

American Idiocracy: 50 Years Later, We're Still Stranded in the Twilight Zone

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[“We’re developing a new citizenry. One that will be very selective about cereals and automobiles, but won’t be able to think.”—Rod Serling](#)

Have you noticed how much life increasingly feels like an episode of *The Twilight Zone*?

Only instead of Rod Serling’s imaginary “land of both shadow and substance, of things and ideas,” we’re trapped in a topsy-turvy, all-too-real land of corruption, brutality and lies, where freedom, justice and integrity play second fiddle to political ambition, corporate greed, and bureaucratic tyranny.

It’s not merely that life in the American Police State is more brutal, or more unjust, or even more corrupt. It’s getting more idiotic, more perverse, and more outlandish by the day.

Somewhere over the course of the past 240-plus years, democracy has given way to [idiocracy](#), and representative government has given way to a [kleptocracy](#) (a government ruled by thieves) and a [kakistocracy](#) (a government run by unprincipled career politicians, corporations and thieves that panders to the worst vices in our nature and has little regard for the rights of American citizens).

Examples abound.

In Georgia, [political organizers posted a “Black Media Only” sign outside a Baptist Church](#), barring white reporters from attending a meeting about an upcoming mayoral election.

In Arizona, [a SWAT team raided a family’s home in the middle of the night on the say-so of Child Protective Services](#), which sounded the alarm after the parents determined that their 2-year-old—who had been suffering a 100-degree fever—was feeling better and didn’t need to be admitted to the hospital.

In Virginia, landlords are requiring dog-owning tenants to submit their pets’ DNA to a database that will be [used to track down \(and fine\) owners who fail to clean up after their dogs poop](#) in public.

In Texas, a [police officer who allegedly gave a homeless man a sandwich with dog feces](#) won’t be held accountable for his actions.

In Illinois, Chicago police used a battering ram and a sledgehammer to crash into a family’s home with weapons drawn, [terrorizing the young children gathered for a 4-year-old’s birthday party](#), only to find that they were at the wrong house.

In Kansas, [a 61-year-old back man in the process of moving into his new house found himself held at gunpoint and handcuffed by police](#), who refused to believe he was a homeowner and not a burglar.

If you're starting to notice a pattern here, it speaks to the fact that nearly 50 years after Serling's creative brainchild, *The Twilight Zone*, premiered on national television, we're still fumbling around in the dark, trying to make sense of a world dominated by racism, cruelty, war, violence, poverty, prejudice, intolerance, ignorance, injustice and a host of other social maladies and spiritual evils.

The Twilight Zone was an oasis in television wasteland: a show that captured imaginations; challenged moral hypocrisy and societal prejudices; and railed against inhumanity, racism, prejudice, the mechanization of human beings by way of their technology, tyrants of all shapes and colors, a passive populace, war, injustice, the surveillance state, corporate greed.

Fifty years later, with so much having changed legally, technologically and politically, so much still remains the same. Fear is the same. Prejudice is the same. Ignorance is the same. Hate and war and tyranny are unchanged. Police officers are still shooting unarmed citizens. Bloated government agencies are still fleecing taxpayers. Government technicians are still spying on our communications. And American citizens are still allowing themselves to be manipulated by their fears and pitted one against the other.

All of these themes can be found in *The Twilight Zone*.

Serling, a truth-teller who pulled no punches when it came to calling out the evils of his day, channeled his moral outrage into storytelling. As his daughter Anne explained, "*The Twilight Zone* was more than just the strangest show on TV, with the best theme song, but back in the 50's [Rod Serling was serving up social commentary through science fiction](#)."

That social commentary disguised as entertainment tackled some of the most pressing issues of Serling's day. "It dealt with human issues which I guess is why it's lasted so long, because it [dealt with racism and mob mentality and scapegoating and things that are still very, very prevalent and relevant today sadly](#)," said Anne. "We don't seem to be able to move ahead and change."

