

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Speech on the Fourth of July, 1872

MARK TWAIN

Page | 1

Mark Twain (born Samuel Clemens; 1835–1910), author and humorist, largely took an ironic view of the world around him, rarely missing an opportunity to poke fun at ceremony, solemnity, and moral self-satisfaction. Our sacred holidays were not immune to his wit. Here, for example, from Pudd'nhead Wilson's Calendar, is Twain's entry for July 4th: "Statistics show that we lose more fools on this day than in all the other days of the year put together. This proves, by the number left in stock, that one Fourth of July per year is now inadequate, the country has grown so." In this satirical jab at Fourth of July orations, Twain prepares his own Independence Day address, for a gathering of Americans in London, July 4, 1872.

What, if anything, can be said for this mocking speech and its content? Do we as Americans have a tendency for self-congratulation that deserves to be exposed and corrected, or even ridiculed? If so, is this the best way and the right occasion for pointing out the nation's faults? Should we regret that Twain arranges it so that he was "not able" to give the speech? Does that count as appropriate self-censorship? Whose Fourth of July speech do you prefer, Twain's or Daniel Webster's (see above)? Why? Is there a role for self-mocking humor in our national calendar and in cultivating civic self-awareness and attachment? If so, what is it, and how can it best be accomplished?

Mr. Chairman and Ladies and Gentlemen,—

I thank you for the compliment which has just been tendered me, and to show my appreciation of it I will not afflict you with many words. It is pleasant to celebrate in this peaceful way, upon this old mother soil, the anniversary of an experiment which was born of war with this same land so long ago, and wrought out to a successful issue by the devotion of our ancestors. It has taken nearly a hundred years to bring the English and Americans into kindly and mutually appreciative relations, but I believe it has been accomplished at last. It was a great step when the two last misunderstandings were settled by arbitration instead of cannon. It is another great step when England adopts our sewing-machines without claiming the invention—as usual. It was another when they imported one of our sleeping-cars the other day. And it warmed my heart more than, I can tell, yesterday, when I witnessed the spectacle of an Englishman, ordering an American sherry cobbler of his own free will and accord—and not only that but with a great brain and a

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level head reminding the barkeeper not to forget the strawberries. With a common origin, a common language, a common literature, a common religion, and—common drinks, what is longer needful to the cementing of the two nations together in a permanent bond of brotherhood?

Page | 2

This is an age of progress, and ours is a progressive land. A great and glorious land, too—a land which has developed a Washington, a Franklin, a Wm. M. Tweed, a Longfellow, a Motley, a Jay Gould, a Samuel C. Pomeroy, a recent Congress which has never had its equal (in some respects), and a United States Army which conquered sixty Indians in eight months by tiring them out which is much better than uncivilized slaughter, God knows. We have a criminal jury system which is superior to any in the world; and its efficiency is only marred by the difficulty of finding twelve men every day who don't know anything and can't read. And I may observe that we have an insanity plea that would have saved Cain. I think I can say, and say with pride, that we have some legislatures that bring higher prices than any in the world.

I refer with effusion to our railway system, which consents to let us live, though it might do the opposite, being our owners. It only destroyed three thousand and seventy lives last year by collisions, and twenty-seven thousand two hundred and sixty by running over heedless and unnecessary people at crossings. The companies seriously regretted the killing of these thirty thousand people, and went so far as to pay for some of them—voluntarily, of course, for the meanest of us would not claim that we possess a court treacherous enough to enforce a law against a railway company. But, thank Heaven, the railway companies are generally disposed to do the right and kindly thing without—compulsion. I know of an instance which greatly touched me at the time. After an accident the company sent home the remains of a dear distant old relative of mine in a basket, with the remark, “Please state what figure you hold him at—and return the basket.” Now there couldn't be anything friendlier than that.

But I must not stand here and brag all night. However, you won't mind a body bragging a little about his country on the Fourth of July. It is a fair and legitimate time to fly the eagle. I will say only one more word of brag—and a hopeful one. It is this. We have a form of government which gives each man a fair chance and no favor. With us no individual is born with a right to look down upon his neighbor and hold him in contempt. Let such of us as are not dukes find our consolation in that. And we may find hope for the future in the fact that as unhappy as is the condition of our political morality to-day, England has risen up out of a far fouler since the days when Charles I ennobled

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courtesans and all political place was a matter of bargain and sale. There is hope for us yet.*

** At least the above is the speech which I was going to make, but our minister, General Schenck, presided, and after the blessing, got up and made a great, long, inconceivably dull harangue, and wound up by saying that inasmuch as speech-making did not seem to exhilarate the guests much, all further oratory would be dispensed with during the evening, and we could just sit and talk privately to our elbow-neighbors and have a good, sociable time. It is known that in consequence of that remark forty-four perfected speeches died in the womb. The depression, the gloom, the solemnity that reigned over the banquet from that time forth will be a lasting memory with many that were there. By that one thoughtless remark General Schenck lost forty-four of the best friends he had in England. More than one said that night: "And this is the sort of person that is sent to represent us in a great sister empire!"*

Page | 3