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Heroes, Villains, and Society in the 1920s

The year 1920 ushered in a decade that historians steadfastly refuse to discuss in anything less than superlative terms. The decade brings to mind Charles Dickens's description of the revolutionary years of the eighteenth century in his novel *A Tale of Two Cities*: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times . . . it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us." If a decade may be said to have a personality, then the 1920s had the personality of a child—sometimes laughing and playful, at other times brooding, brutal, and ugly.

The first and perhaps most widely read book about the decade was Frederick Lewis Allen's *Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s*. Published in 1931 during the midst of the Great Depression, *Only Yesterday* describes a carefree decade that began with the end of the Great War and ended with the stock market crash. Allen paints a decade that roars with excitement, a decade brimming with bathtub gin, bootleg liquor, and bubbling champagne. Gangsters, movie sex goddesses, athletic heroes, and fabulous moneymakers seem to come alive on the pages of *Only Yesterday*. In sweeping terms Allen examines the "revolution in manners and morals," the "aching disillusionment" of intellectuals, and the crass materialism of millions of Americans.

Allen was not necessarily wrong. The sexual mores of the youth were changing, and there was evidence of intellectual disillusionment and crass materialism. The problem with the book is that its sweeping generalizations are simply too sweeping. In addition, too much of the activity of the decade is left out. The economic plight of rural Americans, the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, urban-rural tensions, racial injustice, nativism, and religious revivalism are just a few of the subjects that Allen does not treat. As a result, *Only Yesterday* is a flawed and unbalanced classic.

THE AMERICAN
FLAPPER - 1927



In recent years historians have explored the areas where Allen did not venture. And they have presented a different view of the 1920s, viewing the decade as a period of transition where older rural and newer urban attitudes uneasily coexisted. Although the country was becoming increasingly urban and bureaucratic, many Americans clung tightly to the more traditional values of their parents and grandparents. In an effort to preserve these values, they supported a variety of movements such as the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities, the Ku Klux Klan, and the National Origins Act of 1924.

If rural America resisted change, most of urban America accepted it. Spectators filled movie theaters and athletic stadiums to watch others perform, and entertainment became a product that was packaged and marketed by business executives. Millions of Americans worshipped at the altar of business efficiency and organization. Even crime became more organized and efficient. By 1929 the debate between rural and urban America was decided. The future belonged to the cities.

READING 11



The Black Sox Scandal

Dean Smith

Every few years or so, fat-bellied, middle-aged journalists start complaining that baseball “isn’t what it used to be,” that the American pastime is “in trouble,” that the game is “in a crisis from which it may never recover.” And yet, in spite of their nostalgic reflections about “the good old days,” baseball is alive and well. Men’s and women’s softball leagues fill city recreation parks every night of the week, and Little Leaguers are playing more baseball than ever before. Fantasy baseball groups have sprouted in small towns and large cities all over the country, and junior high school boys have turned baseball cards into big business. America still loves baseball.

But there was a time when baseball was in real trouble. In 1921, headlines in newspapers across the country let Americans know that eight members of the Chicago White Sox were accused of conspiring to lose the 1919 World Series. The ensuing investigation and trial became symbolic of American life in the post-World War I years, when doubts about the country’s future seemed endemic. It became known as the Black Sox Scandal, and in the following article Dean Smith describes the controversy and its significance in the 1920s.

When Jim Crusinberry, the *Chicago Tribune's* ace baseball writer, entered the lobby of the Sinton Hotel in Cincinnati that evening of September 30, 1919, he stumbled onto one of the most remarkable scenes of his career.

Perched atop a chair in the lobby was a wildly gesturing man whom he immediately recognized as Abe Attell, former world featherweight boxing champion and consort of New York gamblers. Attell had \$1,000 bills in both hands and he was screaming his head off to anyone who would listen, offering to bet on the Cincinnati Reds to beat the Chicago White Sox—any amount, and at even money—in the World Series which was to open the following day at Redland Park.

Crusinberry's nose for news twitched like a bloodhound's. Even in those free-wheeling days of American sport, gamblers usually exercised more discretion than Attell was displaying. And why was he betting against the White Sox? The awesome Sox, one of the finest teams ever assembled up to that time, were top-heavy favorites to crush the so-so Reds in the Series. In most quarters, one had to offer at least 4-to-1 odds to bet on Chicago. Yet here was Attell betting big on Cincinnati, and at even money!

For most of the next two years, Crusinberry pursued his big story. Although thwarted repeatedly by baseball officialdom, underworld silence, and his cautious sports editor, he put the pieces together at last. With other tenacious reporters, he forced a Chicago grand jury to investigate the case that exploded over the sporting world as the Black Sox Scandal.

For nearly six decades American sports buffs have been discussing and analyzing the Black Sox legend, and still the complete story may never be told. What has been established is that eight members of the 1919

White Sox team conspired with two combinations of gamblers to throw the World Series to the Reds, and that the White Sox did indeed lose, five games to three. None of the sinning players, forever tarred in history as the Black Sox, ever received all the money promised for the fix, and several may have gotten no money at all.

What they did get was lifetime exile from organized baseball—an edict decreed and enforced by Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis—despite the fact that the jury in a Cook County trial found them all innocent.

The Black Sox Scandal had an immense impact on a nation struggling to resume “normalcy” in the wake of World War I. To many Americans in that era of innocence, baseball was an almost religious rite, and the World Series was its most holy sacrament. The heroes of the Great American Game were assumed to be as pure as saints—despite considerable evidence to the contrary—and the heresy of desecrating the game for gambler's gold was unthinkable. When the stink of the Black Sox sellout fouled the air, an entire nation was sickened.

This early 20th-century scandal did incalculable damage to America's self-image as a moral nation, disillusioned millions of youthful fans, and helped set the tone for the licentious decade of the 1920's. Teapot Dome, the Prohibition era, corruption in high places, and the public acceptance of “everybody's doing it” raised questions about the value of personal integrity that remain to the present.

To reconstruct the story of the Black Sox tragedy, return to the Sinton Hotel and September 30, 1919. Jim Crusinberry was only one of many who had heard the rumor of an impending White Sox sellout. Hugh Fullerton, syndicated columnist of the *Chicago Herald and Examiner*, wired this cryptic warning to his newspaper clients: “Don't bet on Series. Ugly rumors afloat.”

Jack Doyle, whose New York billiard academy was one of the nation's biggest gambling centers, estimated that \$2,000,000 was wagered

“The Black Sox Scandal” by Dean Smith. This article is reprinted from the January 1977 issue of *American History Illustrated* 11, pp. 16-25, with the permission of Cowles History Group, Inc. Copyright *American History Illustrated* magazine.

in his establishment the night before the Series opener. "You couldn't miss it ... the thing had an odor," he said later. "I saw smart guys take even money on the Sox who should have been asking for 5-to-1 odds."

The Series fix was one of the worst-kept secrets in the history of infamy. As the betting odds shifted dramatically, Cincinnati was buzzing with rumors. Chick Gandil, the Chicago first baseman and admitted ring-leader of the sellout, recalled in a *Sports Illustrated* confession nearly four decades later that even a clerk in a downtown stationary store whispered to him on the eve of the opener, "I have it firsthand that the Series is in the bag."

Everybody knew, and yet nobody knew for sure. Who was bribing whom—and to do what? To complicate the situation, a story popped up that some Chicago gamblers were out to insure a White Sox victory by getting ace Cincinnati pitcher Dutch Ruether drunk the night before the opener.

The White Sox should have needed no help at all. Owner Charles Comiskey, revered as "The Old Roman," had built a magnificent ball club in Chicago. There was Eddie Collins, probably the best second baseman in baseball, and Buck Weaver, without a peer at third base. "Shoeless Joe" Jackson was a virtual illiterate, but there was no better hitter and left fielder in the game. Happy Felsch in center and Shano Collins in right rounded out a great Chicago outfield. Chick Gandil at first base was so tough he could play his position without a glove. And Swede Risberg was one of the great shortstops of the era. Behind the plate was the superb Ray Schalk.

The pitching staff was a little thin, especially with Red Faber on the injured list, but Eddie Cicotte, Claude Williams, and Dickie Kerr were a match for anything Cincinnati could throw against them. As for manager Kid Gleason, he was a canny veteran who knew the game inside out and did a passable job of welding his moody and contentious athletes into a team that had dominated the American League.

The first post-World War Series had been lengthened to best five games of nine to insure a bigger box office take (it was returned to best four-of-seven shortly thereafter), and a nation weary of war and sacrifice was eager for the spectacle to begin.

The tragic prelude to the opener at Cincinnati on October 1, 1919, is still difficult to piece together. Conflicting grand jury and court testimony, countless published revelations and "authentic" analyses—but a paucity of reliable source material—combine to create a knotty problem for the historian. Eliot Asinof's *Eight Men Out*, generally regarded as the most comprehensive book on the subject, says the Black Sox plot had its beginning when Gandil contacted Boston gambler Joseph (Sport) Sullivan some three weeks before the 1919 Series and offered to "put the Series in the bag" for \$80,000. Gandil, in his 1956 revelation, declared it was Sullivan who first suggested to him that the Series might be fixed.

At any rate, Gandil first enlisted pitcher Eddie Cicotte in the plot and then shortstop Swede Risberg and pitcher Claude Williams. The team's top three hitters—Buck Weaver, Joe Jackson, and Happy Felsch—were reluctant enlistees. Gandil felt sure that those seven could guarantee a White Sox defeat. They could ground out in crucial spots, feed a fat pitch to a slugger with men on base, barely miss a fly ball—all without detection. The seven were soon joined by an eighth conspirator through sheer accident. Utility infielder Fred McMullin, a man hardly in a position to affect the Series outcome, was lying behind a locker one afternoon and overheard Gandil discussing the plan with Risberg. McMullin demanded a part of the action, and he was included to buy his silence.

Consorting with gamblers was not a new occupation for Gandil, who for years had sold information on starting pitchers and other useful baseball tips to the betting fraternity. "We all mixed with gamblers," Gandil explained later, "and most of them were honest."

Such shady associations were a fact of baseball life in 1919, and nobody seemed to care very much.

The eight Chicago players assembled in Gandil's room at the Ansonia Hotel in New York City on the evening of September 21st to discuss strategy. The eight were not particularly good friends and were united on only one subject: their common hatred for Comiskey, whom they regarded as a tight-fisted tyrant who paid his players less than did any other owner in major league baseball.

