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**“Why Are We as a People Worth Saving?”
Battlestar Galactica and the Global War on Terror**

Lori MAGUIRE

Battlestar Galactica represents a deliberately fantasized world but this, of course, does not mean that it is divorced from reality. Science fiction, as a genre, frequently uses an imaginary world to illustrate and comment upon some aspect of our own society. American science fiction films from the 1950s, for example, often dealt with the effects of atomic power while the first *Star Trek* television series (and some of the films that followed) provided a commentary on the Cold War. The original *Battlestar Galactica* began in the late 1970s and was clearly designed to capitalize on the popularity of *Star Wars*. It was not an immense success and was soon cancelled. In the years that followed, a number of people toyed with the idea of reviving it since it had developed a cult following. In the end, the new version kept the basic plot but otherwise totally reimagined the story. It is the contention of this paper that many of these differences relate to changes in American society and history.

The new *Battlestar Galactica* began as a project in 2000, was delayed because of the 11 September terrorist attacks and aired on television from 2003 until 2009. Its existence thus runs parallel to much of the global war on terror and, in particular, to the Iraq War. Furthermore, the subject matter of the series – it begins with a devastating terrorist attack and continues with a horrible war that includes suicide bombings, religious conflicts and torture – clearly resemble events of this time.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the series not from the perspective of art but from that of history. How does *Battlestar Galactica* reflect the tensions of its time? What comment does it make on America and on America's actions in the world? As current events changed, did the series evolve in different directions and reflect these changes? The highly fictionalized genre of science fiction can be a profound source of commentary on the real world.

The utilization of science fiction to provide commentary on current events has been frequently noted¹. Anxieties of the time can be projected into the future or on an alien civilization and then exaggerated in order to give a warning. As a mirror of the hopes and fears of society, it displaces the political and social issues of its time to a different plane and reflects them back. For example, we see an America worried by the possibility of invasion, nuclear war and the threat of radiation in the science fiction of the 1950s. By the late 1960s, these fears were reduced but tensions about the Vietnam War, race relations and distrust of the nation's leadership replaced them. This trend continued in the following decades although the relatively non-violent collapse of communism did provide a real trace of hope. Much of this evaporated, though, after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and the events which followed – notably the invasions of Afghanistan and, in particular, of Iraq. One can find echoes of these in many places but, undeniably, the second *Battlestar Galactica* series provides a remarkable and highly critical commentary on these developments.

The original *Battlestar Galactica* began in the late 1970s and was clearly designed to capitalize on the popularity of *Star Wars*. The series began far from Earth in the Twelve Colonies where we witnessed their destruction by the Cylons, robot invaders. The spaceship Battlestar Galactica, containing most of the few survivors, began a long search for the legendary 13th Colony, known as Earth. Here was a neat inversion of the traditional science fiction adventure format of explorers leaving our planet in order to discover the universe. However, the show clearly glorified the military and even exhibited fascist tendencies – not entirely in keeping with the mood of those post-Vietnam years². It was not a great success and was soon cancelled.

¹ See, for example, Donald Hassler and Clyde Wilcox, *Political Science Fiction*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1997; Jutta Weldes, ed. *To Seek Out New Worlds: Exploring Links between Science Fiction and World Politics*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003; Gianni Hayer and Patrick Gyger, eds., *De beaux lendemains? Histoire, société et politique dans la science fiction*, Paris: Antipodes, 2002. This list is by no means exhaustive. Numerous studies of science fiction cinema also exist. To name but a few: David Seed, *American Science Fiction and the Cold War* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999); Lori Maguire, "The Destruction of New York City: A Recurrent Nightmare of American Cold War Cinema," in *Cold War History* (November 2009) 9:4, p. 513-524; and John Brosnan, *Future Tense: The Cinema of Science Fiction* (London: Macdonald & Jones, 1978). There are many others that there is not the space to list here. Studies of science fiction in television are less frequent although a great deal of work has been done on the original *Star Trek* series and its Cold War context. See, for example, Nicholas Evan Sarantakes, "Cold War Pop Culture and the Image of U.S. Foreign Policy: The Perspective of the Original *Star Trek* Series", *Journal of Cold War Studies* (Fall 2005) 7:4, p. 74-103; Rick Worland, "From the New Frontier to the Final Frontier: *Star Trek* from Kennedy to Gorbachev", *Film & History* (1994) XXIV:1-2, p. 19-35. See also the upcoming, Nancy Reagan, ed. *Star Trek and History*, Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2012.

