

The War of the Worlds - v2.0

No one would have believed in the last years of the twentieth century and the early years of the twenty-first century that our world was being watched keenly and closely by intelligences as great as our own. Intelligences with goals and morals so different from ours that they might as well have been from Mars. As we busied ourselves about our various concerns we were being scrutinized and studied, perhaps almost as narrowly as a man with a microscope might scrutinize the transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water. With infinite complacency we drove to our jobs, texted our friends, took our kids to soccer practice, and called our wives or husbands to let them know we'd be a little late for dinner. Little did we know that every move we made, every character we typed, and every call we placed was being analyzed and stored in huge databases. Every individual, regardless of how eminent or inconsequential, became a node in an electronic mapping of relatives, friends, acquaintances, and interests. Our postings on social media provided a gold mine of additional data, including birthdays, anniversaries, photo recognition, and the names of family pets.

Activities which involved no personal data also yielded a treasure trove of information. Hobby drones which forwarded "sky views" to our smart phones also provided close-up aerial photos, with precise GPS locations. "Smart" dash cams performed a similar role. This information supplemented high altitude aerial reconnaissance from satellites and balloons and would prove invaluable to our adversary after our GPS satellites were destroyed. The "find your ancestors" DNA tests provided a huge database of DNA identification and interrelationships. Our premier academic and corporate research labs pushed forward the boundaries of scientific knowledge, usually but not always unaware of the fact that every move they made was being relayed to the other world. Artificial intelligence enabled our adversaries to analyze, organize, and utilize this data in ways we never even imagined.

The shift from information gathering to hostile actions occurred so gradually, and so smoothly, that even today there is no broad agreement as to when the war began. Subtle actions were taken to influence public opinion, suppress news that our adversary didn't want us to hear, and highlight news they wanted us to see. Unwelcome news was not at first deleted, it was just made more difficult to find. An Internet search would yield the stories they wanted us to see on the first or second screen, while it took much scrolling to find viewpoints that were not favored. Sadly, our own well-intentioned but misguided corporations often supported this censorship. The anonymity of the Internet allowed bots and imposters to dominate social media. One computer or a handful of hirelings could quickly generate thousands of likes, dislikes, or snarky comments on any topic of interest. Investigations into the 2016 elections discovered a handful of Russian agents had falsely generated posts for and against both of the candidates, just to create dissention. Their efforts were miniscule compared to the influence of our adversary. The advancement of AI made this effort easier and more successful, leading to still greater divisiveness among our citizens. Ironically, government and industry efforts to suppress disinformation aggravated the division when it became apparent that many of the suppressed stories were true, but were labeled "disinformation" for political purposes.

Heavy industries which had once made America the Arsenal of Democracy were lured away by cheap labor. Our adversary cornered markets that supplied pharmaceuticals, raw materials, iron, steel, chemicals, and electronic components needed for high-tech weaponry. Political influence gained

through media influence and bribery opened our borders to massive illegal immigration – intensifying the political division, pushing our economy toward insolvency, and providing easy entry to saboteurs. The latter hamstrung industries such as agriculture, in which we still excelled. Mysterious fires, epizootics, industrial accidents, and contaminations drove up consumer prices and created shortages of everything from baby formula to toilet paper.

Active hostilities began with non-lethal actions designed to confuse, disorganize, and undermine our resistance. Saboteurs who had already crossed our borders used small arms to take out transformers, cell towers, refineries, fuel storage, and other key resources. Liberal politicians immediately blamed right wing domestic terrorists, and conservative politicians immediately blamed left wing Marxist radicals. “Chatter” on the Internet, much of it posted under false names by our adversary’s agents and AI, blamed both, leading to bitter online debates. Government security agencies found evidence that both the sabotage and the online rumors originated overseas, but the government had played the disinformation “Wolf!” card too often and few paid any attention. The military did pay attention, and quickly began scanning the skies and the seas for invaders. Unfortunately, the invading army was already at our shores, hiding in hundreds of commercial cargo ships lined up at our ports.

Specially trained troops burst from cargo ships docked on the east and west coasts. They quickly took over the dockyards and began unloading troops, tanks, artillery, helicopters, and everything else needed to conquer the country. Anti-satellite weapons knocked out our GPS, reconnaissance, and key command and control communication satellites while sparing orbiting Internet and commercial communication units. Hackers took down major portions of the grid, likewise sparing commercial and backup power to Internet and cell phone services.