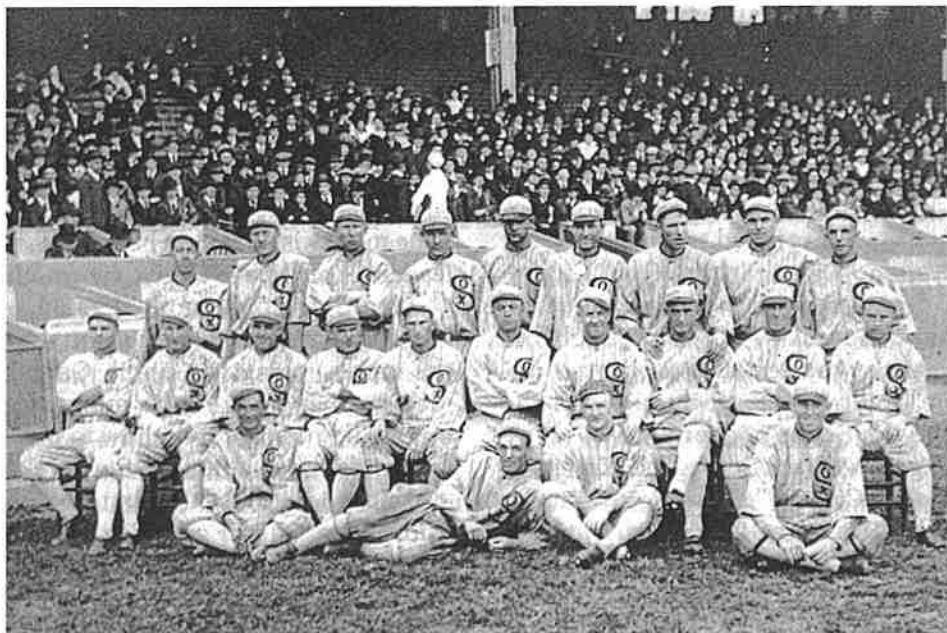
Gandil and Felsch, for example, were earning only a little more than \$4,000 a year; Cicotte's 1919 salary was about \$5,000 (and he a 29-game winner with an earned run average of 1.82!); and the great Jackson, batting .375 for the season, earned only \$6,000—compared with the \$10,000 Cincinnati paid its leading hitter, Ed Roush.

The eight agreed to deal with the gamblers, although Weaver is said to have suggested that they take the fix money and win

the Series, anyhow. The evidence is conclusive that the superlative third baseman never threw a game or received a dime from the gamblers. He spent the rest of his life protesting his innocence and trying to restore his good name.

Even before arrangements could be made with Sullivan, word of the fix attempt leaked out. Cicotte was approached by gambler William T. (Sleepy Bill) Burns, a former pitcher who had made money in Texas oil, to let him bid on the action. Soon two gambling combinations—unknown to each other—were negotiating with the Chicago eight.

It was common knowledge in the far-flung American gambling community that only one man, Arnold Rothstein of New York City, could put up enough money to engineer a project as grandiose as the fixing of a World Series. Burns hurriedly consulted with a small-time gambler named Billy Maharg in Philadelphia, and together they rushed to Rothstein with the proposition.



"Shoeless" Joe Jackson and seven other players on the Chicago White Sox were charged with accepting money to throw the 1919 World Series.

Rothstein would not see them personally, but told his ambitious lieutenant, Abe Attell, to check it out. Attell was entranced with the sheer audacity of the idea, so Rothstein agreed to discuss the matter with Burns. But the gambling king, known far and wide as "The Big Bankroll," turned Burns down flat and advised him to forget this wild scheme.

Attell could not put the lucrative idea out of his mind, however, and he decided to step into the big time on his own. He called Burns and told him a lie that could have bought Abe a concrete casket: Rothstein had changed his mind, said Attell, and would put up \$100,000 if Burns could get the eight White Sox to go along. It was sheer bluff on Attell's part. Certainly he could not lay his hands on the money the players were demanding, but he put up a confident front and prayed he could get the cash somewhere.

Meanwhile, Sullivan was busy, too. He also sought out Rothstein and somehow made a better impression on the shrewd New Yorker than had Burns. Rothstein assigned an aide named Nat Evans to work out the details of the Series fix with Sullivan and the players.

So Gandil and his co-conspirators began their comic opera dealings with two sets of gamblers, holding clandestine meetings in hotel rooms and hoping the rival fixers would never meet. The players demanded cash in advance, but the gamblers were untrusting souls who refused payment except after each game Chicago lost. Only Cicotte held out for his money beforehand, so Sullivan gave Gandil \$10,000 to clinch the deal. The money mysteriously appeared under Cicotte's pillow at the Sinton Hotel the night before the Series opener.

According to the Black Sox legend, Rothstein demanded that Cicotte "give a sign" that the fix was on by hitting the first Cincinnati batter with a pitch. Whether or not Cicotte agreed, we will never know for sure, but for whatever reason—the heat of the 90-degree afternoon, the screaming throng of 30,500 in

Redland Park, nerves made jumpy by his Judas role, or a shouted threat from the stands that "there's a guy looking for you with a rifle"—Cicotte's second pitch to Cincinnati leadoff hitter Maurice Rath strayed inside and hit him in the small of the back.

It was not Cicotte's day. He was driven from the mound in the fourth inning as the Reds waltzed to a 9-1 victory. Even the Cincinnati pitcher, Dutch Ruether, connected for two triples to the humiliation of the proud Sox. The next day Claude Williams, a left-hander famous for his control, was shockingly wild and the Reds won again, 4-2.

Meanwhile, rumors of the fix had reached manager Gleason and owner Comiskey. Late at night after the first game, according to one version of the story, Comiskey woke John Heydler, president of the National League and a member of baseball's National Commission, and poured out his fears that the White Sox had sold out to the gamblers. Heydler then woke Ban Johnson, president of the American League and a bitter enemy of Comiskey's, and relayed the Chicago owner's apprehensions.

"That's the yelp of a beaten cur!" sneered Johnson, who terminated the conversation abruptly and went back to bed.

The gamblers were equally indisposed to conversation. Sullivan disappeared after the first game. Attell was in town, but he was very vague about specifics of the payoff to Gandil. "The money is all out on bets," he told the ring-leader. "You'll have to give me another day."

According to Asinof's version, Attell did come up with \$10,000 after the second game, the money going to Gandil. Gandil later denied receiving any of the money for himself, but he did manage somehow to buy a big new car immediately after the Series.

Chicago had lost the first two games and, aside from Gandil and Cicotte, none of the White Sox conspirators had received so much as a "thank you" from either gambling combination. Understandably, they were now ready to forget the entire arrangement and play to

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win. With rookie Dickie Kerr pitching a three-hit shutout before 29,126 rabid fans at Chicago's Comiskey Park, the White Sox cruised to a 3-0 triumph. Gandil himself drove in two of the Chicago runs.

Unfortunately for Attell, Burns, and their colleagues, the news of the White Sox rebirth of spirit had not reached them. As they ruefully reported later, they lost all their previous winnings betting on the Reds in the third game and had no further participation in the Series machinations. But Sullivan was still very much in the game. Fearful that the White Sox players had revolted, he came up with \$20,000, part of the bankroll reportedly supplied by Rothstein.

Now it was time for the fourth game and Cicotte's chance to redeem himself. The spitball ace pitched a strong five-hitter, but his mates were powerless at the plate and Cincinnati walked away with a 2-0 win. Williams gave up only four hits in the fifth game, but again the White Sox bats were silent and the Reds had their fourth victory, 5-0.

At this point Sullivan made the last of the gamblers' payments, this one purportedly \$15,000.

Only one game away from losing the Series, the White Sox miraculously returned to their regular season form in the sixth game. Kerr won it, 5-4, with Gandil's hit providing the winning margin in the 10th inning. Cicotte was brilliant in the seventh game, winning 4-1, and suddenly the White Sox looked like winners again.

The gamblers were more than a little nervous, even with the paid-off Williams slated to pitch the eighth game in Chicago. To be sure of his position, Sullivan (according to Williams' wife) employed a professional persuader to remind Williams of the unpleasant consequences in store for him and his family if he should win.

A well-known gambler telephoned reporter Fullerton before the game and told him to "watch out for the biggest first inning you ever saw." It arrived on schedule, with Williams

surrendering four runs in the first frame. The fired-up Reds raced off to a 10-1 lead before Chicago scored four in the eighth to close the final Cincinnati victory margin to 10-5.

The lowly Reds had pulled off the baseball upset of the decade. But had they really outplayed the White Sox, or had the eight Chicago conspirators handed the Series to them in return for tainted money?

The debate continues to this day.

One of the leading advocates of the "no fix" theory, Victor Luhrs, in his book *The Great Baseball Mystery*, declares the indications are overwhelming that Cincinnati would have won the Series anyhow. In his summary Luhrs admits that Williams' poor pitching cost the White Sox the second and eighth games and that he quite probably was an intentional loser. Gandil and Risberg, he says, did not give their best efforts and McMullin (who appeared only twice as a pinch hitter) did not play enough to permit a judgment. But he stoutly defends Jackson, Weaver, Felsch, and Cicotte, crediting all four with playing their best.

Dr. Harold Seymour, in his book *Baseball—The Golden Age*, concluded that the box scores do not indicate that the Series was thrown. "In fact," says he, "the Black Sox on the whole actually made a better showing in the games than the Clean Sox (the other Chicago players)."

Joe Jackson, for example, led both teams at the plate with a .375 average, and Weaver ended with a .324 batting effort. Gandil's timely hitting won two games, and both Weaver and Jackson played errorless ball. Clean Eddie Collins, on the other hand, made two errors and batted an anemic .224; the other unblemished Chicago regulars did little better.

The rumors of a fix continued for many months, despite the best efforts of investigative reporters to dig out the truth. Comiskey offered a \$20,000 reward (soon reduced to \$10,000) for information on any skullduggery. But he ignored tips supplied by at least one

gambler and never answered a letter from the remorseful Jackson, written by his wife, offering to tell what he knew. Apparently baseball officialdom had decided to sweep the dirt under the rug and hope it would be forgotten.

But the *Chicago Tribune's* Jim Crusinberry would not forget.

Crusinberry devoted every spare moment to tracking down leads, and at last—on a rainy New York afternoon in July 1920—the first crack in the wall of silence appeared. The telephone rang in the hotel room when Crusinberry was relaxing with columnist Ring Lardner. It was Kid Gleason, and he spoke in an excited whisper.

"I'm at Dinty Moore's," he told Crusinberry, "and Abe Attell is at the bar, drinking and starting to talk. Come on over and get close enough to listen." Within minutes, Crusinberry and Lardner were eavesdropping on a fascinating conversation.

"So it was Arnold Rothstein who put up the dough for the fix," they heard Gleason say. "That was it, Kid," answered Attell. "You know, Kid, I hated to do that to you, but I thought I was going to make a lot of money and I needed it, and then the big guy double-crossed me, and I never got but a small part of what he promised."

Attell rambled on for half an hour, naming the participants. At last Crusinberry had the information for his block-busting story. But his sports editor, wary of a libel suit, refused to print it. Frustrated and angry, Crusinberry decided to take matters into his own hands. He wrote an open letter to the *Tribune*, demanding a grand jury investigation of the Series fix, and persuaded Chicago businessman Fred M. Loomis to sign it. The strategy worked. The Cook County grand jury agreed to the probe, and on September 21, 1920 subpoenas were sent to baseball owners, managers, players, writers, and gamblers.

