

More on Monsters

by Bill Herbst

Version 1.4 (posted on 26 October 2021)
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Who are the Monsters in America? They include persons who own and run the following partial list of “biggest of the big” and “richest of the rich” companies:

- **Fossil Fuel Energy Companies** (oil and gas) — Exxon Mobil, Chevron, Marathon, Valero, Phillips 66, Conoco-Phillips, Occidental
- **Defense Contractors** (military-industrial complex) — Lockheed-Martin, Northrup-Grummond, Boeing, Raytheon, General Dynamics, Honeywell, Bechtel
- **Big Investment Banks** —Morgan Stanley, J.P. Morgan, Bank of America, Citigroup, U.S. Bancorp, Capital One, Goldman Sachs
- **Private Equity Firms** — Blackstone Group, Carlyle Group, KRK & Co., TPG Capital, Warbur Pincus LLC
- **Hedge Funds on Wall Street** — BlackRock Advisors, Capital Management, Bridgewater Associates, Renaissance Technologies
- **Big Tech/Social Media Companies** — Apple, Microsoft, Google, Amazon, Facebook, Twitter
- **Big Pharma** — Johnson & Johnson, Pfizer Inc., Merck & Co., AbbVie Inc., Bristol Myers Squibb, Abbott Laboratories, Amgen, Gilead Sciences, Eli Lilly and Co., Biogen
- **Agri-Business** — a huge sector that includes Food Producers, Chemicals (Fertilizers/Pesticides), Seeds, Machinery, and more. Major players include Cargill, Archer-Daniels-Midland (ADM), Tyson Foods, Seaboard, Dole Food, Del Monte Produce, Perdue Farms, Nestle, Pepsico, Monsanto/Bayer, Pioneer Hi-Bred, Dow, Mosaic, CF Industries, AGCO

What do these companies have in common? They’re all massive in terms of revenues and profits — economic juggernauts that form the basic structure of corporate business and wealth acquisition in America. Their owners are often among the 1% class of the out-of-sight rich. They effectively own the government and are as ruthless as the earlier Robber Barons in the Gilded Age. They wield immense leverage in securing as much advantage for themselves as possible and never choose *not* to do so. Self-interest is their only motivating calculation. And they are all purveyors of Death Culture.

Having gained their unimaginable wealth from specific economic endeavors, the owners of America then spread their tentacles into every arena of social activity

and public policy. They do so with varying degrees of visibility. Some become notorious, almost buzzword caricatures in the social realm — Bill Gates, Jeff Bezos, and Elon Musk come to mind, among others, but the majority remain relatively invisible and nearly unknown to the public.

Some eager players at the lower fringe of the mega-wealthy end up serving (i.e., pandering to) more powerful members above them. The American public does not believe for a second that Jeffrey Epstein committed suicide. Whether or not the truth about his demise ever comes out, it is plain as day that Epstein was killed because he knew where some of the bodies were buried and was about to blow the whistle and spill the beans on various of his “betters.” Like *omerta* in the Mafia, the pact of silence and code of honor are strictly enforced by the uber-wealthy, and the penalty for betrayal can be death.

This is one of numerous differences between regular people and monsters. Regular people have trouble with killing and murder. During World War II, 80% of front-line American combat soldiers never fired their weapons. Not once, not even in the heat of battle. (The Army took careful note of this and subsequently changed its training to more effectively create killers...) Monsters, on the other hand, regard murder with neutrality or even opportunism. Killing someone is seen merely as a risk-reward calculation, a simple option rather than a moral concern — “just business.”

That’s part of the empathy disconnect in narcissists and sociopaths. Regular people are — to some degree, large or small — empathetic with others. They feel others’ suffering and usually seek not to inflict it. Monsters feel no pain from the suffering of others, only from their own. As I’ve written often, they shrink the “Us” who matter down to only a few — family relations, personal beloveds, and close friends. Everyone else is “Them” and might as well go fuck themselves. People considered Them can suffer, die, or be killed without any pangs of conscience or a shred of regret on “our” part.

That’s why former U.S. Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright, could assert in an infamous 1996 “60 Minutes” interview that the deaths of half a million Iraqi children caused by U.S.-supported economic sanctions were “worth it.” Albright later tried to wriggle out from her admission and walk it back, but no one bought that fake retraction. The revelation was obvious, just something not typically admitted so directly. Usually such collateral damage is qualified in public statements by monsters as having been “unfortunate” or “sadly tragic,” but that’s just P.R. and probably not how they truly feel. The incidence of despair- or regret-based suicides among monsters is as rare as hen’s teeth. Of course, Albright suffered no serious consequences from her blunt admission beyond a slight tarnishing of her image.