The reason these services were spared only became apparent in hindsight. Parents received frantic calls from their children in nearby states, begging them to come rescue their grandchildren from the invaders. Others received calls from elderly parents, begging them to come to their aid. Utility crews were dispatched to distant locations to deal with the most severe outages. Reservists received orders to report to distant mobilization centers, as all nearby centers had been destroyed. Military units received orders to deploy to confront the enemy at one location, only to have those orders countermanded and replaced by new deployment instructions. The net result was that hundreds of thousands of people jumped into their vehicles and took to the highway. It was if the entire country was in a hurricane evacuation, with every vehicle trying to evacuate in a different direction. Highways, especially the Interstates, quickly became jammed. Cars and trucks ran out of gas, further clogging the highways. Emergency vehicles and ordinary drivers who had the foresight to carry extra cans of gas and diesel fuel managed to get those vehicles underway, but electric vehicles proved to be an insolvable problem. Drivers would pull off at one exit, find all the charging stations occupied or out of commission because of power outages, and get back on the highway hoping to make it to the next exit. The next exit was no better. When these cars finally ran out of juice there was no quick solution to get them off the road. Soon the roads were completely jammed with abandoned vehicles, making them totally unusable for emergency services, military convoys, or any other critical service. Not until months later, after the war was over, did people realize the calls that triggered the traffic jams were made by AI computers. Voice calls, video calls, texts, emails, and even encrypted military communications were successfully faked by these computers and their huge databases of personal information.

The jammed highways did not obstruct air traffic, and as soon as it became clear that an invasion force was assembling at our ports the Air Force launched missions to destroy it. Sadly, those planes burst into flames as they approached the ports. Eyewitnesses reported seeing devices that looked like short stubby telescopes emerge from ships and unloaded military vehicles just before the aircraft exploded. They described the cause as “an invisible heat ray.” Military analysts suggested it might be a directed energy weapon, a class of weapons that we had alternately pursued and pooh-pooed since the 1980s. Research had followed the all-too-common cycle where the party in power would start a crash program into one type of weapon, only to have it ridiculed and eventually defunded by the opposition party. That party would instead push another technology, only to have it scrapped when the other party again took power. Our adversary, clearly well informed on all these programs, chose to consistently pursue the ones that showed the most promise.

As the ships unloaded, mechanized columns began to move inland, with columns from multiple ports converging on key strategic targets. Scattered and disorganized defending forces attempted to stop them, but the “heat rays” vaporized rockets and shells launched by the defenders and quickly obliterated the defenders themselves. Military special forces and a surprising number of non-military militia groups tried to conceal themselves to emerge and attack from close range, destroying vehicles and troops before the attackers could employ their heat rays, but the invaders began deploying a blue smoke which asphyxiated the concealed troops where they hid. Rumors soon began spreading that the blue smoke was actually a genetically engineered virus which was lethal to Americans but harmless to our adversary. Violent conflicts broke out among the terrified civilians in the path of the invaders. Half the population thought that flu masks were essential to prevent the spread of this virus, and anyone not wearing a mask was threatening the lives of all the “informed” citizens who wore masks. The other half believed masks were useless and would impede their efforts to flee or to fight the invaders. They refused to wear masks. Postwar analysis showed the blue smoke was a conventional, though previously unknown, chemical agent which penetrated even military gas masks. Postwar analysis also showed, to no one’s surprise, that the Internet rumors were initiated by the invaders.

Our adversary seemed to be invincible. Defending ground and air forces managed to inflict some damage on the advancing columns, but they were quickly defeated by the heat rays and poisonous smoke. A steady resupply of food, fuel, and ammunition streamed from the ports. The ports themselves were protected from air and sea attacks by the heat rays and submarines. All major ports were in enemy hands. Advancing columns had surrounded Washington DC, Philadelphia, Sacramento, and Portland, while columns were advancing on Las Vegas, Phoenix, Charlotte, and Atlanta. Then an amazing thing happened. The advance began to slow. The front lines of each column became disjointed, as individual units halted haphazardly. Then the advance stopped completely. Civilians who had hidden in port cities reported all activity had stopped at the ports. Suburbanites and farmers who lived within sight of the resupply lines reported all resupply traffic had stopped.

Slowly, cautiously, reconnaissance patrols approached the stalled columns. What they found astounded them. All enemy soldiers, from commanding generals down to simple privates, were glued to their phones. Cat videos, porn sites, Internet gambling, re-runs of Gilligan’s Island – there was something for everyone on the Internet and the attraction was irresistible. The enemy had left the Internet untouched because they used it to spread disinformation, but it proved to be their undoing.

Our soldiers, having been surrounded by these temptations since birth, had developed the ability to set their phones aside when necessary. A natural immunity, so to speak. Their soldiers grew up under a totalitarian regime that strictly limited Internet content to approved, beneficial material. Their brains had no defenses against the allure of mindless Internet binging. They were happy to surrender their rifles as long as they were allowed to keep their phones as they were led off to POW camps.