Six days later the first sensational revelation hit the newspapers. Enterprising Jimmy Isaminger, a writer for the Philadelphia *North*

American, tracked down gambler Billy Maharg—a cohort of Burns and Attell—and got him to talk. Maharg knew only part of the story, of course, but his statement exploded like a bombshell. He implicated Cicotte as the chief fixer, said Attell had betrayed Burns and himself, and declared that the first, second, and eighth Series games had been thrown by the Chicago eight—who immediately became known as the Black Sox.

The ink was still damp on the Isaminger story when Gleason sought out the tormented Cicotte and persuaded him to confess. Weeping through much of his sensational testimony before the grand jury the following day, Cicotte admitted receiving \$10,000, confessed that he had served up pitches that anyone could hit, and said he did it for his wife and children.

Jackson next took the stand, nervously admitting that he got \$5,000 of the \$20,000 promised him. As he was leaving the courthouse following his testimony, the most poignant incident of the whole sordid scandal took place. Several ragged youngsters crowded around him and one asked pleadingly, "Say it ain't so, Joe!"

All America fervently joined in that plea.

Historians may note with some amusement that the original Associated Press quote of the remark was a more grammatical "It isn't true, is it, Joe?" But several other reporters who were there quoted it in the street jargon in which it was probably uttered.

Williams testified next, admitting that he got \$5,000 for his part in the fix. Then came Felsch, who also confessed \$5,000, but insisted that he had done nothing to throw any of the games.

Although the White Sox were battling for the American League pennant in the final week of the season, Comiskey immediately suspended all seven active players. (Gandil had "retired" from baseball before the start of the 1920 season.) With the Chicago team decimated, Cleveland breezed to the league championship.

The grand jury indicted all eight Chicago players, along with gamblers Attell, Burns, Hal Chase, and "Rachael Brown," the name used by Rothstein aide Nat Evans. Rothstein himself escaped indictment. The New York gambling king made an appearance before the grand jury, storming in outraged innocence, and somehow convinced everyone that he had not participated in any way.

When the Black Sox trial finally began, on June 27, 1921, the prosecution made an electrifying announcement: All the players' signed confessions had mysteriously disappeared from the files! American League President Ban Johnson accused Rothstein of paying \$10,000 to arrange the theft, upon which Rothstein threatened him with a \$250,000 slander suit. He never carried out the threat.

Free of the damning confessions, the players all denied their earlier testimony and pleaded innocent. None testified during the trial.

All through a blazing hot July the sensational trial dragged on in the sweltering Chicago courtroom. The defense was conducted by several of the most expensive lawyers of the day (who paid them was never proved), and the crowded courtroom was noisily in support of the players. Burns turned state's evidence, and the other gamblers all avoided prosecution through legal maneuvers.

The outcome teetered in the balance as the mountain of testimony piled up. Then, on August 2, both legal teams rested their cases and Judge Hugo Friend made his charge to the jury:

The State must prove that it was the intent of the ballplayers and gamblers charged with conspiracy through the throwing of the World Series to defraud the public and others, and not merely to throw ball games.

The tricky bit of semantics was all the jury needed. The judge said taking bribes was not

enough—throwing ball games was not enough. To be legally guilty, the players must have intended to defraud the public. How could anybody prove that?

In just two hours, forty-seven minutes the jury brought in "not guilty" verdicts on all concerned. The hushed courtroom erupted in wild cheering and, incredibly, members of the jury hoisted several of the Black Sox to their shoulders and paraded them triumphantly around the courtroom. Flushed with victory, Gandil spotted Ban Johnson, rushed to his side, and declared: "Goodbye, good luck, and to hell with you!"

The Black Sox celebrated their triumph at an Italian restaurant after the verdict was read—the same restaurant, incidentally, where the jurors dined and congratulated themselves—and toasted the immediate resumption of their baseball careers. But they did not reckon with the stern morality of white-haired Judge Kenesaw Mountain Landis, who had been installed as Commissioner of Baseball following the grim days of the grand jury investigation. Landis had said upon taking office that the Black Sox would never play again, but that was before the trial. Surely, the players reasoned, the judge would not dare to overrule a court of law.

But he did just that. Landis's statement after the trial was a verdict of doom:

Regardless of the verdict of juries, no player that throws a ball game ... [or] sits in a conference with a bunch of crooked players and gamblers where the ways and means of throwing games are planned and discussed, and does not promptly tell his club about it, will ever play professional baseball.

He added one more shocker: In addition to the eight Black Sox, he slapped a lifetime ban on Joe Gedeon of the St. Louis Browns, who had told the grand jury he made money betting on Cincinnati at the suggestion of Swede Risberg.

The players screamed, hired lawyers, and got petitions signed—but all to no avail. None of them ever played in organized baseball again. Landis was as unbending as iron, and many years later he went so far as to deny Jackson's petition to manage the Greenville, South Carolina, club in the low-low minors.

Part of the Black Sox legend is that Landis's stiff punishments saved baseball in its darkest hour. A glance at the soaring major league gate receipts in 1920 and 1921, however, seems to show that the sporting public would have supported the game whether or not the Black Sox had been punished. But the old judge's decision undoubtedly discouraged future cozy dealings between players and gamblers. Baseball never has suffered another scandal.

So the chastened Black Sox were cast out to make a living the best way they could. Weaver ran a Chicago drug store. Cicotte farmed near Detroit and then worked at an automobile plant. Williams ran a Chicago poolroom for a time and then started a nursery business in California. Felsch opened a tavern in Milwaukee. Risberg worked on a Minnesota dairy farm before opening a tavern in northern California. Gandil became a plumber in California. McMullin took one job and then another.

Jackson operated a restaurant, and later a liquor store, in South Carolina.

All eight are now dead.

Though most of them protested varying degrees of innocence throughout their lives, Gandil declared in his 1956 confession, "To this day, I feel that we got what we had coming."

Baseball survived and thrived, but it was never again the gloriously pure American rite it once had been. Too many little boys—of all ages—had suffered sobering disillusionment.

Perhaps Nelson Algren, who had idolized Swede Risberg, said it best many years later in his superb short story "The Silver-Colored Yesterday":

I traded off my Risberg bat ... and I flipped the program from that hot and magic Sunday when Cicotte was shutting out everybody forever, and a triumphant right-hander's wind had blown all the score cards across home plate, into the Troy Street gutter. I guess that was one way of learning what Hustletown, sooner or later, teaches all its sandlot sprouts. "Everybody's out for The Buck. Even big leaguers."

Even Swede Risberg.

Study Questions

1. Why did the little boy's comment "Say it ain't so, Joe" come to symbolize the public's reaction to the entire scandal?
2. What actually happened? Did the players really throw the World Series?
3. Who were the major characters in the scandal?
4. What decision did Judge Landis reach? Do you agree with the decision?
5. How would you compare the punishment given to the players in 1921 with contemporary professional athletes who gamble or find themselves with drug problems?

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PART

5



Depression and War

Despite all the talk about prosperity and progress in the 1920s, there were disturbing signs that the economy was not as healthy as people assumed. Throughout the decade, agricultural prices steadily declined as production rose, in what many called a "poverty of abundance." In face of high protective tariffs, foreign trade gradually declined, and the production of durable, domestic goods peaked in 1927. When the bubble burst with the crash of the stock market in October 1929, most Americans were shocked. The shock soon turned to despair as banks failed in record numbers, small businesses closed their doors, and unemployment reached unheard-of levels. How could it have been? For three centuries the world viewed America as the land of opportunity. Suddenly, people were losing their jobs, homes, and life savings. The American dream had become a nightmare.

Bewildered with their plight, most Americans were desperate for answers. Socialists and Communists blamed capitalism, arguing that, just as Karl Marx had predicted, the system was collapsing under the weight of its own corruption and exploitation. The technocrats claimed that industrialization had run its course and that a new social order, based on science and technology, would soon emerge out of the rubble of the Depression. Businessmen blamed politicians for the trouble. Farmers saw bogeymen in bankers and commodities speculators. Some Americans even blamed Jews for the collapse. Abandoning laissez-faire economics, Hoover modestly tried to reorganize the federal government to fight the Depression, but his efforts failed. In the next presidential election, Americans put Franklin D. Roosevelt into the White House.

Roosevelt was an unlikely hero for an impoverished nation. Born to old wealth and raised in splendor, he had little understanding of economics and no empathy for poverty. But he did have keen political instincts and few philosophical inhibitions. In a whirlwind of activity, the New Deal greatly increased relief spending, attacked specific problems in the money markets, and tried, usually in a haphazard way, to stimulate an industrial recovery. Although it took World War II to finally lift the country out of the Depression, Franklin D.



Roosevelt nevertheless became one of the most beloved presidents in American history, popular enough to win reelection in 1936, 1940, and 1944. People remembered him for the spark in his eye, his smiling face and cocked head, and his uncompromising exuberance. To men working on government projects, it was Roosevelt who took them away from the soup lines. To farm wives living in poverty, it was Roosevelt who brought the electric transmission lines, the subsidy check, and the refinanced mortgage. To mass production workers, it was Roosevelt who sanctioned their labor unions and brought minimum wages. And to old people, it was Roosevelt who provided for their futures with Social Security.

But just as Roosevelt was easing fears about the economic future, political developments in Europe were bringing new tensions to a weary nation. Adolf Hitler's designs on Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland in 1938 and 1939 convinced many that another war was imminent and that the problems of the Depression, as bad as they were, would only be child's play compared to a new global conflagration. Hitler's conquest of France and the Low Countries in 1940, the assault on Great Britain, and the invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941 only confirmed those fears. For a brief time, the United States was caught between its historic need for isolation and its responsibilities as a global leader. On December 7, 1941, Japan resolved America's uncertain position.

READING 14



F.D.R.'s Extra Burden

Bernard Asbell

When President Franklin D. Roosevelt collapsed and died of a stroke on April 12, 1945, the nation went into a state of depression unknown since the death of Abraham Lincoln. Like Lincoln, Roosevelt had become inseparably linked with a series of national crises—in his case the Great Depression and World War II. And like Lincoln, Roosevelt was viewed as a savior, a man who had redeemed his people, first from starvation and then from the specter of fascist oppression. Put simply, FDR enjoyed the elusive charisma so prized by politicians. Blessed with enormous self-confidence and an ingratiating personality, he inspired tremendous loyalty among most Americans. They loved him and put him in the White House on four separate occasions—1932, 1936, 1940, and 1944. But like all charismatic leaders, Roosevelt also generated tremendous hostility in some circles, particularly in corporate boardrooms and the parlors of the well-to-do. They viewed him as a “traitor to his class,” a politician so seduced by power that he posed a threat to property and the social order.

