

OPINION

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Cleansing' Huck Finn: I'm A'gin It

Fictionalizing history for propaganda purposes

BY LEE A. DANIELS

Two recent events underscore the wisdom of the warning the great historian Barbara W. Tuchman gave in 1982 to those who would "practice" the craft of writing history.

"Leaving things out because they do not fit," she wrote in her book, *Practicing History: Selected Essays*, "is writing fiction, not history."

The powerful lure to fictionalize history some succumb to for propaganda purposes, or out of a wrongheaded attempt to "comfort" either the afflicted or the powerful has shown itself at work again. On the one hand, an Alabama-based publisher has a new edition of Mark Twain's classic, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, with the word "nigger" — which appears in the original 219 times — completely excised from it and replaced with the word "slave." The new edition also substitutes the word "Indian" for the word "injun" Twain used.

This idiotic move is precisely the opposite of the search for the truth and the truthful meaning that makes any critical undertaking worth reading.

Yet, even this bit of the bizarre was topped by what occurred Thurs-

day in the House of Representatives on the first day of the new Congress.

There, its members read from the floor the entire Constitution of the United States that was approved by the Constitutional Convention of 1787 — except for those sections of the document House Republicans, who now constitute the majority, deemed politically troublesome.

So, most notably, the politically palatable Constitution read Thursday in the Congress did not include Article I, Section 2 of the Constitution — the Section which used the infamous "bound to service" and "three-fifths" clauses to euphemistically but unmistakably endorse Negro Slavery.

But the 14th amendment to the Constitution, which the post-Civil War Congress enacted along with the 13th and 15th amendments to eradicate Article, Section 2, was read.

You can see their point, of course. Reading Article I, Section 2 would illuminate the truth that the Constitution, as great as it was in many respects, was also a flawed document, one that was born of numerous political compromises and needed significant excising of its original flaws and a judicious amending to accept new realities and new needs of the American democratic experiment.

That was one of the points the Illinois Democratic Rep. Jesse Louis Jackson Jr. made in a brief remarks on the House floor just before the

reading of the "partial" Constitution began and in a later statement his office released.

"Our expectation," he said, "was that the new Republican majority would read the Constitution as written and its subsequent amendments ... that [have] turned our Constitution into a living document paid for by the blood, sweat and tears of millions of Americans from the Revolutionary War through the Civil War to even our current conflicts."

He went on to say that the "redacted Constitutional reading gives little deference to the long history of improving the Constitution ... [and] leaves out the need to continue to refine the Constitution so that we have a more perfect union."

Despite the protestations of NewSouth Books, its substituting in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* the word "slave" for the word "nigger," evinces a similar desire to glide over rather than confront the tradition of racism and exclusion that dominated American practices until well into the 20th century.

Alan Gribben, a Twain scholar at Auburn University at Montgomery, who proposed the book to NewSouth, told the *New York Times* that he had always wanted "not to pronounce that word when I was teaching either 'Huckleberry Finn' or 'Tom Sawyer.' And I don't think I'm alone."

Prof. Gribben asserted he was "by no means sanitizing Mark Twain ... I just had to get us away from obsessing about this one word, and just let the stories stand alone."

But he's got it exactly wrong. Twain's goal was not to soothe its readers; it was to alert them to the great wrong at the heart of a society which boasted interminably of its commitment to liberty and opportunity while simultaneously discriminating against African Americans, Native Americans and other entire groups of Americans.

No white American before or during his time saw this more clearly than Twain. Few white novelists have written about it with such power. (My personal Twain favorite is his 1894 novel, *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, in which he illuminates one of the central facts of Slavery — namely, that it was very often a distorted family affair.)

Who cannot see the awesome power of the word "nigger" in *Huck Finn*? Who cannot see that Twain used it as a device not to disparage blacks but to compel the reader to look into the soul of white Americans? To read, for example, the stunning passage in which Twain introduces us to Huck's odious Pap is to, first, virtually feel the hurricane-force gale of Pap's virulently racist rant about a black college professor he had recently encountered in his drunken wanderings — "a free nigger ... with the whitest shirt on you ever see, too."

