



## GODS OF GEEKDOM

# HERBERT GEORGE WELLS

Much to my surprise, H. G. Wells now rates a 7 on the geek scale. As little as a quarter century ago, everyone knew who H. G. Wells was, most people had read at least one of his novels, and everyone had seen at least a couple of the movies made from his books. That seems to no longer be the case. In a typical undergraduate class, by which I obviously mean the last class I taught, a mention of H. G. Wells now solicits more puzzled looks than I think is appropriate, so I failed the whole class. None of them are going to get into the law school of their choice now, but they will sure as heck remember who H. G. Wells is, so it was worth it. H. G. Wells wrote books a century ago.

Two of those books in particular have some interesting insights into international politics. The first is *The War of the Worlds* and, completely dismissing the war part, it provides an interesting take on group identity and group conflicts. The us versus them part of the human reaction to the attack by the Martians is strikingly insightful and is later “discovered” by Coser and later “rediscovered” by scholars studying domestic political reactions to war. The second interesting book is *The Time Machine*. It may seem

odd to mention it in terms of international politics as the book is usually discussed in terms of early popular culture takes on evolution or as a story about socialism, but there is one small element of what the time traveller sees on his journey forward that is fascinating. Even though the book was published twenty years before the unbearable carnage of World War I and a half century before the first atomic bomb, Wells appears to have anticipated the idea that the very existence of human civilization could be put at risk. I had a student assume that the atomic war in the older film meant that Wells predicted nuclear weapons. Wells didn't, and the student double failed for trying to get away with watching the film instead of reading the assigned book, but think about how much of modern international politics, from nuclear policy, to international efforts to coordinate responses to infectious diseases, to the politics of climate change are driven or heavily influenced by the idea that human civilization is potentially at risk. Wells's secular, non-fatalistic take on this idea, his hero coming back to warn his friends and perhaps change that fate, was well before its time.