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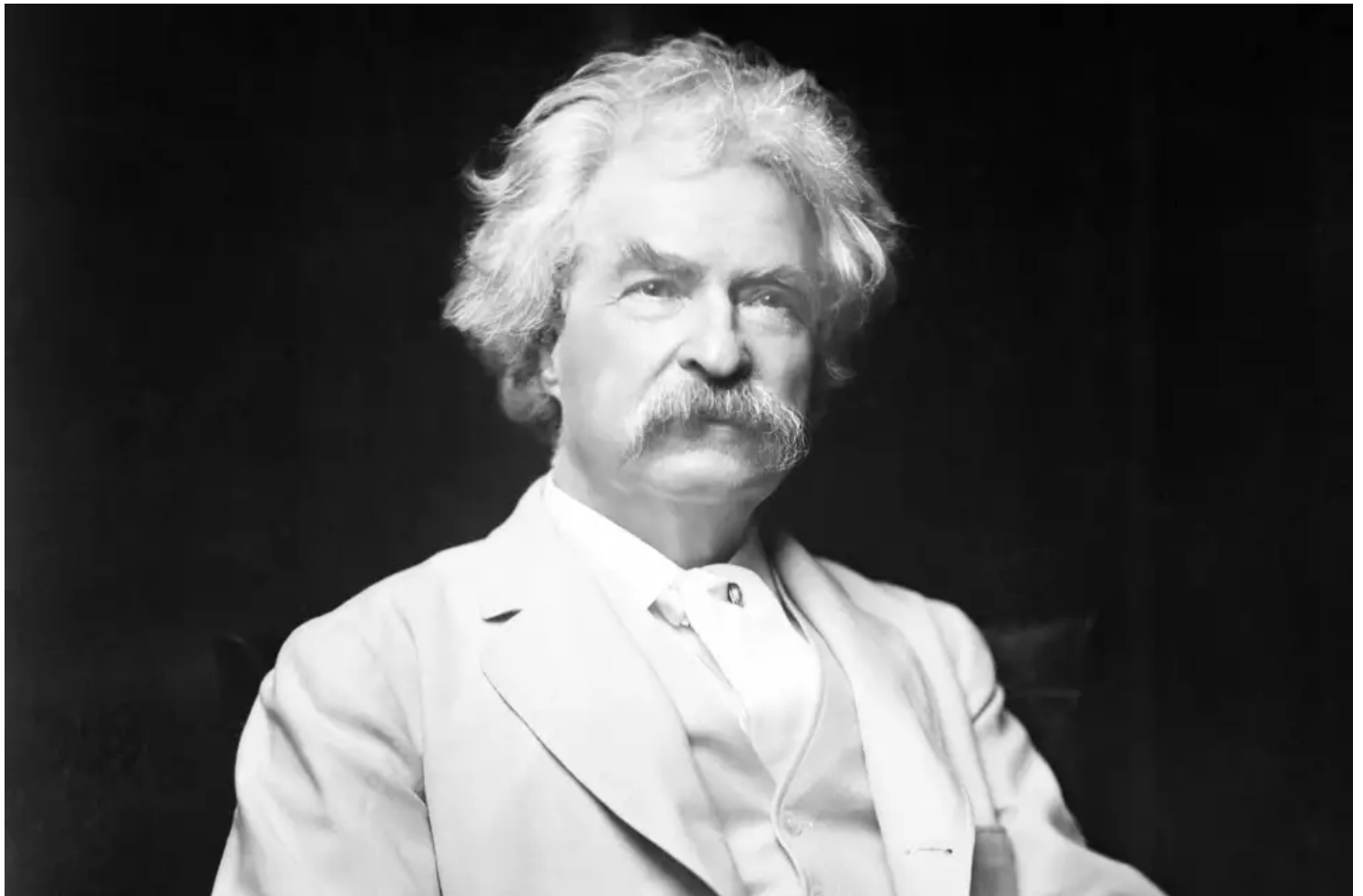
Trump's tactic to 'flood the zone' is now threatening Mark Twain's legacy

By Frances Dinkelspiel

Updated June 8, 2025 1:52 p.m.

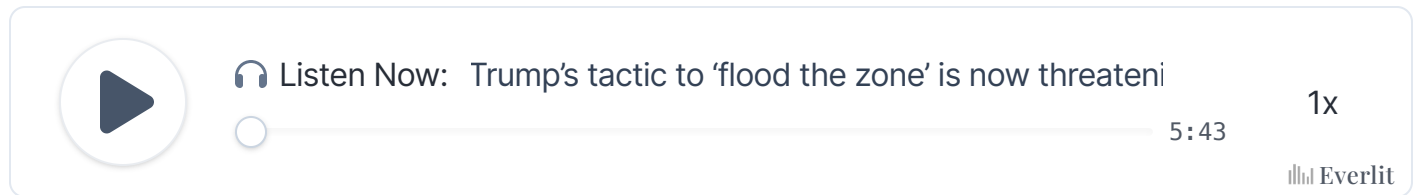


Gift Article



The president is said to admire Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens, 1835-1910) but in April the Trump administration's National Endowment for the Humanities rescinded a \$450,000 grant to the Mark Twain Papers and Project, undermining its ability to continue, in UC Berkeley's Bancroft Library.

