

# The radio broadcast that terrified a nation

In 1938, with the world lurching towards war, Orson Welles caused mass panic in the U.S. when the now infamous live radio adaptation of *The War of the Worlds* was broadcast to an unsuspecting public

## *The War of the Worlds* By H.G. Wells

Author of "Under the Skin," "The Time Machine," etc.



■ **1898: H.G. Wells'** novel *The War of the Worlds* imagines attack on London by Martian invaders with towering tripod fighting machines

■ **1938: Actor Orson Welles'** radio show reworks literary classics into one-hour radio plays. For Halloween episode, Welles and CBS show's producers agree to adapt work of science fiction

■ **Mon, Oct 24, 1938:** Writer **Howard Koch** instructed to adapt *The War of the Worlds* for broadcast, moving it to contemporary New Jersey setting

■ **Thu, Oct 27:** Welles asks crew to insert news flashes and eyewitness accounts to create sense of urgency. Rewritten first act is now **40 minutes** long

■ **Fri, Oct 28:** Executive producer warns writing is too realistic and tells authors to tone it down

"*The nation's No.1 radio bogey man*" – **Orson Welles, photographed for New York Sunday News, 1938**



■ **Sat, Oct 29:** In rehearsal, sound effects team pays special attention to crowd scenes, cannon fire and chilling Martian war machines

■ **Sun, Oct 30 – Afternoon:** Music rehearsal. Orchestra mimics dance band, interrupted by news broadcasts. Studio's emergency fill-in music – solo piano playing Debussy and Chopin – is used several times, adding to sinister overtone

■ **6pm:** Dress rehearsal works in last-minute changes by Welles, including impersonation of President **Franklin D. Roosevelt** by actor **Kenneth Delmar** (forbidden by major networks)

**Alien probe, as seen in first movie portrayal (1953)**

■ **8pm:** Show airs live from New York, causing widespread panic. With fears of war growing, many Americans mistakenly believe Nazi invasion is underway

Radio shows usually pause on half-hour for station messages. **Breaking news does not obey this rule.** Many listeners who missed opening disclaimer that show is fictitious, are convinced news reports are real, especially when lengthy first act means station break fails to arrive until **8:40pm**



■ **Mon, Oct 31:** Welles denies intending to deceive audience

■ Broadcast helps catapult Welles to global fame. He goes on to make

several classic movies, notably **Citizen Kane** (1941) and **Touch of Evil** (1958)

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