But then, that’s part of what distinguishes monsters from regular people. As I asserted in last week’s opening edition of this rant, regular people sometimes do terrible things, about which they may or may not feel varying degrees of remorse at the time or regret later. By definition, though, human monsters feel

neither remorse nor regret ever — not before, during, or after their crimes. The actions themselves are part of the story, but it's the combination of horrible deeds and complete lack of conscience that make a person monstrous.

Do I think it's "terrible" to act based on self-interest? No, not at all. The survival instinct is built into all earthly life forms. We're not talking about a binary choice of either/or here, but rather proportional considerations that shift from situation to situation and even moment to moment. Self-interested is not a synonym for selfish, and self-centeredness is not the same as narcissistic or sociopathic.

Monsters leave the realm of loving humans by taking "me, me, me" to an extreme and making it their complete and sole mantra. This is not to suggest that they are unaware of or insensitive to the idea of the greater good. They may even feel motivated in that direction, but only when it dovetails with their self-interest. Whenever a conflict arises, they will ditch the greater good in favor of self-interest. That's part of what defines them as monsters.

Also, just being messed up doesn't make anyone a monster. Everyone I know is messed up (me, too) — that's part of the human condition. We harm ourselves and also harm others, especially people close to us. By contrast, monsters are messed up in ways that lead to their harming large numbers of human beings — sometimes millions of them. Although they can and do at times harm or kill individuals close to them, most of the carnage monsters orchestrate is aimed at people they've never met, don't know, and whose lives and/or deaths don't matter to the monsters.

I'm sympathetic to the grave difficulties involved in knowing where to draw the line between acting out of pure self-interest and acting for the greater good. For one thing, defining self-interest isn't necessarily simple nor straightforward. What I may want or need for myself right now, in this moment, is not always obvious to me. And even when it is clear and plain, it's not necessarily the same as nor in harmony with my long-term self-interest. I may want to eat a piece (or more) of chocolate cake, and it will probably taste good. But will eating the cake satisfy me? And is it good for me in the long run? Those can be difficult questions.

On the other side, knowing what will support and further the greater good is often utterly opaque and terribly confusing. Sure, there's that's built-in moral admonition to "*do no harm*," but that's more easily said than done. Unanticipated effects and unintended consequences are not rare. The road to hell is paved with good intentions.

So, I'm very sympathetic to someone who might say to me, "*Look, Bill, figuring out all this stuff with any confidence or certainty is just too much. It's all I can do to just take care of myself today, so I'm going to try to do that and hope that it works out.*" OK. I get it. But that's human, not monstrous, and it's unlikely to apply in every situation, all the time. Monsters approach life by always asking, "*What's in it for me?*" And then they act accordingly.

Monsters are not a recent phenomenon. They have existed among us and done their dirty work throughout the entire history of humanity, and with particular potency since civilization began. What is different now are at least two factors that significantly increase the dangers they pose. I'd wager that there are more factors than that, but I want to highlight two for this brief essay.

First is the sad reality that America has become a culture that supports monsters. Far from discouraging the monstrous, our culture actively encourages it, as if being a monster were virtuous. As a result, we spawn a higher percentage of monsters than in the past, as well as a lot more of them. In addition, America doesn't typically penalize our monsters, no matter how egregious their actions. Instead, we reward them.

Second, the damage monsters could do and did in the historical past was constrained by humanity's overall lack of power and impact on the world. The consequences we suffered at the hands of our own monsters was piecemeal. That's not the case any longer. The limitations are gone. Now humanity wields so much potentially destructive power that even a small number of selected monsters could literally cripple the biosphere and end much of life on this planet. This is not just a theoretical risk. We're headed in that direction now. The edge of the cliff is not that far off, and we don't seem to have the inclination or collective will to even slow down, much less stop or change direction.

When I was a kid, what upset me more than just about anything else was people — other kids mainly — who were cruel to animals. You know, the assholes who liked to tie tin cans to cats' tails or stuff M-80s into frogs, blow them up, and laugh about it. I hated those sadistic perverts. The adult version of those little assholes are the monsters who run the world.

Is there any possibility that I'm just another doomer alarmist fallen victim to negative emotions and apocalyptic visions? Sure. I'm aware that I'm damaged. But that doesn't mean I'm necessarily wrong about the world. As the old saying goes, *"Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean that they're not actually out to get you."*

As always, you can (and should) decide for yourself if the monsters are real.