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When you enter the offices of the [Mark Twain Papers and Project](#) at UC Berkeley, you'll see portraits and photographs of the revered writer and humorist hanging on the walls. A few tchotchkes of dubious taste, like a porcelain bust with a head of his greying hair, are scattered around — all part of the largest repository of Twain materials in the world.

Brought to UC Berkeley in 1949, the project's primary purpose isn't collecting fun souvenirs; it houses everything major that Twain wrote and furthers scholarly interpretations of his work. The suite of offices on the fourth floor of the Bancroft Library holds numerous editions of his 30 published books, more than 11,000 letters he and his family wrote, 17,000 letters written to him, as well as 600 unpublished manuscripts, business documents, scrapbooks, bills and photographs. Hundreds of scholars have used the collection to inform their books, documentaries and other works.

"The Mark Twain Papers ranks as one of the foremost scholarly achievements of our era," Ron Chernow, who relied on the papers to prepare his recently published biography of Twain, aka Samuel Clemens, wrote in his acknowledgements.

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The project is so significant that the federal government has funded it for the past 58 years. In doing so, it helped editors decipher and organize the 5,000 pages Twain left as an autobiography and publish it, as Twain requested, 100 years after his death. The 2010 book became a New York Times bestseller.

Even President Donald Trump admires Twain. He wants a statue of the author to be included in his proposed, yet unfunded, [“National Garden of American Heroes,”](#) which would open to coincide with the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

But in April, the National Endowment for the Humanities rescinded a \$450,000 grant to the Mark Twain Papers and Project, undermining its ability to continue. It was part of the [cost-cutting effort](#) of the Department of Government Efficiency, an organization not established by government statute and led until recently by Elon Musk. Two young men from DOGE, one who dropped out of college, commandeered the offices of the NEH in early April and unilaterally decided, without [consulting any of the experts inside the agency, to cancel 1,500 grants,](#) according to a lawsuit filed by three major scholarly organizations looking to claw back the canceled funds. Days later, the two men let go of 85% of the NEH's 180-person staff.

“NEH has cancelled awards that are at variance with agency priorities, including but not limited to those on diversity, equity, and inclusion (or DEI) and environmental justice, as well as awards that may not inspire public confidence in the use of taxpayer funds,” the agency [explained in an April 24 press release](#).

In the swirl of outrage surrounding the Trump administration's various actions, cancellation of the Twain grant has not drawn any attention — no news reports, no public announcements or cries of anger. That it has almost been unnoticed reflects the precarious times in which we live.

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The University of California has been tempered in its reaction. It has joined two lawsuits, but Rich Lyons, the UC Berkeley chancellor, and UC President Michael Drake have only spoken about the Trump cuts in [concerned but not outraged terms](#). The university and the rest of the UC system appear to be [avoiding the limelight](#), probably to avoid Trump's wrath. They don't want to be targeted like Harvard.

Outrage fatigue has also settled in. The Trump administration has rescinded funds to the Lawrence Hall of Science, San Francisco Gay Men's Chorus, Transit Books

and SFJazz, among many others. It has yanked funding from major research centers, forcing labs doing critical research to scramble to survive. The Trump administration has fired weather experts and downsized Social Security offices. Students have been abducted off the street.

So, what is one more cut to another revered institution?

It matters, not just because it damages the study of Mark Twain, whose biting political commentary would help us weather these dark days. ("Suppose you were an idiot. And suppose you were a member of Congress. But I repeat myself," Twain famously said.) It matters because it is part of a strategy, stated by Trump ally and political strategist Steve Bannon, to "flood the zone" and overwhelm dissenters. By deluging citizens with the pace of his destructive acts, Trump has created a sense of paralysis. How do you know what to protest when there are so many things to be angry about?

There is a call for mass demonstrations on June 14, Trump's 79th birthday and the date he has set for a \$45 million military parade in Washington. I plan to participate in the protests because I want Trump to know the United States is a better place when we support the arts and sciences and lift people rather than denouncing broad sectors of our society and callously deporting people without due process.

In the meantime, the Bancroft Library is appealing NEH's decision to slash Mark Twain funding.

"Without that funding, the project won't be able to continue beyond the calendar year," said Kate Donovan, director of the Bancroft Library.

Even though it is an effort, we must resist the urge to collapse from exhaustion. We must fight back against every grant lost, every lab shuttered.

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As Twain put it, "Loyalty to country ALWAYS. Loyalty to government, when it deserves it."

Correction: A photo caption in a previous version of this story misstated the year of Mark Twain's birth. He was born in 1835.

Frances Dinkelspiel is a former member of the Friends of the Bancroft Library.

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Frances Dinkelspiel

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