Franklin D. Roosevelt was a complicated man, a beloved acquaintance of thousands but an intimate of very few. Born rich and raised in pampered splendor, he nevertheless led a virtual revolution in public policy, giving ethnic minorities, labor unions, and poor people their first taste of influence at the federal level. Although Roosevelt inspired a legion of intellectuals to invest their energies in public service, he was not an innovative thinker himself. He preferred the give and take of politics, and the inherent excitement of its risks, to the intricate must and bolts of social and economic policy. His public persona was overwhelming, but there was also a private side to his life that the American people understood only superficially. During the summer of 1921, little more than a decade before he became president, Roosevelt contracted polio, or infantile paralysis, a disease that crippled him for the rest of his life. In “F.D.R.’s Extra Burden,” Bernard Asbell describes that paralysis and how Roosevelt, the press, and the nation handled it.

Every campaigner, especially for leadership of a large and complex state or for national office, is a cripple.

His legs are bound against running faster than his constituents are able to keep in step. His hands are tied by the limited powers of the office he seeks; he had better not promise what he knows he cannot deliver. His tongue is gagged against pronouncements that may make new friends if those pronouncements will also make new enemies. His balance is threatened by the pulls and tugs of conflicting demands for justice—shall money go for this urgent need or that one?—shall this group's freedom be expanded at the expense of that one's?

Immobilized by these paralyzing constraints, the candidate has to make himself appear able-bodied, attractive, confident, and powerful. At least more so than his opponent.

Being crippled—not in metaphor, but in reality—is perhaps good schooling for politics.

To this day, more than a quarter century after his death, people keep wondering aloud and speculating, "If Roosevelt had not been a cripple, would he have been the same kind of President?" Of course not. "If a different kind, how?" Impossible to say. "If he had not been a cripple, would he have become president at all?" Again, imponderable.

Did F.D.R.'s private battle teach him to identify with those who suffer? Unquestionably. Moreover it taught him the uses of patience (never a strong suit with crusaders who relied upon him, upon whom he relied, yet who continually harassed him). It heightened his sense of time and timing. "It made him realize"—an observation of Egbert Curtis, a Warm Springs companion—"that he was not infallible, that everything wasn't always going to go his way." More than anything, it forced him to study the uses of handicap, paradoxi-

cally giving him a leg up in a profession of able-bodied crippled men.

Let's not carry theory and speculation too far. Instead, let's try to observe firsthand, insofar as the written word permits, the connections between suffering and Roosevelt's acquired capacity for patience, for tolerance and respect of the wills and ambitions of others, for turning handicap into power.

We begin with his own words. A sufferer identifies with sufferers; and "Doctor" Roosevelt of Warm Springs also identified with other doctors. In F.D.R.'s early days at Warm Springs a South Carolina physician wrote to Roosevelt for a personal case report that might help him treat any polio patients who came his way. Roosevelt's reply is the only detailed personal account of what he had recently endured. The letter, dictated to Missy Le-Hand, his private secretary, during their first stay at Warm Springs, says in part:

. . . I am very glad to tell you what I can in regard to my case and as I have talked it over with a great many doctors can, I think, give you a history of the case which would be equal to theirs.

First symptoms of the illness appeared in August, 1921. . . . By the end of the third day practically all muscles from the chest down were involved. Above the chest the only symptom was a weakening of the two large thumb muscles making it impossible to write. There was no special pain along the spine and no rigidity of the neck.

For the following two weeks I had to be catheterized and there was slight, though not severe, difficulty in controlling the bowels. The fever lasted for only 6 or 7 days, but all the muscles from the hips down were extremely sensitive to the touch and I had to have the knees supported by pillows. This condition of extreme discomfort lasted about 3 weeks. . . . [but] disappeared gradually over a period of six months, the last remaining point being the calf muscles.

"F.D.R.'s Extra Burden" by Bernard Asbell, from *American Heritage* (June, 1973). Reprinted by permission of Curtis Brown, Ltd. Copyright © 1973 by Bernard Asbell.

As to treatment—the mistake was made for the first 10 days of giving my feet and lower legs rather heavy massage. This was stopped by Dr. Lovett, of Boston, who was, without doubt, the greatest specialist on infantile paralysis. In January, 1922, 5 months after the attack, he found that the muscles behind the knees had contracted and that there was a tendency to footdrop in the right foot. These were corrected by the use of plaster casts during two weeks. In February, 1922, braces were fitted on each leg from the hips to the shoes, and I was able to stand up and learned gradually to walk with crutches. At the same time gentle exercises were begun, first every other day, then daily, exercising each muscle 10 times and seeking to avoid any undue strain by giving each muscle the correct movement with gravity. These exercises I did on a board placed on the bed.

The recovery of muscle paralysis began at this time, though for many months it seemed to make little progress. In the summer of 1922 I began swimming and found that this exercise seemed better adapted than any other because all weight was removed from the legs and I was able to move the legs in the water far better than I had expected. . . .

I still wear braces, of course, because the quadriceps are not yet strong enough to bear my weight. One year ago I was able to stand in fresh water without braces when the water was up to my chin. Six months ago I could stand in water up to the top of my shoulders and today can stand in water just level with my arm pits. This is a very simple method for me of determining how fast the quadriceps are coming back. Aside from these muscles the waist muscles on the right side are still weak and the outside muscles on the right leg have strengthened so much more than the inside muscles that they pull my right foot forward. I continue corrective exercises for all the muscles.

To sum up I would give you the following "Don'ts".

Don't use heavy massage but use light massage rubbing always towards the heart.

Don't let the patient over-exercise any muscle or get tired.

Don't let the patient feel cold, especially the legs, feet or any other part affected. Progress stops entirely when the legs or feet are cold.

Don't let the patient get too fat.

The following treatment is so far the best, judging from my own experience and that of hundreds of other cases which I have studied:

1. Gentle exercise especially for the muscles which seem to be worst affected.

2. Gentle skin rubbing—not muscle kneading—bearing in mind that good circulation is a prime requisite.

3. Swimming in warm water—lots of it.

4. Sunlight—all the patient can get, especially direct sunlight on the affected parts. It would be ideal to lie in the sun all day with nothing on. This is difficult to accomplish but the nearest approach to it is a bathing suit.

5. Belief on the patient's part that the muscles are coming back and will eventually regain recovery of the affected parts. There are cases known in Norway where adults have taken the disease and not been able to walk until after a lapse of 10 or even 12 years.

I hope that your patient has not got a very severe case. They all differ, of course, in the degree in which the parts are affected. If braces are necessary there is a man in New York . . . who makes remarkable light braces of duraluminum. My first braces of steel weighed 7 lbs. apiece—my new ones weigh only 4 lbs. apiece. Remember that braces are only for the convenience of the patient in getting around—a leg in a brace does not have a chance for muscle development. This muscle development must come through exercise when the brace is not on—such as swimming, etc.

At Hyde Park, before discovering Warm Springs, this powerful man, to the shock of his children and friends, practiced dragging himself crablike across the floor, explaining that the one fear he ever knew was that of being

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caught in a fire. Then, showing off his inordinately strong shoulders and arms, he filled the house with laughter, wrestling his boys on the floor two at a time. His mother ordered an electric tricycle from Europe, but F.D.R. used it only once. He didn't want his muscles worked; he wanted to work them himself.

John Gunther describes Roosevelt's determination to get from floor to floor unaided: "Day after day he would haul his dead body weight up the stairs by the power of his hands and arms, step by step, slowly, doggedly; the sweat would pour off his face, and he would tremble with exhaustion. Moreover he insisted on doing this with members of the family or friends watching him, and he would talk all the time as he inched himself up little by little, talk, and make people talk back. It was a kind of enormous spiritual catharsis—as if he had to do it, to prove his independence, and had to have the feat witnessed, to prove that it was nothing."

At Warm Springs in 1924 he concentrated on the day he would be able to walk unaided with braces. Braces, which he once said he "hated and mistrusted," which he could not put on or take off by himself, made him like a man on stilts. Unable to flex his toes, he had no balance. In 1928, after seven years of immobility and more than four years of daring and persevering, one day, finally, triumphantly, he hobbled most of the way across the living-room floor of his cottage—with braces, but without human help. The achievement was exhausting—and was never to be accomplished again. Years later, according to Grace Tully, "Missy's eyes filled up when on occasions she reminisced about those days." Roosevelt liked to maintain the belief that if he had had another year before the demand that he run for governor, he'd have mastered walking with a single brace.

In the summer of 1928 at Warm Springs, shortly after Roosevelt agreed to address the Democratic National Convention at Houston, his son Elliott, eighteen, was visiting. One



Throughout his presidency, the press seldom printed pictures showing FDR in a wheelchair or with leg braces. This photograph humanizes him and would have been seen by few Americans.

evening Roosevelt was lost in concentrated thought when suddenly he burst out:

"With my hand on a man's arm, and one cane—I'm sure. Let's try it!"

A fellow polio victim, Turnley Walker, Roosevelt's dinner guest, described what then happened and was repeated over and over:

First Roosevelt would get over to the wall and balance there with his cane. It was an ordinary cane but he held it in a special way, with his index finger extended down along the rod from the handle. This finger acted as a rigid cleat . . . so that the strenght of the massive arm and shoulder rammed straight along the cane to its tip against the floor.

"Now, Elliott, you get on the left, my weak side." Elliott watchfully took his place and [Helena] Maboney [a physiotherapist] came forward to show him how to hold his right arm against his middle at the proper angle and lock it there with a clenching of his biceps.

"Remember that a polio needs more than a fingertip of guidance—he needs an iron bar," said Mahoney, "Make a habit of holding that arm there. Never forget the job it's got to do."

"Let's go," said Roosevelt, and he reached out to find the proper grip. Elliott had never felt his father's hand touching him that way. He had been grabbed and hugged, and even tossed and caught with wild energy when he was younger. But now the fingers sought their grip with a kind of ruthless desperation. . . . The pressure became stronger than he had expected as his father pressed down to hitch one braced leg forward for the first step. "You must go right with him," said Mahoney sternly. "Watch his feet. Match your strides with his." Elliott stared down as the rigid feet swung out slowly, and through the pressing hand he could feel the slow, clenching effort of his father's powerful body.

"Don't look at me, Son. Keep your head up, smiling, watching the eyes of people. Keep them from noticing what we're doing."

The cane went out, the good leg swung, the pressure came, the weak leg hitched up into its arc and then fell stiffly into the proper place against the floor. Elliott carefully coordinated his own legs, and they moved across the room.

Roosevelt set his hips against the far wall and told Elliott to rest his arm. "We'll do beautifully," he said.

They went across the room and back again. It was becoming somewhat easier.

"As soon as you feel confident, Son, look up and around at people, the way you would do if I weren't crippled."

"But don't forget," Mahoney warned, "if he loses his balance, he'll crash down like a tree."

"Don't scare us," said Roosevelt.

. . . The cane, the swing, the pressure, the swing. Elliott found that he could look up now and then as they advanced. He caught his father's eyes, the broad smile which was held with a very slight rigidity. . . . Only then did he notice that his father was perspiring heavily.