Serling would have no shortage of material to draw from today, given the government's greed for money and power, its disregard for human life, its corruption and graft, its pollution of the environment, its reliance on excessive force in order to ensure compliance, its covert activities, its illegal surveillance, and its blatant disdain for the rule of law.

"I can tell you [my dad] would be [absolutely apoplectic about what's happening in the world today](#). And deeply saddened," said his daughter Anne Serling. "There are moments that I'm glad he's not here to see."

It boggles the mind how relevant *The Twilight Zone* and its unique brand of truth-telling are to an age in which truth has become a convenient fiction for those in power, what researchers refer to as "[Truth Decay](#)."

As a report from the Rand Corporation explains, "[Truth Decay is defined as a set of four related trends](#): increasing disagreement about facts and analytical interpretations of facts

and data; a blurring of the line between opinion and fact; an increase in the relative volume, and resulting influence, of opinion and personal experience over fact; and declining trust in formerly respected sources of factual information.”

Serling would have had a lot to say about the lies that masquerade as truth today.

I’m not sure that Serling would have been surprised by current events, though. After all, this was the man who concluded that [people are alike all over](#): that was the kernel of truth in one of Serling’s episodes about a pair of astronauts who journey to Mars only to find that while they may have landed on an alien planet, inhabited by alien creatures, the ignorance, fear and prejudice of the “foreigner” was the same.

So many truths, packaged in 156 episodes that aired from 1959 to 1964.

Serling took pride in the writing, penning 92 of the 156 episodes himself. For the rest, he enlisted some of the best writers of the 20th century to lend their talents to *Zone* episodes: Ray Bradbury, Richard Matheson, Charles Beaumont, Earl Hamner, to mention a few. As such, the *Twilight Zone* became the embodiment of great story-telling.

If you want to watch something that fuses time and space into reality by way of a fictional setting, then I suggest that you tune into *The Twilight Zone*.

Director Jordan Peele has taken Serling’s material out for [a new spin in a reboot airing on CBS All Access](#), but if you haven’t experienced the original series, do yourself a favor and spend some time with them.

There are so many to choose from, but the following are 12 of my personal favorites:

Time Enough at Last: Mild-mannered Henry Bemis (Burgess Meredith), hen-pecked by his wife and brow-beaten by his boss, sneaks into a bank vault on his lunch hour to read. He is knocked unconscious by a shockwave that turns out to be a nuclear war. When Bemis regains consciousness, he realizes that he is the last person on earth.

I Shot an Arrow into the Air: Three astronauts survive a crash after their craft disappears from the radar screen. They find themselves on what they believe to be a dry, lifeless asteroid. Only five gallons of water separate them from dehydration and death. And temperamental crew member Corey (Dewey Martin) goes to great lengths to ensure his survival.

The Howling Man: During a walking tour of Europe after World War I, David loses his way and comes to a remote monastery. He is turned away but passes out, and the monks take him in. David regains consciousness and hears a bizarre howling. He eventually finds a man in a jail cell who the monks say is the Devil himself, kept in his prison by the “staff of truth.”

Eye of the Beholder: Janet lies in a hospital bed, her face wrapped in bandages, hiding the hideous face that has made her an outcast all her life. This is her eleventh hospital visit and the last allowed by the government. The faces of the doctors and nurses are also hidden by shadows and camera angles. Janet’s bandages are finally removed, and the medical staff retreat in disgust.

The Invaders: A haggard woman (Agnes Morehead) hears a strange sound on the roof. She climbs up to see a miniature flying saucer and tiny spacemen who invade her home. Their

small ray guns sting, but she fights back.

Shadow Play: Adam (Dennis Weaver) is on trial, and the judge gives him the electric chair. Adam chortles that it's all a joke, a recurring nightmare in which all the participants are bit players in a scripted play. But will anyone listen?

