


Substantial Disruption



The War of the Worlds

By Mike Tully

Despite his bravado, Mr. Manulis panicked and bolted out of the car. He was so frightened by the reports of interplanetary invasion that he ran off, leaving Aunt Bea to contend with the green monsters he expected to drop from the sky at any moment. She walked home. Six miles. When Mr. Manulis called for a date the next week, she told my mother to say she couldn't see him. She had married a Martian.

- Woody Allen, "Radio Days" (1987)

Four score years ago less one, a radio drama by 23-year-old Orson Welles "created almost [unbelievable scenes of terror](#) in New York, New Jersey, the South and as far west as San Francisco," as listeners drank in a Halloween tale of an invasion from Mars. As Welles advised his audience at the beginning of the broadcast, the presentation was an adaption of H. G. Wells' "War of the Worlds." Most of the audience understood they were listening to a gripping radio drama, but not all. Welles' program, the *Mercury Theater*, was far from the most popular show in the timeslot. That honor, curiously, belonged to Edgard Bergen, a ventriloquist who starred, with chief dummy Charlie McCarthy, in the [Chase and Sanborn Hour](#), a comedy-variety program. Bergen's prominence was strange enough in its own right. As Joshua Mostel [exclaimed](#) in the movie, *Radio Days*, "He's a ventriloquist on the radio - how do you know he's not moving his lips?" But I digress.

The nation tuned in to Bergen and his wooden supporting case – at first. When the program's opening segment – a comedy bit – ended and a musical number started, many listeners reached for the tuner and a number settled on the *Mercury Theater*. They missed the explanatory introduction and several panicked, believing, as the *New York Daily News* [reported](#) the next day, the planet was under attack by monsters that "were destroying hundreds of people with death-ray guns." "Without waiting for further details," the *Daily News* stated, "thousands of listeners rushed from their homes in New York and New Jersey, many with towels across their faces to protect themselves from 'gas' which the invader was supposed to be spewing forth." The story added that thousands called newspapers, police, switchboard operators and electric companies asking for information and help. (Younger readers may have to Google the phrase "switchboard operators.") Fifteen people were treated for shock at Newark's St. Michael's Hospital.

Welles, who failed to fully appreciate radio's ability to create its own reality and manipulate listeners, employed the medium as entertainment, not as a weapon. But radio and other media have become weaponized since the relatively innocent days of the *Mercury Theater* and the current lead practitioner of media weaponization is President Donald Trump. Martians have been replaced with [Mexican rapists](#), [terrorists](#), [criminals](#), [drug-dealers](#), and, of course, [Muslims](#), whom Trump fraudulently claimed celebrated by the thousands when the Twin Towers fell on November 11, 2001. His buckshot tweets included professional football players who protested social ills during the national anthem. He is a master of what columnist Timothy Egan refers to as the "[fog machine](#)." But why?

Noam Chomsky [stated](#), “The primary element of social control is the strategy of distraction which is to divert public attention from important issues and changes determined by the political and economic elites, by the technique of ... flooding continuous distractions and insignificant information.” That describes the Trump media strategy in cell and sinew: he’s out to distract the populace. He has invested more time and energy into feints and distractions than policy initiatives or governing. What explains his odd, sleight-of-tweet presidency?

The answer: Russia. Trump is so panicked by Special Counsel Robert Mueller’s investigation into possible collusion between his presidential campaign and Russian operatives that he grabbed a Golden Oldie from his bag of tricks: the Hillary Clinton Russian Uranium [story](#), which he accuses the news media of ignoring. That story, of course, was widely reported seven years ago, then resuscitated by Trump during the 2016 campaign. The story is a big pile of “no there, there,” but Trump has allies: [lackey congressmen](#) and the dark practitioners at *Fox News*. Their playbook is worn, yellowed and dog-eared, but the cacophony runs on: Obama is a Kenyan, Hillary is a Martian, look away, look away, nothing to see here. You can’t have “cacophony” without “phony.”

Trump and his allies have conjured up their own “war of the worlds” scenario, inventing an alternate planet where the Russians are the good guys and false Clinton stories, no matter how many times debunked, dominate the news. They deal in fantasy and deception, but the waft of their alchemy does not mask the smell of fear. Mueller is on to something and Trump knows it. That’s why he employs the strategy of distraction.

Presumably a man who acts like he’s guilty *is* guilty, which would explain Trump’s manic deflections and desperate need to change the subject from Russia. The one person who probably knows everything is not telling: the silent, inscrutable First Lady, Melania. If anybody knows the truth, she does. After all, she had married a Martian.