"The War of the Worlds"

### and the World between the Wars:

## The Beginnings of Modern Paranoia

November 15-17, 2005

# <sup>2</sup> I. Fear Itself

## - The 1930s

- ★ Great Depression (a global event) brought western capitalist nations to their knees, opened minds to previously, unimagined political and economic possibilities, both good and bad.
  - ☆ Capitalism & individualism seemed to be failed, outmoded systems.
  - In Europe, many countries were taken over by highly regimented "corporatist" regimes of the left (communism, socialism) or, more often, the right (Fascism, Nazism).
  - In U.S. & other countries, much sympathy for these regimes & systems as <u>mass unrest</u>, poverty, and fear grew: <u>Bonus Army</u>, CPUSA, home-grown Fascist movements (video).
  - ☆ Fueled by early radio, atmosphere of extremism and conspiracism flourished.

★ FDR elected 1932: His "New Deal" was a moderate effort to protect capitalist system, but many conservatives feared it as a conspiracy to destroy American liberty.

- At the same time, liberals & radicals feared right-wing subversion: <u>Gen. Smedley D. Butler's story</u> of an attempted Fascist coup d'etat against FDR in 1932. <u>Investigated by Congress</u>.
- Popular movements arose, driven by radio & based partly on CTs, seeking causes for the Depression or radical solutions like the "Share the Wealth" program of Gov. Huey Long:
  - <u>"Radio priest" Charles Coughlin</u> created National Union for Social Justice, turned against FDR, formed 3d party in 1936, ended up as an open anti-Semite and Nazi sympathizer (video).

#### II. Conspiracy Theorists vs. the "Masters of War"

★ Disillusionment with war after World War I

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- ☆ Heavy propaganda had to sell U.S. public & intelligentsia on entry into European war after President Wilson had earlier promised to stay out.
- WWI became crusade "to end all wars" & "make the world safe for democracy." The crusade failed:
  Liberty at home was threatened, League of Nations failed, world's nations returned to old ways.
- ✤ 1920s & 30s saw outpouring of anti-war novels, plays, tracts, organizations. Disgust w/ mass slaughter.
- "Devil Theory of War": The arms industry and int. bankers seen as cause of U.S. entry into WWI & most wars. Strong among radicals, Midwestern Republicans, bigots alike. "Who benefits?" motif.
- ★ Isolationist politics and the Devil Theory in the 30s
  - \* "Isolationists" believed that U.S. should stay away from foreign alliances & wars, employing military power only in self-defense.
  - ☆ As troubles grew in Europe and Asia & U.S. economy stayed terrible, "devil theory" grew very prominent & was used as an argument for not getting involved. Bestselling book was *Merchants of Death.*
  - Sr Nye Committee investigation, 1934-36:
    - Found less evidence than expected, moved to bigger targets.
    - Spawned Neutrality Acts of 1935-38, nationalization proposals, Flynn plan to limit wartime profits.
- ★ Note: Political influence of defense industry is not entirely CT. Eisenhower made an issue of it in his 1961 <u>Farewell Address</u>.

#### III. Background to the 1938 "Panic Broadcast"

\* October 30, 1938: CBS broadcast a radio play of H.G. Wells's novel, The War

*of the Worlds*. Mass panic ensued, with people convinced that a real Martian invasion had begun. Why did people think it was real?

- New technology that seemed incredibly powerful and frightening in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: machine guns, automobiles, tanks, airplanes, movies, radio.
  - New weapons (incl. poison gas) had led to massive loss of life during World War I.
  - Radio had just achieved mass acceptance, and political leaders such as Hitler and Roosevelt had used it to achieve unprecedented power and popularity.
  - Radio was first experience that most people had had with direct access to news events as they unfolded. Audience was not jaded or guarded.
    - Radio could be more realistic than plays or films and was consumed in bits & pieces.
- ☆ Not many UFO sightings yet, but astronomer Percival Lowell's theories about a dying Martian civilization were well known.
- ☆ Rise of Nazi Germany and other Fascist empires created fears of war and sudden attack or invasion.
  - The culture was becoming more attuned to ideas such as foreign invasion, world conquest, end of the world, total destruction.
  - Rise of <u>science fiction</u> and <u>"pulp" adventure stories</u> in this same period, familiarizing readers with spaceships, aliens, evil conspiracies, madmen bent on world domination, fantastic technology, superheroes to fight them. Comic book heroes develop from pulps: Doc Savage to Superman.

## Orson Welles and *The Mercury Theater on the Air* present

### "The War of the Worlds"

- ★ The Panic
  - Caused by faked radio broadcast format
    - Headlines and news stories
    - Grover's Mill, NJ: site of Martian attack in play
    - <u>Covers</u> of the H.G. Wells novel
    - Poster from 1950s War of the Worlds movie
- ★ The Backlash
  - Initial outrage died down in favor of a "lesson" in the power of electronic media & propaganda, feeding further fears.
    - In fact Welles had clearly announced that broadcast was a play, the usual literary adaptation.
  - ☆ FCC Investigation

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#### IV. Conspiracy Theory and the Coming of WWII

- ★ Isolationists remained politically very strong even long after war broke out in 1939.
  - Strong among pacifists, leftists, conservatives, German Americans, in Midwest and mountain states.
  - ☆ Included many powerful, respected figures such as Charles Lindbergh, Robert A. Taft (leading Republican), Herbert Hoover, America First Committee.
- ★ Roosevelt aided British with Lend-Lease, wanted to fight Hitler, got tough but tried to avoid conflict with Japanese.
- ★ Attack on Pearl Harbor brought war & ended power of isolationists, but they suspected another conspiracy.
  - Charge was made, and investigated by Congress, that FDR knew about Japanese attack, but did not warn commanders in Hawaii because he wanted to force U.S. into the war.

- Japanese code had been broken just before P.H.
  FDR haters, defenders of military, isolationists kept idea alive.
- ★ Fears of imaginary Japanese conspirators led to internment & oppression of Japanese-Americans beginning Mar. 1942.