The Obsolete Man: Romney (Burgess Meredith) is a God-fearing librarian in a totalitarian state in which books and religion have been banned. Romney is judged obsolete by the government chancellor but is granted several requests before he dies. He chooses to have a television audience watch his execution. Forty-five minutes before he is to die, he invites the chancellor to his room and locks them both inside.

Nightmare at 20,000 Feet: Robert (William Shatner) boards an airplane after having been discharged from a mental hospital for a nervous breakdown. He looks out his window during the flight and sees a weird creature on the wing. Alarmed, he alerts others. However, when they look out, the creature disappears. Robert eventually realizes that what he sees is a demon trying to dismantle the plane so it will crash. Robert decides to act.

Living Doll: Erich (Telly Savalas) is angry at his wife for buying his stepdaughter an expensive doll. Erich has a nasty disposition and soon discovers that the doll has a life of its own and it dislikes him. In fact, the doll tells him so. Talky Tina says emphatically "I hate you" and "I'm going to kill you."

The Masks: On his deathbed, Jason Foster calls his four heirs to his side on a Mardi Gras evening. Each heir has a character flaw—self-pity, avarice, vanity or cruelty. Foster demands that each wear a mask he has fashioned for them. If they refuse to keep the masks on until midnight, they will be disinherited. The masks are hideous, and the heirs do not want to don them. But out of greed, they slide them onto their faces.

It's a Good Life: Peaksville, Ohio, a small community, has been "taken away" from the so-called normal world—ravaged by 6-year-old "monster" Anthony (Billy Mumy). By mere thought and/or wishes, Anthony can make things and people disappear or turn into hideous creatures. All of the adults kowtow to his every desire.

To Serve Man: The Kanamits—nine-foot-tall, large-headed creatures—come to Earth from outer space, bringing gifts, spouting peace and promising to end famine. After some initial resistance by earthlings, the world relents and humans become entranced by the visitors. However, government agent Mike (Lloyd Chambers) soon discovers a sinister and shocking plot being hatched by the Kanamits.

The Twilight Zone was a paradox.

Although the series is often seen as science fiction, ultimately it was not science fiction.

Whatever weird or far out setting may have been involved in a particular episode, the focus was always on the angst, pain and suffering we face in the so-called "real" world. As author Marc Scott Zicree writes:

The Twilight Zone was the first, and possibly only, TV series to deal on a regular basis with the theme of alienation—particularly urban alienation.... Repeatedly, it states a simple message: The only escape from alienation lies in reaching out to others, trusting in their common humanity. Give in to the fear and you are lost.

Fifty years after the original *The Twilight Zone* series questioned whether we can maintain our humanity in the face of authoritarian forces trying to reduce us to mindless automatons, we're still struggling with the demons of our age who delight in fomenting violence, sowing distrust and prejudice, and persuading the public to support tyranny disguised as patriotism.

Yet as I make clear in my book [Battlefield America: The War on the American People](#), we don't have to be stranded in this alternate universe, this twilight zone of tyranny, brutality and injustice.

We still have the power to change our circumstances for the better.

However, overcoming the evils of our age will require more than intellect and activism. It will require decency, morality, goodness, truth and toughness.

As Serling concluded in his remarks to the graduating class of 1968:

["Toughness is the singular quality most required of you..."](#) we have left you a world far more botched than the one that was left to us... Part of your challenge is to seek out truth, to come up with a point of view not dictated to you by anyone, be he a congressman, even a minister... Are you tough enough to take the divisiveness of this land of ours, the fact that everything is polarized, black and white, this or that, absolutely right or absolutely wrong. This is one of the challenges. Be prepared to seek out the middle ground ... that wondrous and very difficult-to-find Valhalla where man can look to both sides and see the errant truths that exist on both sides. If you must swing left or you must swing right—respect the other side. Honor the motives that come from the other side. Argue, debate, rebut—but don't close those wondrous minds of yours to opposition. In their eyes, you're the opposition. And ultimately ... ultimately—you end divisiveness by compromise. And so long as men walk and breathe—there *must* be compromise."

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