Yet except when a public show required such extraordinary exertion, Roosevelt was as helpless as a baby. When no strangers were around to see, he let himself be carried by practiced attendants. When F.D.R. became governor, his cousin Nicholas Roosevelt spent a weekend at Hyde Park and later recalled: "His mother and I stood on the veranda watching his son Elliott and Gus Gennerich, the state trooper who acted as his personal bodyguard, carry him down the steps and place him in the car. As they turned and left him, he lost his balance (his powerful torso was much heavier than his crippled legs), and he fell over on the car seat. I doubt if one man in a thousand as disabled and dependent on others would have refrained from some sort of reproach, however mild, to those whose carelessness had thus left him in the lurch. But Franklin merely lay on his back, waved his strong arms in the air and laughed. At once they came back and helped him to his seat behind the wheel, and he called me to join him."

Louis Howe, F.D.R.'s indispensable factotum, set an iron rule—one that F.D.R. was not inclined to resist—that he never be carried in public.

Frances Perkins remembered the gubernatorial campaign.

I saw him speak in a small hall in New York City's Yorkville district. The auditorium was crowded. . . . The only possible way for any candidate to enter the stage without being crushed by the throng was by the fire escape. I realized with sudden horror that the only way he could get over that fire escape was in the arms of strong men. That was how he arrived.

Those of us who saw this incident, with our hands on our throats to hold down our emotion, realized that this man had accepted the ultimate humility which comes from being helped physically. . . . He got up on his braces, adjusted them, straightened himself, smoothed his hair, linked his arm in his son Jim's, and

walked out on the platform as if this were nothing unusual. . . . I began to see what the great teachers of religion meant when they said that humility is the greatest of virtues, and that if you can't learn it, God will teach it to you by humiliation.

Was humility—or humiliation—Roosevelt's great teacher? Many have speculated. Harold Ickes, after a day in a campaign car with press secretary Steve Early:

"[Early] recalled the campaign trips that he had made with Roosevelt when the latter was a candidate for vice president in 1920. He said that if it hadn't been for the President's affliction, he never would have been President of the United States. In those earlier years, as Steve put it, the President was just a playboy. . . . He couldn't be made to prepare his speeches in advance, preferring to play cards instead. During his long illness, according to Steve, the President began to read deeply and study public questions."

Perkins: ". . . He had become conscious of other people, of weak people, of human frailty. I remember thinking that he would never be so hard and harsh in judgment on stupid people—even on wrongdoers. . . . I remember watching him [as governor] in Utica. . . . Certainly some of the Democratic rank-and-file were pretty tiresome, with a lot of things to say that were of no consequence. However, he sat and nodded and smiled and said, 'That's fine,' when they reported some slight progress. I remembered, in contrast, how he had walked away from bores a few years earlier when he was in the State Senate.

"Now he could not walk away when he was bored. He listened, and out of it learned. . . that 'everybody wants to have the sense of belonging, of being on the inside,' that 'no one wants to be left out' as he put it years later in a Columbus, Ohio, speech. . . ."

A considerably more speculative observation by Noel F. Busch, childhood neighbor of the Oyster Bay Roosevelts who grew up to be

a *Time* correspondent and avid F.D.R.-watcher: "Loss of the use of one's legs has several effects on the human psyche. One is that, when deprived of the power to move around, the mind demands a substitute or compensation for this power, such as the ability to command other people to move around. That is why almost all invalids tend to be peevish and demanding. However . . . Roosevelt sublimated and refined the pardonable peevishness of the normal invalid into an administrative urge which would have had profound consequences for him even if he had never become President."

Biographer Emil Ludwig: "The privilege of remaining seated, which everyone concedes him because of his affliction, starts him off with an advantage in his intercourse with others, in the same way as the smallness of Napoleon's stature compelled everyone standing before him to bend his back a little. Certainly giants like Bismarck or Lincoln had an advantage when they appeared before men, but the same effect can be produced by the opposite, by a weakness, and as Roosevelt looks up at everyone standing in front of him, he has accustomed himself to an upward and therefore very energetic gesture of the chin which counteracts the danger of his conciliatory smile."

While never mentioning his paralysis in public (until his last speech to Congress in 1945) and seldom privately, F.D.R. could come down fiercely on those he felt mentioned it unfairly. Huey Long's tapping a straw hat on the useless Presidential knee he could take as bad manners—the other fellow's problem, not his. But when Fulton Oursler brought him a manuscript of a profile of F.D.R. by Jay Franklin to be published in *Liberty*—the editor courteously seeking F.D.R.'s reaction—Oursler saw "a red flush rise on his neck like the temperature in a thermometer." Assuming that Roosevelt was angered over some political needling, he learned otherwise:

"Mr. Oursler, there is only one statement in this article that I want corrected. The author

says in this line here that I have 'never entirely recovered from infantile paralysis.' *Never recovered what?* I have never recovered the complete use of my knees. Will you fix that?"

His reticence to mention it—and the released heat that accompanied exceptions—was shared by Mrs. Roosevelt. At an Akron, Ohio, lecture she was asked: "Do you think your husband's illness has affected his mentality?" Betraying no emotion as she read the written question aloud, she paused for an extra cooling moment and replied:

"I am glad that question was asked. The answer is yes. Anyone who has gone through great suffering is bound to have a greater sympathy and understanding of the problems of mankind." The audience rose in an ovation.

He was frequently torn between keeping his silence and protesting his case. On April 6, 1938, he wrote to an "old friend"—Elliott's description—mentioning his affliction. The important thing is not what he wrote but his decision not to mail it. Instead, he marked it "Written for the Record" and filed it away. It said in part:

. . . I do not mind telling you, in complete 100% confidence, that in 1923, when I first went to Florida . . . my old running mate, Jim Cox, came to see me on my house-boat in Miami. At that time I was, of course, walking with great difficulty—braces and crutches. Jim's eyes filled with tears when he saw me, and I gathered from his conversation that he was dead certain that I had had a stroke and that another one would soon completely remove me. At that time, of course, my general health was extremely good. . . .

Jim Cox from that day on always shook his head when my name was mentioned and said in sorrow that in effect I was a hopeless invalid and could never resume any active participation in business or political affairs.

As late as 1931—I think it was—when I was coming back from the Governor's Conference in Indiana, I stopped off at Dayton to see Jim

Cox. He had had a very serious operation, followed by a thrombosis in his leg, and was very definitely invalided. His whole attitude during the two hours I spent with him alone was the same—that it was marvelous that I could stand the strain of the Governorship, but that in all probability I would be dead in a few months. He spent the greater part of the time asking me solicitously how I was, though he was a much sicker man than I was.

He made a fine come-back and is furious today if anybody ever refers to the thrombosis he had in his leg—but I still think he expects me to pop off at any moment.

While deciding not to mail that letter, at other times he could be as open as a billboard. Son Jimmy recalls that on one of Madame Chiang Kaishek's visits to the White House the grande dame thoughtlessly told the President not to stand up as she rose to leave the room. He gently replied, "My dear child, I couldn't stand up if I had to."

In a wheelchair or an automobile, getting F.D.R. into or out of an overcoat was an awkward exercise. With a stage sense of costume, F.D.R. took to a velvet-collared, braid-looped regulation Navy cape that, along with his cigarette holder, became a personal mark. Again, disadvantage was the fabric from which, with flair and style, he fashioned advantage.

Out of deference to his office as well as personal affection, newsmen virtually never mentioned the President's disability. So effective was their conspiracy even upon themselves, that, as John Gunther recalled, "hard-boiled newspaper men who knew that he could not walk as well as they knew their own names could never quite get over being startled when F.D.R. was suddenly brought into a room. The shock was greater when he wheeled himself and, of course, was greatest when he was carried; he seemed, for one thing, very small. . . . During the 1930s when I lived in Europe I repeatedly met men in important positions of state who had no idea that the President was disabled."

The people of the United States—his constituents, those from whom he drew strength and, more importantly, those who drew strength from him—knew, yet didn't know. They, too, waiting at tiny railroad depots, straining to see through the autumn sunshine the commanding figure of their President,

froze at the sight of the painfully slow-motion, brace-supported step-pause-step across what seemed a torturous mile of observation platform from the train's rear door to the microphone.

It was an unexpected, unforgettable drama of frailty and strength.

Study Questions

1. Did Roosevelt's illness give him the capacity to identify with the suffering of others? How much? Why?
2. Describe the physical course of Roosevelt's disease. How physically restricted was he in his activities?
3. What would you say about his mental attitude? What does it reveal about his personality?
4. How did the press handle the illness? Why were they so respectful of Roosevelt's privacy? Would today's press be equally respectful? Why or why not?
5. Why was Roosevelt so secretive of his illness? What were the possible political ramifications of the public understanding the extent of his handicap?

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READING 16



Night of the Martians

Edward Oxford

It's a truism today that the mass media influences the lives of Americans. Society is constantly barraged with questions and criticism about such issues as the quality of children's television programming, the political bias of newscasters, the ethics of television advertising, the domination of political campaigns by the media, and the decline of literacy and the written word. More than any other technological innovation, the development first of radio and then of television has transformed American life, changing the way people live and relate to one another. The first radio station in the United States began broadcasting out of Pittsburgh in 1920. Three years later there were more than 500 stations doing the same thing, and by 1929 more than 12 million families listened to the radio at home every night. The communications revolution that radio stimulated contributed to the creation of a mass, national culture.

The influence of the radio, however, did not immediately dawn on people. In 1927 the National Broadcasting Company became the first national network, and by 1933 President Franklin D. Roosevelt was effectively using the radio for his famous "fireside chats." But it was not until 1938, when Orson Welles broadcast his famous "War of the Worlds" program, that Americans realized the potential of radio to shape public attitudes. With Adolf Hitler making his designs on Czechoslovakia well known, Americans were worried that another global conflict was in the making. Battered by the frustration of the Great Depression and nervous about the safety of the world, millions of people panicked when Orson Welles described over national radio an invasion of the East Coast by Martians. In the following essay, historian Edward Oxford describes the broadcast and the controversy it inspired.

A little after eight P.M. on Halloween eve 1938, thirteen-year-old Dick Stives, his sister, and two brothers huddled around their family's radio. They were in the dining room of their grandfather's farmhouse near the hamlet of Grovers Mill, four miles east of Princeton, New Jersey. Their mother and father had dropped them off there and gone to the movies.

Dick worked the radio dial, hunting for the station that carried the *Chase and Sanborn Hour*, his—and the nation's—favorite Sunday evening program. As he scanned the airwaves, Dick tuned in the local affiliate of the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS). A commanding voice—that of Orson Welles—riveted his attention.

