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Mark Twain on "idiot" Politicians and Our Current Predicament

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MARK TWAIN
Edited by Shelley Fisher Fishkin,
Stanford University

Every word of the text printed below was written by Mark Twain in novels, speeches, autobiographical dictations, interviews, letters, notebooks, manuscripts, and other sources. The material dates from 1867 to 1909, and includes material published posthumously—in some cases (by design) one hundred years after his death. From his thirties until his death in 1910, Twain railed against stupidity, tyranny, injustice, and corruption wherever he found it, and was increasingly outspoken on political issues in his later years. The objects of his barbs include the arrogance, egotism, and self-importance of a politician like President Theodore Roosevelt, whose imperialist ventures in the Philippines in the early twentieth century Twain abhorred; the dishonesty and corruption he saw in Congress and other governing bodies; and the ways that blind party loyalty sabotaged democracy.

As I edited this piece, I channeled the the spirit of my dear friend, the late Hal Holbrook, one of the greatest actors America has produced. Holbrook, who died in 2021, was a truly brilliant scholar as well as a consummate artist. Holbrook performed his original one-man show, "Mark Twain Tonight!" every year for over six decades, starting in 1954. He stitched together bits and pieces of Twain's writings for each performance in ways that made Twain appear to be addressing whatever issues were current. His highly intuitive and associative method was fueled by his encyclopedic knowledge of Twain's work, and by his pitch-perfect gifts as an artist and performer. Although Mark Twain died in 1910, as the following piece demonstrates, he continues to speak to our present moment in ways that are startlingly prescient, witty, brazen, and bold.

