Loyalty to Mankind

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Now perhaps more than ever, our politicians have convinced us that empathy for citizens of other countries is unpatriotic. It should therefore come as no surprise that the American public today does not celebrate Mark Twain's "The War-Prayer" to the same extent as his other works. In "The War-Prayer," family members of soldiers gather at a church to pray for their victory, only to have a messenger from God explain to these people that they are truly praying for agony and death—for the opposing side. It seems truly unfortunate that this short story has not reached the same mass audience and level of fame as the better-known Twain classics, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and the *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. For just as a novel like *Huckleberry Finn* serves as a searing critique of racial inequality, "The War-Prayer" offers a dark satire on society's willful blindness to the ramifications of jingoistic patriotism. With "The War-Prayer's" truly timeless message—that we too commonly lack the empathy necessary to allow others the same good life that we wish for ourselves and our loved ones—one cannot help but wonder how our history as Americans might have changed had "The War-Prayer" been as popular as the Twain classics.

At its core, "The War-Prayer" is a story about empathy, and understanding the situation from another's point of view. As the church members pray to God to "crush the foe" and "grant to [the. . .] country imperishable honor and glory," few seem to care that their prayer, should it be answered, would result in the annihilation of other individuals. Even those who do step forward to question the war's merit receive "such a stern and angry warning that for their personal safety's sake they quickly [shrink] out of sight."

As far as superpowers go, America has a superficial history of empathy toward other countries. Superficial, because it seems the United States acts with empathy when it serves in the United States' best interests. We did not enter World War II to combat dictatorship or hateful ideology; we joined the war only after we realized that American lives were in danger. We came to Kuwait's aid against Iraq in 1991 under the pretense that we had a moral obligation to do so; yet it was no coincidence that Kuwait also happened to be a primary exporter of our oil, and that Iraq had formerly been a chief ally of the Soviet Union. And more recently, our government claims that we have brought democracy to the Middle East and liberated oppressed civilians through our efforts in Iraq, but one could make a compelling case that our purpose there is as much economic in nature as it is humanitar-

ian.

The American government has often implied over its history that the lives of Americans are of higher priority than the lives of those in foreign countries. So if the American people did truly share, or at least acknowledge, the viewpoint Mark Twain seems to convey in "The War-Prayer," how might our history have changed? Let us look at two examples.

Harry Truman's decision to drop the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki seems to be a prime case for examination. Over a hundred thousand Japanese lives were lost in the name of sparing American ones. Entire cities were pillaged; entire communities destroyed. As if it were not terrible enough for a single life to be lost, in a moment individuals lost lives in incomprehensible numbers.

But what if we had had more empathy for the Japanese civilians? Were they the ones allying with Hitler, or was it Hirohito? What crime did the Japanese civilians commit? One cannot dodge such questions. It seems, by all accounts, that the vast majority of people who lost their lives on August 6 and August 9, 1945, were innocent individuals, guilty only of living in the wrong place at the wrong time.

These questions do not have definitive answers by any means. Perhaps more empathy in this case might have spelled the destruction of the United States as Americans knew it. Perhaps we would have lost Americans in similar numbers to those the Japanese lost as a result of our atomic explosions. Yet I still have trouble digesting the idea that Americans must value American lives more than those of others. Perhaps it is productive to feel a greater value for one's own than for foreigners. From an objective standpoint, however, Americans must remember that American loss has no greater validity or meaning than the loss of anyone in any place in the world. We must recognize that those who perished as a result of Fat Man and Little Boy also had loved ones who, from that day forward, could never again live with any sort of happiness—that is, if they, too, did not perish on that fateful day.

Twain's line still seems to ring in the reader's ear: those who oppose the war receive "such a stern and angry warning that for their personal safety's sake they quickly [shrink] out of sight." Does that sound like anything we have experienced today? Let us take the example of Fox News. On March 19, 2003, America invaded Iraq. By April, Fox News anchors, pundits, and hosts such as Shepard Smith, Bill O'Reilly, and Sean Hannity had taken the official stance that it was "unpatriotic" for "liberals" to question, or demonstrate against, the war in Iraq. Fortunately for those anti-war protesters, the liberal side had enough support to maintain its position, rather than shrink back in fear, as in the situation

Twain describes. Yet the rhetoric seems strikingly similar: it is unpatriotic to have anti-war sentiment, and it is inherently bad to be unpatriotic.

This last idea begs two questions, the first being: who has created this bastardization of the word "patriotism?" Dictionary.com describes patriotism as "love and devotion to one's country." But should that not involve pride in the government's decisions? What if a person disagrees with his or her government in a particular instance? What if a person genuinely believes that such a decision is not in the best interest of his or her country? For just as we as individuals cannot attain perfection, we cannot truly believe that our government is perfect, no matter how much the politicians in the majority might try to convince us. Too often we have subconsciously defined patriotism as a loyalty to a partisan ideology. Twice in his other works Twain refutes this idea. In one of his short pieces entitled *"*The Czar's Soliloquy*,"* Twain remarks through one of his characters, "The modern patriotism, the true patriotism, the only rational patriotism is loyalty to the nation all the time, and loyalty to the government when it deserves it." And again, Twain's protagonist in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* opines,

> You see my kind of loyalty was loyalty to one's country, not to its institutions or its office-holders. The country is the real thing, the substantial thing, the eternal thing; it is the thing to watch over, and care for, and be loyal to; institutions are extraneous, they are its mere clothing, and clothing can wear out, become ragged, cease to be comfortable, cease to protect the body from winter, disease, and death. To be loyal to rags, to shout for rags, to worship rags, to die for rags—that is a loyalty of unreason. (81-82)

And here is the second question, one that, it seems, we are all afraid to ask: is patriotism necessarily a good thing? TV pundit Bill O'Reilly would kick me right off his show if I should ever pose that question in public (not to worry—I have no plans to make an appearance on *The Factor*). Come to think of it, so would most hosts, even someone on the other side of the spectrum, such as Jon Stewart. But Twain seems to maintain that such a question is a valid one. And yes, I know the knee-jerk, and perfectly valid response is that patriotism is necessary for the preservation of one's country. And with this answer I agree. But I assert that a pride and love for one's country ought never to supercede a love for humanity. And I believe Twain would agree with me on that.

Twain makes a similar case in "The War-Prayer." Do these people honestly believe that glory for one's country has more value than the lives of other human beings? Do they believe that their family members' lives are worth more than those of other human beings? To them, certainly. But do the soldiers on the opposing forces not also have families,

friends, and loved ones? In "The War-Prayer," the characters' sheer ignorance leads them to believe that God's messenger, who has posed these questions, must be just an insane old man. But in today's society, ignorance cannot be a sufficient excuse.

Though the opposition in a war may fall into the category of "evil" by American standards, we must remember that the opposing side does not view itself as the evil side, but rather as the moral and right side. From a more objective point of view, it becomes much more difficult to determine who is truly right and wrong in the absolute sense, if such a sense exists. If patriotism means supporting a government's perceived incorrect, potentially detrimental, and possibly biased decision-making, then perhaps it ought not to have such a positive connotation. Perhaps in a State of War, our duty does not lie in calling for a prayer of glory for one's country. Perhaps our duty lies in calling for a prayer for the preservation of humanity.