“ . . . across an immense ethereal gulf, minds that are to our minds as ours are to the beasts of the jungle, intellects vast, cool, and unsympathetic, regarded this earth with envious eyes and slowly and surely drew their plans against us. . . . ”

Dick Stives turned the dial no further. Instead, during the next hour he and millions of other listeners sat glued by their radios, convinced by an alarming series of “news bulletins” that monster aliens from Mars were invading America. Dick's village of Grovers Mill—the supposed landing site for these invaders—became the focal point of a panic wave that rapidly swept across the nation.

The program—the *Mercury Theatre on the Air* adaptation of H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*—would later be remembered as the most extraordinary radio show ever broadcast. And Orson Welles, its brilliant young producer, director, and star, would be catapulted to nationwide fame overnight.

As the wonder boy of the performing arts, Orson Welles had by age twenty-three already appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine; built a considerable reputation as a radio actor; set the stage world on its ear with a *Julius Caesar* set in Fascist Italy, an all-black *Macbeth*, and a production of Marc Blitzstein's opera *The Cradle Will Rock*; and founded—with his partner-in-drama John Houseman—the revolutionary and often controversial Mercury Theatre.¹

In midsummer 1938, the Columbia Broadcasting System, impressed by Welles's meteoric success, offered him and his repertory company a grand stage, radio—“the Broadway of the entire United States”—on which to deliver a sixty-minute dramatization each week.

Broadcast from the twenty-second floor of the CBS building in midtown Manhattan, the *Mercury Theatre on the Air* had no commercial sponsor. The show was subsidized by the CBS network, and its bare-bones budget provided no money for expensive, original plays. “We offered the audience classic works from the public domain—*Julius Caesar*, *Oliver Twist*, *The Heart of Darkness*, *Jane Eyre*, and such,” recalls John Houseman. “Orson and I would select the book. Sometimes it was my task to fashion the original into a workable radio script.”

For the last program of October, the seventeenth in their series, Welles and Houseman wanted to “throw in something of a scientific nature.” They settled on an adaptation of *The War of the Worlds*, a science-fiction novel written in 1898 by British author H. G. Wells. Houseman assigned the script to a recent addition to the company, writer Howard Koch.

“Night of the Martians” by Edward Oxford. This article is reprinted from the October 1988 issue of *American History Illustrated* 23, pp. 14–23, 47–48 with the permission of Cowles History Group, Inc. Copyright *American History Illustrated* magazine.

¹Up to this time Welles was probably best known to radio audiences as “Lamont Cranston,” alias “The Shadow,” on the popular Sunday afternoon mystery program of the same name. But he also appeared frequently on many other shows including “The March of Time,” and was said to be earning \$1,000 a week from his radio commitments alone.

For the fall season CBS had moved the *Mercury Theatre on the Air* from Monday evening to the Sunday night eight-to-nine-o'clock slot, an "unsold" time period. During this hour much of America tuned in to the competing NBC Red network for the *Chase and Sanborn Hour*, which featured ventriloquist Edgar Bergen and his wooden-headed "dummy" Charlie McCarthy. The Crossley ratings of listenership gave Charlie McCarthy a "thirty-five" (roughly 35 percent of radio listeners at that hour tuned in), while the *Mercury* usually scored about "three."

During the week before the October 30 broadcast, Welles nonchalantly put in his own typically frantic week while Houseman, Koch, and the cast struggled to ready the show. Welles spent much of his time not in the CBS studios at 485 Madison Avenue, but on the stage of the Mercury Theatre on West 41st Street, rehearsing his repertory company for the opening of a new play. He hurried back to CBS at odd hours to try out some of his lines, listen to run-throughs by the radio show's cast, and render his inimitable revisions.

Welles and his company spent much of Sunday amid a litter of sandwiches and coffee cups in Studio One, adding final touches to their version of *The War of the Worlds* and conducting a dress rehearsal with full music and sound effects.

Just before eight p.m., Eastern Standard Time, Welles, conductor-like, stood poised on his platform in the middle of the studio. He had at his command not only his loyal band of actors, but also a small symphony orchestra. Wearing a headset, the multifaceted genius was prepared to read his own lines, cue the other actors, signal for sound effects, summon the orchestra, and also keep in touch with the control room.

At the stroke of eight o'clock, he gave the cue for the start of the *Mercury* theme—the Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-Flat Minor.

For the next unforgettable hour, Dick Stives at Grovers Mill, along with several million other Americans, sat transfixed as the airwaves brought word of weird and almost incomprehensible events that seemed to unfold with terrifying reality even as they listened.

It was not as though listeners hadn't been warned. Most simply didn't pay close attention to the program's opening signature (or tuned in a few seconds late and missed it altogether): "The Columbia Broadcasting System and its affiliated stations present Orson Welles and the Mercury Theatre on the Air in *The War of the Worlds* by H. G. Welles. . . ."

Many in the radio audience failed to associate what they heard with prior newspaper listings of the drama. And, by the time a single station break came late in the hour with reminders that listeners were hearing a fictional story, many others were too agitated to comprehend that they had been deceived.

Skillfully choreographed by Welles and Houseman, the program—a play simulating a montage of real-life dance band "remotes" and news bulletins—began with deliberate calm. Millions of listeners, conditioned by recent news reports of worldwide political turmoil—and by their inherent trust in the medium of radio—believed what they heard.

Just two minutes into the show, audience perception between fantasy and reality began to blur when, following Welles's dramatic opening monologue, the microphone shifted to a "network announcer" reading an apparently routine report from the "Government Weather Bureau."

Programming then shifted to "Ramon Raquello and his orchestra" in the "Meridian Room" at the "Hotel Park Plaza" in downtown New York City.

During rehearsals for the show, Welles had insisted—over the objections of his associates—on increasing the broadcast time devoted to the fictional orchestra's soothing renditions of "La Cumparsita" and "the ever-popular 'Stardust.'" As he had anticipated, the

resulting “band remote” had a disarming air of reality—and provided emotional contrast to the intensity of later news bulletins.²

Just when Welles had calculated that listeners might start tuning out the music in search of something more lively, an announcer broke in with a bulletin from the “Intercontinental Radio News”: “Professor Farrell of the Mount Jennings Observatory” near Chicago had reported observing “several explosions of incandescent gas occurring at regular intervals on the planet Mars. . . . The spectroscope indicates the gas to be hydrogen and moving towards the earth with tremendous velocity.”

The dance music resumed, only to be interrupted repeatedly during the next several minutes by other bulletins. The tempo of events—and listeners’ interest—began to intensify.

From a “remote pickup” at the “Princeton Observatory,” reporter “Carl Phillips” interviewed famous astronomer “Richard Pierson” (played by Welles). As the clockwork of mechanism of his telescope ticked in the background, Professor Pierson described Mars as a red disk swimming in a blue sea. He said he could not explain the gas eruptions on that planet. But skeptical of anything that could not be explained by logic, the astronomer counted the chances against living intelligence on Mars as being “a thousand to one.”

Then Phillips read a wire that had just been handed to Pierson: a seismograph at the “Natural History Museum” in New York had registered a “shock of almost earthquake intensity occurring within a radius of twenty miles of Princeton.” Pierson played down any possible connection with the disturbances on Mars: “This is probably a meteorite of unusual size

and its arrival at this particular time is merely a coincidence.”

Again the program returned to music, followed by yet another bulletin: an astronomer in Canada had observed three explosions on Mars, confirming “earlier reports from American observatories.”

“Now, nearer home,” continued the announcer, “comes a special announcement from Trenton, New Jersey. It is reported that at 8:50 P.M. a huge, flaming object, believed to be a meteorite, fell on a farm in the neighborhood of Grovers Mill, New Jersey, twenty-two miles from Trenton. The flash in the sky was visible within a radius of several hundred miles and the noise of impact was heard as far north as Elizabeth.”

Listeners leaned closer to their sets. In Grovers Mill, Dick Stives stared at the radio and gulped.

Again the broadcast returned to dance music—this time to “Bobby Millette and his orchestra” at the “Hotel Martinet” in Brooklyn. And again the music was interrupted by a news flash. Having just arrived at the scene of “impact” on the “Wilmuth farm” near Grovers Mill, reporter Carl Phillips, accompanied by Professor Pierson, beheld police, state troopers, and onlookers crowding around what appeared to be a huge metallic cylinder, partially buried in the earth.

About this time, some twelve minutes into the broadcast, many listeners to the *Chase and Sanborn Hour*, momentarily bored by a guest musical spot, turned their dials. A lot of them stopped in sudden shock as they came upon the CBS wavelength. The events being described seemed real to listeners—quite as real to them as reports, not many months before, that Adolf Hitler’s troops had marched into Austria.

“I wish I could convey the atmosphere . . . the background of this . . . fantastic scene,” reported Phillips. “Hundreds of cars are parked in a field back of us. . . . Their headlights throw an enormous spot on the pit where the object is half-buried. Some of the

²The format was a familiar one to radio listeners. “Big band remotes”—network broadcasts featuring America’s best-known dance bands as they played at one-night stands in ballrooms from coast to coast—were a staple of broadcasting during the 1930s.

more daring souls are venturing near the edge. Their silhouettes stand out against the metal sheen. . . ."

Professor Pierson described the object as "definitely extraterrestrial . . . not found on this earth. . . . This thing is smooth and, as you can see, of cylindrical shape." Then Phillips suddenly interrupted him:

"Just a minute! Something's happening! Ladies and gentlemen, this is terrific! The end of the thing is beginning to flake off! The top is beginning to rotate like a screw! The thing must be hollow! [shouts of alarm] Ladies and gentlemen, this is the most terrifying thing I have ever witnessed. . . . Wait a minute! Someone's crawling out of the hollow top. Someone or . . . something. I can see peering out of that black hole two luminous disks—are they eyes? Good heavens, something's wriggling out of the shadow like a gray snake. . . . I can see the thing's body. It's large as a bear and it glistens like wet leather. But that face. It . . . it's indescribable. I can hardly force myself to keep looking at it. The eyes are black and gleam like a serpent. The mouth is V-shaped with saliva dripping from its rimless lips that seem to quiver and pulsate. . . ."

Thirty state troopers, according to the reporter, now formed a cordon around the pit where the object rested. Three policemen carrying a white handkerchief of truce walked toward the cylinder. Phillips continued:

"Wait a minute . . . something's happening. [high-pitched, intermittent whine of machinery] A humped shape is rising out of the pit. I can make out a small beam of light against a mirror. . . . What's that? There's a jet of flame springing from the mirror, and it leaps right at the advancing men! It strikes them head on! Good Lord, they're turning into flame! [screams and shrieks] Now the whole field by the woods has caught fire! [sound effects intensify] The gas tanks, tanks of automobiles . . . it's spreading everywhere! It's coming this way now! About twenty yards to my right [abrupt silence]."³

Now terror was afoot. A series of voices—fictional "announcers," "militia commanders," "network vice presidents," and "radio operators"—took up the narrative. At least forty people, according to the radio bulletins, lay dead at Grovers Mill, "their bodies burned and distorted beyond all possible recognition." And in a Trenton hospital, "the charred body of Carl Phillips" had been identified.

