In 1891, Mark Twain closed his Hartford home and moved to Europe where he could live more cheaply and recoup his finances by lecturing around the world. Twain was still abroad in 1896 when the United States declared war on Spain.

Although he initially supported the American claim that it was only interested in helping the colony of Cuba win freedom from Spain, Twain became an outspoken critic of the war once it was clear that our government’s true motive was to make Cuba a protectorate of the U.S. and to annex Spain’s colonies of Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines.

Sickened by our military suppression of the Philippines and our intervention in China during the Boxer Rebellion, Mark Twain announced upon his return to the United States in 1900 that: I am an anti-imperialist, and I am opposed to having the eagle put its talons on any other land!

Chosen as vice-president of the Anti-Imperialist League, Twain repeatedly used the power of his pen to wage a rhetorical war against the horrors of real war.

Many today cite his fictional “The War Prayer” as Twain’s most powerful indictment of American intervention abroad. Written in 1904, Twain was pressured by friends and family not to publish it, fearing a public backlash for its mockery of patriotic fervor and religious piety. Twain reluctantly agreed, saying that the story would have to wait for publication until after his death, which came in 1910.

Ironically, “The War Prayer” was finally published in late 1916, just months before the United States ended its neutrality and entered World War I.

It was a time of great and excalting excitement. The country was up in arms, the war was on, in every breast burned the holy fire of patriotism; the drums were beating, the bands playing, ...an every hand and jar down the receding spreads of roofs and balconies a fluttering wilderness of flags flashed in the sun; daily the young volunteers marched down the wide avenue...in their new uniforms, the proud fathers and mothers and sisters and sweethearts cheering them with voices choked with happy emotion as they swung by; nightly the packed mass meetings listened, panting, to patriotic oratory which stirred the deepest deeps of their hearts...the tears running down their cheeks the while, in the churches the pastors preached devotion to flag and country and invoked the God of Battles, beseeching His aid in our good cause in outpouring of fervid eloquence which moved every listener.

...next day the battalions would leave for the front; the church was filled; the volunteers were there, their faces alight with material dreams-visions of a stern advance, the gathering momentum, the rushing charge, the flashing sabers, the flight of the foe, the tumult, the enveloping smoke, the fierce pursuit, the surrender! – then home from the war, bronzed heroes, welcomed, adored, submerged in golden seas of glory!

...The service proceeded; ...the first prayer was said;... and with one impulse the house from the war, bronzed heroes, welcomed, adored, submerged in golden seas of glory!

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

Then came the “long” prayer... The burden of its supplication was that an ever -merciful and benignant Father of us all would watch over our noble young soldiers and aid, comfort, and encourage them in their patriotic work... and grant to them and to their flag and country imperishable honor and glory.

An aged stranger entered [the church] and moved with slow and noiseless step up the main aisle, his eyes fixed upon the minister, his long body clothed in a robe that reached to his feet... his scrawny face unnaturally pale, pale even to ghastliness... Without pausing, he ascended to the preacher’s side and stood there, waiting.

...The stranger touched his arm, motioned him to step aside – which the startled pastor, and also you in your hearts, fervently prayed silently... He commandeth me to put it into words. Listen!

“O Lord our Father, our young patriots, idols of our hearts, go forth to battle – be Thou near them! With them, in spirit, we also go forth from the sweet peace of our beloved presides to smile the foe. 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 ring the hearts of their unoffending widows with unavailing grief; help us to turn them out roofless with their children to wander unfriended the wastes of their desolated land in rags and hunger and thirst... 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! We ask it in the spirit of love, of Him Who is the Source of Love, and Who is ever-faithful refuge and friend of all that are sore beset and seek His aid with humble and contrite hearts. Amen.

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