² For an in-depth analysis of the fascist tendencies of the original series see John Kenneth Muir, *An Analytical Guide to Television's Battlestar Galactica*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland &

In the years that followed, a number of people toyed with the idea of reviving it since a cult had developed after the first show. The new *Battlestar Galactica* began as a project for the Fox network in 2000 with director Bryan Singer and producer Tom De Santo. When Singer left to direct the film of *X-Men II*, the project moved to the Sci Fi channel and got a new development team, David Eick and Ronald Moore. They would become the dominant figures in the 21st century series.

In the end, the new version kept the same basic plot and a few character names but otherwise the story was totally reimagined³. The new *Battlestar Galactica* aired on television from 2003 until 2009. Its existence, thus, runs parallel to much of the Global War on Terror and, in particular, to the Iraq War. Furthermore, the subject matter of the series – it begins with a devastating terrorist attack and continues with a horrible war that includes suicide bombings, religious conflicts and torture – clearly resemble contemporary events. The creators – David Eicks and Ronald Moore had been political science majors in college – readily acknowledged this. In an interview with *Rolling Stone* Magazine, Moore recognizes the influence of current events on the series: “It was important to us that this show be as truthful as it could be to the things we were experiencing in the culture after 9/11 [...] All the moral dilemmas, all the ethical questions that we’ve posed hearken back to that central idea: what kind of people do we hope to be?”

The complexity of the series was soon noticed and began to excite commentary in the mainstream press. *Time* Magazine called it “a ripping sci-fi allegory of the war on terror”⁴. *Newsweek* commented:

An orchestrated terrorist attack. An inexorable march to war. An enemy capable of disappearing among its targets, armed with an indifference to its own mortality. It sounds like a PBS special on Al Qaeda. In fact, it’s a synopsis of the Sci Fi Channel series *Battlestar Galactica*, which [...] captures better than any other TV drama of the past eight years the fear, uncertainty and moral ambiguity of the post-9/11 world⁵.

Academics soon followed and scholarly analyses of the show began to appear. For example, C.W. Marshall and Tiffany Potter observed that the series offers “more honest commentary on contemporary events than is to be found on 24-hour news stations”⁷. What began as a story

Co, 1999.

³ For more on the details and development of the show see Lynette Porter, David Lavery, & Hillary Robson, *Finding Battlestar Galactica*, Naperville, Ill: Sourcebooks, 2008; David Bassom, *Battlestar Galactica: The Official Companion*, London: Titan Books, 2005.

⁴ Mikal Gilmore, “Television: ‘Battlestar’ Apocalypse”, *Rolling Stone*, 19 March 2009.

⁵ 16 Dec 2005.

⁶ Joshua Alston, *Newsweek*, 22 Dec 2008.

⁷ “‘I See the Patterns’: *Battlestar Galactica* and the Things that Matter” in Tiffany Potter

with clear heroes and villains became an essay in the moral ambiguity of post 9/11 America. As these comments show, the political viewpoint was clearly very different from the earlier series – a fact which upset some of the right-wing fans of the original *Battlestar*⁸.

This, of course, does not mean that the show is in any way a simple allegory. Rather, it has a plot and atmosphere that force the characters into situations that resemble those experienced by Americans in this period. Let us look in detail at the commentary the series provides on the Global War on Terror.