A current of fear flowed outward across the nation. Real-life police switchboards, first in New Jersey, then, steadily, throughout the whole Northeast, began to light up: "What's happening?" "Who's attacking America?" "When will they be here?" "What can we do?" "Who are they—these Martians?"

By now, according to the broadcast, "eight battalions of infantry" had surrounded the cylinder, determined to destroy it. A "Captain Lansing" of the "Signal Corps"—calm and confident at first, but with obviously increasing alarm—described what happened next:

"Well, we ought to see some action soon. One of the companies is deploying on the left flank. A quick thrust and it'll all be over. Wait a minute, I see something on top of the cylinder. No, it's nothing but a shadow. . . . Seven thousand armed men closing in on an old metal tube. Tub, rather. Wait, that wasn't a shadow. It's something moving . . . solid metal. Kind of a shield-like affair rising up out of the cylinder! It's going higher and higher! Why, it's . . . standing on legs! Actually rearing up on a sort of metal framework! Now it's reaching above the trees and searchlights are on it! Hold on [abrupt silence]."

In a matter of moments, a studio "announcer" gave America the incredible news:

" . . . Those strange beings who landed in the Jersey farmlands tonight are the vanguard of

³Phillip's narrative bore a perhaps-not-coincidental resemblance to a famous eyewitness report by Chicago radio newsmen Herb Morrison, who on May 6, 1937, had described the explosion and destruction of the German dirigible Hindenburg as it was about to moor at Lakehurst, New Jersey.

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an invading army from the planet Mars. The battle which took place tonight at Grovers Mill has ended in one of the most startling defeats ever suffered by an army in modern times; seven thousand men armed with rifles and machine guns pitted against a single fighting machine of the invaders from Mars. One hundred and twenty known survivors. The rest strewn over the battle areas from Grovers Mill to Plainsboro crushed and trampled to death under the metal feet of the monster, or burned to cinders by its heat ray. . . ."

Groves Mill's couple of hundred real-life residents hardly knew what to make of it all. Young Dick Stives was stunned. He and his sister and brothers pulled down the shades in the farmhouse. Their grandfather shoved chairs against the doors.

Teen-aged Lolly Dey, who heard about the "invasion" while attending a church meeting, consoled herself by saying: "I am in the Lord's House." Another resident, seeing what he thought to be a Martian war machine among the trees (actually a water tower on a neighbor's property), peppered it with shotgun blasts. One man packed his family into the car, bound for parts unknown. He backed right through his garage door. "We're never gonna be needing that again anyway," he muttered to his wife.

"The monster is now in control of the middle section of New Jersey," proclaimed the voice on the radio. "Communication lines are down from Pennsylvania to the Atlantic Ocean. Railroad tracks are torn and service from New York to Philadelphia discontinued. . . . Highways to the north, south, and west are clogged with frantic human traffic. Police and army reserves are unable to control the mad flight. . . ."

Life was soon to imitate art. A wave of terror, unprecedented in its scope and rapidity, swept across New Jersey. A New Brunswick man, bound for open country, had driven ten miles when he remembered that his dog was tied up in the backyard of his home.

Daring the Martians, he drove back to retrieve the dog.

A West Orange bar owner pushed customers out into the street, locked his tavern door, and rushed home to rescue his wife and children.

Twenty families began to move their belongings out of a Newark apartment house, their faces covered by wet towels to repel Martian rays. Doctors and nurses volunteered to come to hospitals to help handle the "war casualties."

At Princeton University, the chairman of the geology department packed his field equipment and headed into the night to look for whatever it was that was out there. The governor of Pennsylvania offered to send troops to help New Jersey. A Jersey City man called a bus dispatcher to warn him of the fast-spreading "disaster." He cut their conversation short with: "The world is coming to an end and I have a lot to do!"

Meanwhile, on the radio, the "Secretary of the Interior," speaking in a voice much like that of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, announced that he had faith in the ability of the American military to vanquish the Martians.⁴ He solemnly intoned:

" . . . placing our trust in God we must continue the performance of our duties each and every one of us, so that we may confront this destructive adversary with a nation united, courageous, and consecrated to the preservation of human supremacy on this earth."

A Trenton store owner ran out screaming, "The world is ending! The world is ending!" Another man dashed into a motion-picture theater in Orange, crying out that "the state is being invaded! This place is going to be

⁴Network censors, concerned that the drama might sound too factual, had earlier requested more than thirty changes in the script. Thus, although he still sounded like Franklin Roosevelt, the "President" became the "Secretary of the Interior." The "U.S. Weather Bureau" was changed to the "Government Weather Bureau," the "National Guard" became the "State Militia," etc.

blown up!" The audience hurriedly ran out to the street.

A woman in a Newark tenement just sat and cried. "I thought it was all up with us," she said. A man driving westward called out to a patrolman: "All creation's busted loose! I'm getting out!"

More grim reports issued from the radio. Scouting planes, according to the broadcast, had sighted three Martian machines marching through New Jersey. They were uprooting power lines, bridges, and railroad tracks, with the apparent objectives of crushing resistance and paralyzing communications. In swamps twenty miles south of Morristown, coon hunters had stumbled upon a second Martian cylinder.

In the Watchung mountains, the "22nd Field Artillery" set down a barrage against six tripod monsters—to no avail. The machines soon let loose a heavy black poisonous gas, annihilating the artillerymen. Then eight army bombers from "Langham Field, Virginia," attacked the tripod machines, only to be downed by heat rays.

Thousands of telephone calls cascaded into radio stations, newspaper offices, power companies, fire houses, and military posts throughout the country. People wanted to know what to do . . . where to go . . . whether they were safer in the cellar or the attic.

Word spread in Atlanta that a "planet" had struck New Jersey. In Philadelphia, all the guests in one hotel checked out. Students at a college in North Carolina lined up at telephones to call their parents for the last time. When a caller reached the CBS switchboard, the puzzled operator, asked about the end of the world, said: "I'm sorry, we don't have that information."

Radio listeners soon heard an "announcer," said to be atop the "Broadcasting Building" in Manhattan, describe a doomed New York City:

"The bells you hear are ringing to warn the people to evacuate the city as the Martians ap-

proach. Estimated in the last two hours three million people have moved out along the roads to the north. . . . No more defenses. Our army wiped out . . . artillery, air force, everything wiped out. . . . We'll stay here to the end."

Something like madness took hold among radio listeners in New York City. People stood on Manhattan street corners hoping for a glimpse of the "battle." Thirty men and women showed up at a Harlem police station wanting to be evacuated. A woman had her husband paged at a Broadway theater and told him of the Martian landings; word spread quickly and a throng of playgoers rushed for the exits.

The radio voice continued: "Enemy now in sight above the Palisades! Five great machines. First one is crossing the river . . . wading the Hudson like a man wading through a brook. . . . Martian cylinders are falling all over the country. One outside Buffalo, one in Chicago, St. Louis. . . . Now the first machine reaches the shore! He stands watching, looking over the city. His steel, cowlish head is even with the skyscrapers. He waits for the others. They rise like a line of new towers on the city's west side. . . ."

A Bronx man dashed into the street and saw people running in all directions. One New Yorker claimed he heard the "swish" of Martian flying vehicles. Another told of machine-gun fire. Atop a midtown Manhattan building, a man with binoculars "saw" the firing of weapons. In Brooklyn, a man called the police station: "We can hear the firing all the way here, and I want a gas mask. I'm a taxpayer."

An NBC executive was upset because *his* network wasn't carrying the ultimate news event. One man sped at eighty miles an hour to reach a priest before the "death rays" overtook him; his car flipped over twice, but he lived.

The program played out the drama of doom right to its end.

From atop his fictional building, the "broadcaster" continued his "eyewitness" report: "Now they're lifting their metal hands. This is the end now. Smoke comes out. . . ."

People in the streets see it now. They're running towards the East River . . . thousands of them, dropping in like rats. . . . It's reached Times Square. . . . People trying to run away from it, but it's no use. They . . . they're falling like flies. . . ."

Meanwhile, in real life, Boston families gathered on rooftops and thought they could see a glow in the sky as New York burned. A horrified Pittsburgh husband found his wife with a bottle of poison, screaming: "I'd rather die this way than that!"

People called the electric company in Providence, Rhode Island, to turn off all the city lights to make it a less visible target. A motorist rode through the streets of Baltimore, Paul Revere-fashion, blowing his horn and warning of the Martian invasion.

The staff of a Memphis newspaper readied an extra edition on rumored landings in Chicago and St. Louis. In Minneapolis, a woman ran into a church yelling: "This is the end of the world! I heard it on the radio!"

Back on the broadcast, the forlorn announcer carried on: "Now the smoke's crossing Sixth Avenue . . . Fifth Avenue . . . [coughing] a hundred yards away . . . it's fifty feet . . . [thud of falling body, then only sound of ships' whistles]."

In Salt Lake City, people started to pack before heading into the Rocky Mountains. One man, in Reno for a divorce, started to drive east, hoping to aid his estranged wife. A man and woman who'd run out of gas in northern California just sat and held hands, expecting any minute to see the Martian war machines appear over the tops of trees. Electric power failed in a village in Washington; families started to flee.

In Hollywood, John Barrymore downed a drink, went to his kennels and released his Great Danes. "Fend for yourselves!" he cried.

Then, from the radio, came the mournful call of a "radio operator": "2X2L calling CQ . . . New York. Isn't there anyone on the air? Isn't there anyone?"

Forty minutes into the broadcast, Welles gave his distraught audience a breather—a pause for station and program identification.

In the control room, CBS staffer Richard Goggin was startled as telephones there began to ring. That would only happen in an emergency. "Tension was becoming enormous in Studio One," he later recalled. "They had a tiger by the tail and couldn't let go."

For those brave enough to stay tuned, Welles was able to match the program's stunning first portion with an equally remarkable concluding sequence. In what amounted to a twenty-minute soliloquy, he, in the role of Professor Pierson, chronicled the events that followed the Martians' destruction of New York City. Welles's spellbinding voice—magnetic, doom-filled, stirring—held listeners mesmerized.⁵

In the script, a stoic Pierson, still alive in the rubble, made his solitary way toward the ruins of New York, hiding from the invaders as he went.

Along the way he met a "stranger," a former artilleryman. This survivor feared that the Martians would cage and enslave any humans still alive. The stranger was determined to outwit and outlast the Martians and, in time, to turn the heat-rays back on the invaders and even—if need be—upon other humans. And so, one day, new leaders would rule a new world.

Pierson, unwilling to join the stranger's cause, continued his lonely journey. Entering Manhattan through the now-empty Holland Tunnel, he found a lifeless city:

"I wandered up through the Thirties and Forties . . . stood alone on Times Square. I caught sight of a lean dog running down Seventh Avenue with a piece of dark brown meat

⁵Welles's closing narrative, fictionally dramatic in style and compressing months of events into twenty minutes, contrasted sharply with the realism of the first portion of the program. Nevertheless, many listeners apparently remained convinced that Martians had landed.

in his jaws, and a pack of starving mongrels at his heels. . . . I walked up Broadway . . . past silent shop windows, displaying their mute wares to empty sidewalks. . . ."