Then, you understand that Pap's hatred is driven by a fear of black competition, of black success and a reckoning with his own worthlessness — an insight that continues to be broadly relevant today as well.

Shelley Fisher Fishkin, profes-

sor of English at Stanford University, made just this point in criticizing the damage done to Twain's art. "Leading black writers in America from Frederick Douglass to Ralph Ellison have understood this: to criticize racism effectively you have to make your reader hear how racists sound in all their offensive ugliness. When Malcolm X famously asked "What do you call a black man with a Ph.D.?" and answered 'Nigger,' he was testifying to the destructive power of this word and the world view it embodied."

The NewSouth edition of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* uses a euphemism for "nigger" and so distorts the reality of the era — what black Americans faced; what the majority of white Americans sought to look away from.

A century before Twain wrote, the delegates to the Constitutional Convention used euphemisms to obscure the moral cowardice they justified as pragmatism.

And Thursday, some members of Congress could not bring themselves to confront the real original Constitution, instead preferring the political comfort of a fictionalized one.

Barbara Tuchman's words have never rung truer.

Nor have William Faulkner's from his 1951 novel, *Requiem for a Nun*: The past is never dead. It's not even past.

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Health Reform is Smart Choice Repeal attempt by new Congress is a travesty

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

In 2010, there was finally good news for millions of uninsured children and families when the President and Congress took a major step towards ensuring affordable and comprehensive health coverage for millions of children and families in America.

With the passage of The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act more than 35 million Americans including more than 95 percent of children will have access to the critical health coverage they need to survive and thrive.

Among other important protections, the Affordable Care Act prohibits insurers from denying health coverage to children who desperately need it, those already sick with "pre-existing conditions."

Children like Katie in Texas who



suffers from severe seizure-like attacks that last as long as 11 hours caused by an undiagnosed neuro-developmental disorder. Katie is also deaf in one ear, has a feeding disorder and requires daily medication for asthma. In her short life, she has already made numerous visits to the emergency room and had several hospital stays.

When Katie lost her health coverage her father tried to buy private insurance through his employer but he couldn't afford the nearly \$1,000 a month cost, about 30 percent of his salary. No other private insurer would offer the family coverage for Katie due to her pre-existing conditions. Today millions of children like Katie will be able to receive the health coverage they need to grow up healthy or in less pain because of

protections in the Affordable Care Act.

In our wealthy nation no child should be born at low birthweight, at risk of future health and learning difficulties, because of preventable causes, or die in the first year of life because their mothers did not have adequate prenatal or postnatal care.

Undiagnosed, untreated, and poorly managed health and mental health problems increase a child's chances of falling behind in school or having disciplinary problems and lower a child's chances of succeeding in and out of school. Without access to comprehensive, affordable health care, more children will do poorly in school at a time when we need to be improving our global competitiveness. Good health at birth and throughout childhood is essential for them as children and as

productive future workers.

Ensuring children access to comprehensive health coverage is one of the smartest, most cost-effective choices our country can make. The hidden costs of not insuring children include high costs of uncompensated care for those without insurance; use of costly emergency room care instead of early access to primary care; long term treatment of preventable illnesses; and the costs of untreated emotional problems in children whose unmet needs bring them to the child welfare or juvenile justice systems.

Millions of children and families are already depending on the protections in the Affordable Care Act and millions more will do so as the act is implemented over the next few years. That these new and long overdue protections are now subject to a repeal attempt by some

members of the new Congress is a travesty.

A vote to repeal the Affordable Care Act is a vote to deny at least 16 million children, parents, and childless adults eligibility for Medicaid; threaten the successful Children's Health Insurance Program which now provides more than seven million children health coverage and is expected to double in size by 2015; and deny health coverage for the more than 1.2 million young adults now eligible for coverage through their parents' health plans as they graduate from school and seek work up to age 26.

A vote to repeal the Affordable Care Act would undermine opportunities for help for hundreds of thousands of children with disabilities and other special needs.

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