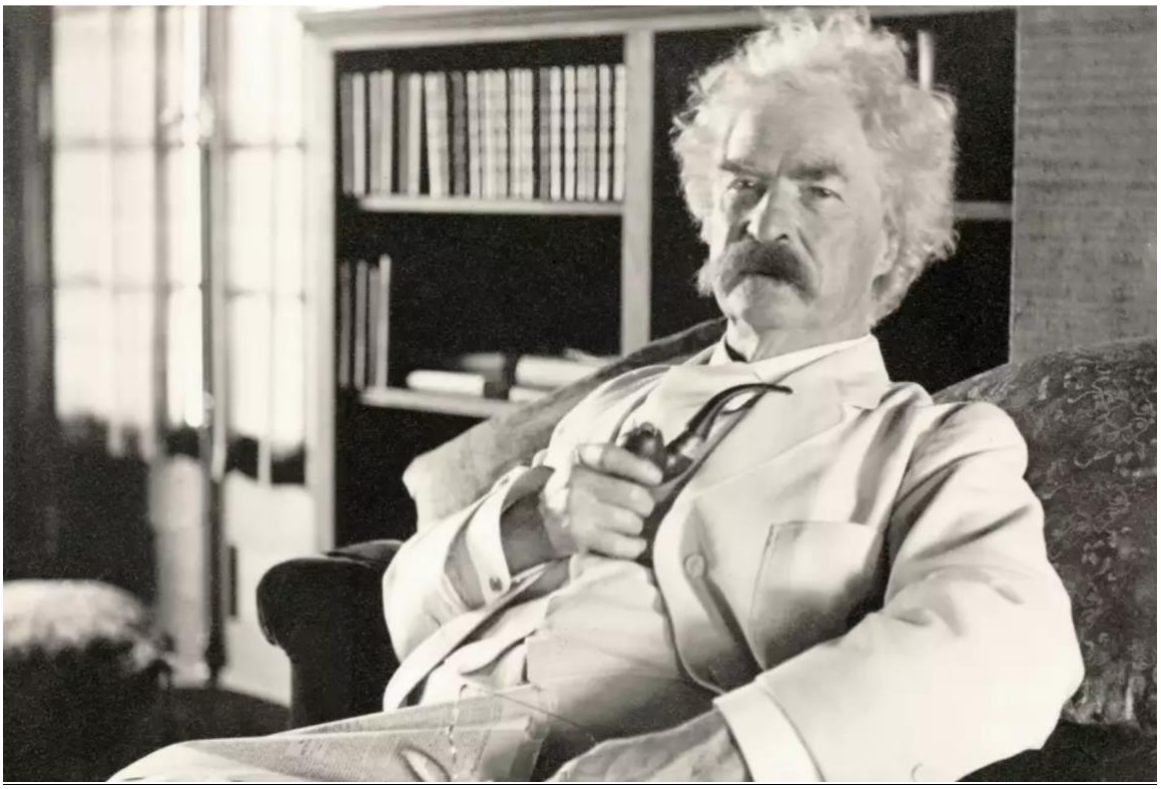


Fig. 1 Samuel Langhorne Clemens (1835 to 1910), known by pen name Mark Twain, was an American humorist, satirist, writer and lecturer whose writing indicates he seemed to know what was coming.

I have often wondered at the condition of things which set aside morality in politics and make possible the election of men whose unfitness is apparent. We have never had a president before who was destitute of self-respect & of respect for his high office; we have had no president before who was not a gentleman; we have had no president before who was intended for a butcher, a dive keeper or a bully, and missed his mission by compulsion of circumstances over which he had no control.

We are by long odds the most ill-mannered nation, civilized or savage, that exists on the planet today, and our president stands for us like a colossal monument visible from all the ends of the earth.

He is fearfully hard and coarse where another gentleman would exhibit kindliness and delicacy.

He became so expert in duplicity, and so admirably plausible that he couldn't tell himself when he was lying and when he wasn't. The most outrageous lies that can be invented will find believers if a man only tells them with all his might.

He taught them that the only true freedom of thought is to think as the party thinks; that the only true freedom of speech is to speak as the party dictates; that the only righteous toleration is toleration of what the party approves; that patriotism, duty, citizenship, and devotion to country, loyalty to the flag, are all summed up in

loyalty to party. Loyalty is a word which has worked vast harm; for it has been made to trick men into being "loyal" to a thousand iniquities.

It is interesting, wonderfully interesting—the miracles which party-politics can do with a man's mental and moral make-up. In the interest of party expediency they give solemn pledges, they make solemn compact; in the interest of party expediency, they repudiate them without a blush. They would not dream of committing these strange crimes in private life.

It is an accepted law of public life that in it, a man may soil his honor in the interest of party expediency—*must* do it when the party requires it. Where the party leads, they will follow, whether for right and honor, or through blood and dirt and a mush of mutilated morals. Here in our democracy we are cheering a thing which of all things is most foreign to it & out of place—the delivery of our political conscience into somebody else's keeping. This is patriotism on the Russian plan.

Reader, suppose you were an idiot. And suppose you were a member of Congress. But I repeat myself.

We will not hire a blacksmith who never lifted a sledge. We will not hire a school-teacher who does not know the alphabet. We will not have a man about us in our business life, in any walk of it, low or high, unless he has served an apprenticeship and can prove that he is capable of doing the work he offers to do. We even require a plumber to know something about his business, that he shall at least know which side of a pipe is the inside. But when a representative of ours learns, after long experience, how to conduct the affairs of his office, we discharge him and hire somebody that doesn't know anything about it.

Those burglars that broke into my house recently are in jail, and if they keep on, they will go to Congress. When a person starts downhill, you could never tell where he's going to stop.

People seem to think they are citizens of the Republican Party and that that is patriotism and sufficiently good patriotism. I prefer to be a citizen of the United States.

My kind of loyalty was loyalty to one's country, not to its institutions or its officeholders. 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.

In this country we have one great privilege which they don't have in other countries. When a thing gets to be absolutely unbearable the people can rise up and throw it off. That's the finest asset we've got—the ballot box.

In a monarchy, the king and his family are the country; in a republic it is the common voice of the people. Each of you, for himself, by himself and on his own responsibility, must speak. Each must for himself alone decide what is right and what is wrong, and which course is patriotic and which isn't. The citizen who thinks he sees

that the commonwealth's political clothes are worn out, and yet holds his peace and does not agitate for a new suit, is disloyal; he is a traitor.

The political and commercial morals of the United States are not merely food for laughter, they are an entire banquet.

Man is the only animal that blushes. Or needs to.

Notes

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