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The Monsters Are Due on Maple Streets



By Marty Kaplan

The power has gone out in a typical American town. Wait — it's not just the electricity. The phones don't work, either. Portable radios are dead. Cars won't start.

But then lawn mowers and cars and lights inexplicably start and stop on their own. What's going on? A meteor? Sunspots? Or are there, as Tommy's comic book suggests, aliens among us, preparing for a takeover? Suspicion poisons the air. Neighbor turns on neighbor. A scapegoat is blamed. A shot is fired. Panic, madness, riot.

And while the humans behave monstrously, the real monsters watch from a nearby hilltop, working a little gizmo that messes with the power on Maple Street, and marveling how easy it is to manipulate these earthlings into destroying themselves.

In what is arguably the best *Twilight Zone* episode ever, "The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street," Rod Serling wrote a suburban *Lord of the Flies*, a parable about the fragility of civilization, paranoia and the susceptibility of nice folks to manipulation.

Watching it when it first aired, in the depths of the nuclear arms race, people thought it was meant to ward off a witch-hunt for Reds under the bed. Today, watching what's been going on in Madison, Wisconsin, as well as in Washington, D.C., I can't help thinking that the real monsters are chortling at their success in pitting neighbor against neighbor, and I can't help marveling at their genius for distraction and unaccountability.

The monsters aren't Wisconsin's public employees whose right to collective bargaining has helped their families lead middle-class lives, and who have repeatedly declared their willingness to return to the table and negotiate a shared sacrifice. The monsters are on Wall Street, where state pension funds were sunk into toxic sub-prime mortgage-backed securities. The monsters are on K Street, where lobbyists are fighting financial industry oversight. The monsters are the politicians who are using Wisconsin's deficit as a pretext to demonize public employees and bust their unions.

If you look at the budget that House Republicans just passed, if you listen to the “so be it” language of their leadership, you’d think that the federal deficit is caused by the very people who who’ve been suffering the most in this recession.

But the monsters aren’t low-income pregnant women and mothers who can’t afford adequate nutrition for their families; or sick Americans who can’t find health insurance to cover them; or blue-collar workers who want to retire at an age when there’s still some life left in their bodies; or students who can’t afford college without Pell Grants; or people who think their government’s job includes preventing their air and water from poisoning them.

Sitting on the hilltop, watching Americans turn one another into bogeymen, evading scrutiny and responsibility, are the real sources of our distress.

They’re the bankers who’ve extorted trillions of public treasure, blowing up the deficit while awarding themselves inconceivably fat bonuses.

They’re the billionaires who’ve benefited from a massive transfer of wealth from the middle to the top, and whose political puppets protect them from paying their fair share of taxes.

They’re the corporations whose cash has convinced Congress to deregulate industry after industry, despite all evidence that it is the enforcement of rules — not the magic of the marketplace — that protects the public’s rights.

They’re the defense contractors and pork appropriators who’ve used the cover of “national security” to shield the Pentagon’s budget and its procurement process from the cuts and reforms that even Republicans like the Secretary of Defense are advocating.

They’re the front groups and propagandists, like FreedomWorks and Fox, who use class warfare and culture wars in order to turn Americans against their own economic interests.

They’re the Supreme Court justices whose *Citizens United* decision, overthrowing a century of settled law, has made our campaign finance system an open sewer, and whose indifference to conflicts of interest in a coming case promises to throw sick people back onto the tender mercies of insurers and to destroy our best hope to curb Medicare costs - further ballooning the deficit and providing cover for even more draconian cuts.

The game in Washington is to use the deficit as camouflage for destroying government’s capacity to promote the general welfare. The game in Wisconsin and other states whose new Republican governors and legislative majorities are feeling their oats is to shelter the income of the wealthiest, and to balance the budget on the backs of the middle class.

At the end of the episode, Rod Serling says this: “The tools of conquest do not necessarily come with bombs and explosions and fallout. There are weapons that are simply thoughts, attitudes, prejudices to be found only in the minds of men. For the record: Prejudices can kill, and suspicion can destroy, and a thoughtless frightened search for a scapegoat has a fallout all of its own — for the children, and the children yet unborn. And the pity of it is that these things cannot be confined to the twilight zone.”

Sometimes it’s hard to watch the news and not think that things are surreal. The other day, when what’s been happening in Madison reminded me of what happened on “Maple Street,” I suddenly realized the theme music that goes with it.

This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you'd like.

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