



DRAWING BY SALLY LACKAFFE & ROGER HAYES

O DEAR GOD, PLEASE HELP US TO KILL THEM

BY STEPHANIE SALTER

As political satires go, it is a dark and brutal one that begins on a deceptively positive note:

"It was a time of great excitement. The country was up in arms, the war was on, in every breast burned the holy fire of patriotism..."

The place was the United States, the time 1904-1905, and the author was Samuel L. Clemens, by then known around the world as "Mark Twain." In a very short story called *The War Prayer*, Clemens draws his unsuspecting reader in with a rousing account of a nation passionately headed off to war.

"Sunday morning came...the church was filled...With the volunteers sat their dear ones, proud, happy, and envied by the neighbors and friends who had no sons and brothers to send forth to the field of honor, there to win for the flag or failing, die the noblest of noble deaths."

Led by a pastor, Clemens' imagined congregation prays to "an ever-merciful and benignant Father of us all" to watch, aid, comfort, bless and shield "our noble young soldiers" and make them "strong and confident, invincible in the bloody onset; help them to crush the foe, grant to them and to their flag and country imperishable honor and glory."

Then, Clemens eviscerates his reader with what he later told a friend was "the whole truth." In the person of a messenger

from God, "an aged stranger...his long body clothed in a robe that reached to his feet...his seamy face unnaturally pale, pale even to ghastliness," the total reality of the people's prayers for victory is revealed.

It is a reality few of us ever face, let alone accept. "Listen!" the stranger commands. "...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 their 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!"

The messenger finishes by asking for all of this "in the spirit 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."

Driving the final nail of irony, Clemens closes the grim parable with the messenger demanding to know whether the congregation still desires its prayers to be answered. But no one speaks. The last sentence of the story explains:

"It was believed afterward that the man was a lunatic, because there was no sense in what he said."

Accustomed to criticism despite his literary success, Clemens insisted on keeping *The War Prayer* unpublished until after his death in 1910. As his first biographer, Albert Bigelow Paine, noted in 1912, Clemens confided his reasoning to a friend:

"Only dead men can tell the truth in this world."

In the century since it was written, *The War Prayer* has been invoked by pacifists during several conflicts in which the United States has been engaged. Its last major renaissance was the Vietnam War.

With the memory of that landscape and those people — with the vision of millions of besieged Afghan children, women and men — this seems as good a time as any for yet another reading.

Stephanie Salter is a columnist for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, from which this has been reprinted.

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Heavenly Father, bless America (not the *other* Americas: Canada, Mexico, Cuba, Haiti, The Dominican Republic, the Bahamas, Jamaica, Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Guyana, Suriname, French Guinea, Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay, Argentina and Uruguay, but the *real* America, the *United States of America*). Let your radiant blessings flow over our land, which one can find the boundaries of in every atlas. Please don't forget Alaska and Hawaii, they are not often located on the same page as a map of the continental USA. (And don't forget Guam, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands.) Also, God, the U.S. has many foreign embassies within its boundaries which are not U.S. soil, strictly speaking, so please don't bless them (but bless our embassies all over the world because they are, strictly speaking, U.S. soil). I confess a confusion about Indian reservations: are they part of the U.S. and also part independent? Well, God, bless the part that is U.S. but not the other part.

So, too, God, bless the American people. Remember, God, not everyone here is an American; please check their citizenship. If they are planning to become Americans, look into their hearts and if they are truly freedom loving people and legally in the U.S., bless them too.

Also, God, there are Americans all over the world. Please bless them, unless they are seeking to become citizens of other countries.

Yes, please, God, pour your blessings out on the U.S., your true freedom loving people, every last one of them — except the fags and fems, the commies and socialists.

~MICHAEL MILLER (aka SASHA)

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