There seemed to be little hope left for the human race. Then Pierson "caught sight of the hood of a Martian machine, standing somewhere in Central Park, gleaming in the late afternoon sun":

"I rushed recklessly across Columbus Circle and into the park. I climbed a small hill above the pond at Sixtieth Street, and from there I could see standing in a silent row along the mall, nineteen of those great metal Titans, their cowls empty, their steel arms hanging listlessly by their sides. I looked in vain for the monsters that inhabit those machines. Suddenly my eyes were attracted to the immense flock of black birds that hovered directly below me . . . and there before my eyes, stark and silent, lay the Martians, with the hungry birds pecking and tearing brown shreds of flesh from their dead bodies."

The mighty Martians had fallen: ". . . it was found that they were killed by the putrefactive and disease bacteria against which their systems were unprepared . . . slain, after all man's defenses had failed, by the humblest thing that God in His wisdom put upon this earth."

In a sprightly epilogue, Welles then explained away the whole unsettling broadcast as the Mercury Theatre's "way of 'dressing up in a sheet and saying Boo!' . . . We annihilated the world before your very ears, and utterly destroyed the CBS. You will be relieved, I hope, to learn that we didn't mean it, and that both institutions are still open for business."

He tried cheerily to dispel the darkness: "So goodbye everybody, and remember . . . the terrible lesson you learned tonight. . . . And if your doorbell rings and nobody's there, that was no Martian . . . it's Hallowe'en."

The joke was on the listeners. More than one hundred and fifty stations affiliated with CBS had carried the broadcast. About twelve million people had heard the program. Newspapers estimated that at least a million listen-

ers, perhaps many more, had thought the invasion real.

Back in Grovers Mill, disenchantment began to take hold. Twenty-year-old Sam Goldman and three pals had been playing cards when they heard that the Martians were on the move down by the mill. They had thrown down their cards and jumped into a car, ready to face the invaders. "We got there and looked around," Sam said, "and nothing was going on."

A squad of New Jersey state troopers equipped with riot guns had deployed near the crossroads. They found little more than the dilapidated old mill itself.

Nearby, in their grandfather's farmhouse, Dick Stives, his sister, and brothers talked excitedly about the "men from Mars." Then their mother and father came home from the movies and told the children about the "make believe" on radio that everyone was talking about. Dick, more confused than ever, went upstairs to go to sleep, still half-sure that what he heard was "really real."

For the players who had inadvertently just made radio history, the next hours turned into a nightmare. As soon as Welles left the twenty-second-floor studio, he was called to a telephone. He picked it up, to hear the irate mayor of Flint, Michigan, roar that his city was in chaos because of the program and that he, the mayor, would soon be on his way to New York to punch one Orson Welles in the nose.

"By nine o'clock several high-ranking CBS executives had arrived or were in full flight toward 485 Madison. We were in trouble," recalled Larry Harding, a CBS production supervisor for the *Mercury Theatre* show.

Policemen hurried into the CBS building. Welles, Houseman, and the cast were held under informal house arrest. Staffers hastily stashed scripts, memoranda, and the sixteen-inch acetate disks upon which the show had been recorded.

Welles was taken to a room on the seventeenth floor, where reporters battered him with questions about whether he knew of the

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deaths and suicides his broadcast had caused (none have ever been documented), whether he knew ahead of time how devastating an effect his show would have (he said he didn't), and whether he had planned it all as a publicity stunt (he said he hadn't).

Finally, at about one o'clock Monday morning, Welles and the cast were "released," free to go out into the streets of New York where not a Martian was stirring. Welles walked a half-dozen blocks to the Mercury Theatre, where, even at that hour, members of the stage company were still rehearsing their new play.

Welles went up on stage, where news photographers were lurking. They caught him with his eyes raised, his arms outstretched. The next day his photograph appeared in newspapers throughout the country, over a caption that blurted: "I Didn't Know What I Was Doing!" or words to that effect.

The next morning headlines in major city newspapers reported the hoax: "Radio Listeners in Panic, Taking War Drama as Fact" (*New York Times*); "U.S. Terrorized by Radio's 'Men From Mars'" (*San Francisco Chronicle*); "Radio Drama Causes Panic" (*Philadelphia Inquirer*); "Listeners Weep and Pray, Prepare for End of World" (*New Orleans Times-Picayune*).

Many of the listeners who had been deluded laughed good-naturedly at one another—and at themselves. Some professed not to have been taken in by what one woman called "that Buck Rogers stuff." But others turned their wrath on Welles, on the network, and on the medium that had turned their Sunday evening into a time of unsolicited terror.

CBS apologized to the public, but also pointed out that during the program no fewer than four announcements had been made stating that it was a dramatic presentation, not a news broadcast.

A subdued Welles, believing his career was ruined, dutifully followed suit. "I don't think we will try anything like this again," he stated.

For two or three days, the press would not let Welles, nor radio, off the front page. Media rivalry played its part; newspaper publishers

seemed anxious to portray radio—and Welles—as villains. The clipping bureau that served CBS delivered condemnatory editorials by the pound.

While newsmen "tsk-tsked," government officials fumed. Senator Clyde Herring of Iowa, reflecting the anger of many citizens, stated his support for legislation to curb such "Halloween bogymen." The Federal Communications Commission (FCC), flooded with complaint letters, tried to find a philosophical stance somewhere between imposing severe censorship and permitting unbridled expression.

Novelist H. G. Wells cabled his disregards from London. Although he had given CBS permission to air his novel, he complained that "it was not explained to me that this dramatization would be made with a liberty that amounts to a complete reworking of *The War of the Worlds*."

But some columnists and editorialists began to perceive significant merit in the program. Essayist Heywood Broun interpreted the broadcast as a cautionary tale: "Jitters have come home to roost. The peace of Munich hangs heavy over our heads like a thundercloud." *Variety*, under a headline stating "Radio Does U.S. a Favor," described the program as a warning to Americans of the danger of unpreparedness.

In a column that turned the tide of public opinion in favor of Welles and company, Dorothy Thompson called the broadcast "the news story of the century—an event which made greater contribution to an understanding of Hitlerism, Mussolinism, Stalinism, anti-Semitism, and all the other terrorism of our time than all the words about them that have been written by reasonable men."

Welles, to his relief, soon learned that he would not be consigned to *durance vile*. "Bill Paley, the head of CBS, brought Orson and me up on the carpet and gave us a reprimand," Houseman later recalled. "But there was ambivalence to it. The working stiffs thought we were heroes. The executives thought of us as



Orson Welles, besieged by reporters after the 1938 broadcast of *War of the Worlds*. Welles expressed amazement and regret that his dramatization had created panic among millions of radio listeners.

some sort of anarchists. But reason—and revenues—prevailed. A few days after the broadcast, when it was announced that Campbell's Soup had become a sponsor, the boys at the top began to think of us as heroes, or at least as employable persons, as well."

Some critics continued to decry the credulity of the American people. They spoke of the compelling power of the human voice emanating from the upper air. Radio, ominously, seemed able to reduce an entire country to the size of one room; it exerted unexpected power over susceptible millions.

For a book-length study titled *The Invasion from Mars*, Princeton University psychology professor Hadley Cantril interviewed scores of persons who had listened to the program. Speaking with them shortly after "that night," he received responses ranging from insecure to phobic to fatalistic.

"The coming of the Martians did not present a situation where the individual could pre-

serve one value if he sacrifices another," Professor Cantril concluded from his research. "In this situation the individual stood to lose all his values at once. Nothing could be done to save any of them. Panic was inevitable."

Did Welles intend the panic? Had he hoped, by means of his magnificent dramatic powers, to gain all those headlines?

Houseman dismisses such conjecture as "rubbish." He declares: "Orson and I had no clear presense of the mood of the audience. *The War of the Worlds* wasn't selected as a parable of invasion and war in the 1930s, but just as an interesting story unto itself. Only after the fact did we perceive how ready and resonant the world was for the tale. Our intent was theatre, not terror."

Welles and his players could not know that they had portrayed the shape of things to come. The program was, in a way, quite prophetic. Barely two weeks later, German foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop

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chillingly commented: "I would not be surprised if in the United States eyewitness reports are under consideration in which the 'Giants from Mars' marched up in brown shirts waving swastika flags."

Sooner than the peoples of the world could guess, a true nightmare—that of World War II—would be upon them.

Welles, of course, went on to memorable successes in motion pictures and theater. And his *War of the Worlds* broadcast became the most famous radio program of all time.

These days, the crossroads village of Grovers Mill is much the way it was that spectral night half a century ago. There are, however, signs of strangers nearby—new homes sprouting up among what had been potato fields. And futuristic shapes—sleek, glass-walled, high-technology industrial buildings—stand amid the trees.

But the old mill itself is still at the intersection of Millstone and Cranbury roads—a dot east of Princeton on the highway map. The weather-worn wooden structure, with a few of its millstones scattered about, stands lonely vigil.

Here fate tossed its random lightning-bolt. Here the "Martians" made their landing on what is now a municipal park. Nearby, ducks glide on a big, placid pond.

The former Wilson farm (the script spoke of the "Wilmuth" farm, but sightseers made do with the Wilson place) has long since been cut up into smaller properties. Here Martian-hunters once tramped across the cornfields looking for traces of the invaders.

Wayfarers from all parts of the world still occasionally wander the roads and fields of Grovers Mill. They know they will see no Martians, find no burn marks on the earth left by war machines from outer space, nor come upon charred ruins wrought by the aliens' devastation. Still, drawn by curiosity, they come and look and wonder.

Not all Grovers Mill residents find such doings fascinating. The proprietor of a nearby gas station, for example, remembers the night of the "invasion," but didn't think much of it then and thinks as little of it now. "It doesn't make sense," he says with disdain. "Never has. Never will."

But for Dick Stives, now sixty-three, the "panic broadcast" still holds disquieting memories. Not long ago he walked around the "Martian landing ground."

"When I was a kid," he recalled, "I would crawl down near the wheel of the old mill, just by the pond there, and shuck my clothes and go in swimming. It was just a pond on a farm. But now, looking at it, I have to wonder why people still come so far to find a place where something that was supposed to happen didn't happen."

"I still remember," he said, "how I felt that night, up there in the bedroom in my granddad's place, in the dark, trying to sleep, thinking about what we had heard on the radio. The nighttime would make me think about how almost anything, just about anytime, could happen anywhere—even in Grovers Mill. Things in the shadows. Things I didn't understand."

Study Questions

1. Describe the early career of Orson Welles. Did he realize that his *War of the Worlds* broadcast would create such a controversy?
2. Describe how the show was structured to create tension and heighten suspense.
3. How did Americans react to the broadcast? What do their reactions suggest about the power of radio?