls applauded the line about how "whole nations of people conspire to propagate gigantic mute lies" that serve only "tyrannies and shams." The same line drew applause in Hamburg, Germany, in 1961 and in Oxford, Mississippi, on October 9, 1962, during the riots over the admission of African-American James Meredith to the University of Mississippi.

Words That Bleed

Twain's "War Prayer" and other polemic essays of the 1900s are "the Rosetta Stone of dissent from American imperialist folly," wrote Powers. There were, to be sure, other voices raised against that imperialist march, both within and outside the Anti-Imperialist League. But many of them spoke in such starched-collar, schoolmistress tones that they proved poor kindling to fire the conscience of a nation.

"Have we a course of war so clear, so loftily imperative," asked the weekly journal *Nation* in 1899, "that all the hideous carnage and the fearful blow to civic progress must be hazarded in order to vindicate humanity and righteousness?" Even as outspoken and frequently harsh a critic of the Philippines war as Senator George Hoar, a Massachusetts Republican, referred to it at one point as "a policy of ruffianism," a phrase more apt to describe a fistfight in a schoolyard.

Defenders of the "ruffianism" countered with charges of disloyalty or even treason, accusing opponents of undermining the mission and endangering the lives of "our boys" overseas. "Their work cost the lives of hundreds of American soldiers — stabbed in the back as they stood out there on the firing line, by their own countrymen," charged Fred C. Chamberlin, author of *The Blow From Behind* (1903). "All up and down this great country the Anti-Imperialists made speeches of sympathy for the men who were shooting at our own soldiers."

The fact that our own soldiers had been sent on a mission to conquer and subjugate a people in their own land seemed to neither enter the thoughts nor cool the ardor of those who, like Senator Albert Beveridge of Indiana, saw the hand of God leading the Stars and Stripes westward o'er the great Pacific. It was the same hand seen by Congregationalist minister Josiah Strong, who proclaimed the mission of Anglo-Saxons to carry the blessings of civilization to inferior races. James M. King, a Methodist minister in New York, said unequivocally: "God is using the Anglo-Saxon to conquer the world for Christ by dispossessing feeble races, and assimilating and molding others."

Not all the Americans fighting the Filipinos were as eager to carry on the war as some of the politicians, preachers, and journalists back home. "I am not afraid and am always ready to do my duty," said a sergeant in the First Nebraska regiment, "but I would like someone to tell me what we are fighting for." But some seemed to glory in the blood and guts and gore of the battlefield. In his 1962 biography, *Mark Twain, The Man and His Work,* Edward Wagenknecht quoted a letter from a soldier to his mother, published in an Iowa newspaper: "We never left one alive," he wrote. "If any one was wounded we would run our bayonets right through him." The Anti-Imperialist League published a number of letters from soldiers in the Philippines, including one from a volunteer from the state of Washington, who wrote: "This shooting of human beings is a 'hot game' and beats rabbit hunting all to pieces."

Against such unbridled zeal for the bloodied glory of war, the *Nation's* warning of "a fearful blow to civic progress" was of little avail. Even the magazine's reference to "all the hideous carnage" merely hints at the hideous nature of the carnage. Twain's "War Prayer" goes a good deal further with words that all but bleed from the page, describing bodies torn to "bloody shreds," guns drowning out the "shrieks of the wounded," and widows and orphans wandering from their war-wrecked homes, the white snow "stained with the blood of their wounded feet."

It's not a description of war we are likely to hear on either broadcast or cable TV news or read about in our daily papers. Nor are we likely to see a scene Twain wrote for a pageant called "The Stupendous Procession," with the 20th century portrayed as "a fair young creature, drunk and disorderly, borne in the arms of Satan," and Christendom "a majestic matron in flowing robes drenched with blood." On her head was "a golden crown of thorns, impaled on its spine the bleeding hearts of patriots who died for their country — Boers, Boxers, Filipinos; in one hand a slingshot in the other a Bible, open at the text — 'Do unto others,' etc."

There are, after all, milder, antiseptic ways to talk about war, and we have surely heard them all. As the humorist Blount concluded, "Old Mark, unvarnished, might be too hot for cable, even today."

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