

APRIL 15, 2003

Mark Twain speaks: "I'm an anti-imperialist"

With U.S. troops occupying Iraq and the Bush administration making bellicose noises about Syria, let's consider some rarely mentioned words from the most revered writer in American history.

Mark Twain was painfully aware of many people's inclinations to go along with prevailing evils. When slavery was lawful, he recalled, abolitionists were "despised and ostracized, and insulted" – by "patriots." As far as Twain was concerned, "Loyalty to petrified opinion never yet broke a chain or freed a human soul."

With chiseled precision, he wielded language as a hard-edged tool. "The difference between the right word and the almost right word," he once commented, "is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug." Here are a few volts of Twain's lightning that you probably never saw before:

- "Who are the oppressors? The few: the king, the capitalist and a handful of other overseers and superintendents. Who are the oppressed? The many: the nations of the earth; the valuable personages; the workers; they that make the bread that the soft-handed and idle eat."
- "Why is it right that there is not a fairer division of the spoil all around? Because laws and constitutions have ordered otherwise. Then it follows that laws and constitutions should change around and say there shall be a more nearly equal division."
- "I am an anti-imperialist. I am opposed to having the eagle put its talons on any other land."

At the turn of the century, as the Philippines came under the wing of the U.S. government, Mark Twain suggested a new flag for the Philippine province -- "just our usual flag, with the white stripes painted black and the stars replaced by the skull and cross-bones."

While the United States followed up on its victory in the Spanish-American War

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by slaughtering thousands of Filipino people, Twain spoke at anti-war rallies. He also flooded newspapers with letters and wrote brilliant, unrelenting articles.

On Dec. 30, 1900, the New York Herald published Mark Twain's commentary – "A Greeting from the 19th Century to the 20th Century" – denouncing the blood-drenched colonial forays of England, France, Germany, Russia and the United States. "I bring you the stately matron named Christendom, returning bedraggled, besmirched and dishonored from pirate-raids in Kiao-Chou, Manchuria, South Africa and the Philippines, with her soul full of meanness, her pocket full of boodle and her mouth full of pious hypocrisies. Give her the soap and a towel, but hide the looking-glass."

Twain followed up in early 1901 with an essay titled "To the Person Sitting in Darkness." Each of the world's strongest nations, he wrote, was proceeding "with its banner of the Prince of Peace in one hand and its loot-basket and its butcher-knife in the other." Many readers and some newspapers praised Twain's polemic. But his essay angered others, including the American Missionary Board and the New York Times.

"Particularly in his later years," scholar Tom Quirk has noted, "the fierceness of Twain's anti-imperialist convictions disturbed and dismayed those who regarded him as the archetypal American citizen who had somehow turned upon Americanism itself."

What Mark Twain had to say is all too relevant to what's happening these days. But policymakers in Washington can rest easy. Twain's most inflammatory writings are smoldering in his grave – while few opportunities exist for the general public to hear similar views expounded today.

"None but the dead are permitted to speak truth," Twain remarked. Even then, evidently, their voices tend to be muffled. ■