Many of the key themes of the series are expressed in a speech given just before the attack by William Adama, the Commander of Battlestar Galactica, who functions to some extent as the moral centre of the series⁹. He begins by reading a written text full of platitudes: “The Cylon War is long over yet we must not forget the reasons so many sacrificed so much in the cause of freedom. The cost of wearing the uniform can be high but [...]”. At this point he pauses and puts the speech aside. This sounds like traditional martial rhetoric and, indeed, resembles some of Bush’s speeches. For example, when addressing the Veterans of Foreign Wars on 22 August 2005, Bush stated:

Each of these struggles for freedom required great sacrifice. From the beaches of Normandy to the snows of Korea, courageous Americans gave their lives so others could live in freedom. Since the morning of September the 11th, we have known that the war on terror would require great sacrifice, as well. We have lost 1,864 members of our Armed Forces in Operation Iraqi Freedom, and 223 in Operation Enduring Freedom. Each of these men and women left grieving families and loved ones back home. Each of these heroes left a legacy that will allow generations of their fellow Americans to enjoy the blessings of liberty. And each of these Americans have brought the hope of freedom to millions who have not known it. We owe them something. We will finish the task that they gave their lives for. We will honor their sacrifice by staying on the

and C.W. Marshall, eds, *Cylons in America: Critical Studies in Battlestar Galactica*, New York, Continuum, 2008. In another chapter of the book, “(Re)Framing Fear: Equipment for Living in a Post 9/11 World”, Brian Ott notes that “In the course of its first three seasons, BSG has consistently raised post 9/11 issues and themes such as terrorism, torture, patriotism, nationalism, war crimes, genocide, political dissent, religious fanaticism, suicide bombings, insurgencies, and military occupation”, p. 17. See also, Lewis Call, “Crisis of Authority aboard *Battlestar Galactica*” in Nathan Jun and Shane Wahl, eds., *New Perspectives on Anarchism*, Lanham, Md., Rowman & Littlefield, 2010 and Steven Rawle, “Real-Imagining Terror in *Battlestar Galactica*: Negotiating Real and Fantasy in *Battlestar Galactica*’s Political Metaphor” in Roz Kaveney and Jennifer Stoy, *Battlestar Galactica: Investigating Flesh, Spirit and Steel*, London: IB Tauris, 2010.

⁸ See, for example, Jonah Goldberg, “How Politics Destroyed a Great TV Show: The Cautionary Tale of *Battlestar Galactica*,” *Commentary*, 128.3 (2009), p. 34 ff.

⁹ For a somewhat different perspective on Adama see Steven Rubio, “Legitimate Authority: Debating the Finer Points”, in Richard Hatch, ed. *So Say We All: Collected Thoughts and Opinions on Battlestar Galactica*, Dallas, BenBella/Smart Pop Books, 2006.

offensive against the terrorists, and building strong allies in Afghanistan and Iraq that will help us win and fight – fight and win the war on terror.

We see here the idea that the war must continue until victory so that American soldiers would not have died in vain. Like the previously quoted phrases by Adama, this speech fits into a long line of discourses recognizing and trying to justify the death of soldiers for the nation¹⁰. Interestingly enough, the speech was poorly received by the press – a clear sign that after more than two years support for the war was fading.

Certainly, the series at times does seem to give a critical commentary on the facile glorification of the war in Bush's rhetoric. In January 2002 George W. Bush spoke of an "axis of evil" and, in a number of speeches, presented America as the champion of civilization against a depraved enemy:

This is not, however, just America's fight. And what is at stake is not just America's freedom. This is the world's fight. This is civilization's fight. This is the fight of all who believe in progress and pluralism, tolerance and freedom¹¹.

This battle demanded two wars. America went to war in Afghanistan because it had been attacked and America went to war in Iraq because it might be attacked. Both conflicts were presented in a strongly idealistic and clearly Manichean rhetoric. As Bush warned:

The safety of the American people depends on ending this direct and growing threat. Acting against the danger will also contribute greatly to the long-term safety and stability of our world. The current Iraqi regime has shown the power of tyranny to spread discord and violence in the Middle East. A liberated Iraq can show the power of freedom to transform that vital

¹⁰ For a history of martial rhetoric and an analysis of an exceptionally important example in American history see Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, New York: Touchstone, 1992.

¹¹ George W. Bush, Speech to a joint session of Congress, 20 September 2001 <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html> (accessed, 17 February 2011). Because they are the best known documents, the decision has been made here to present aspects of American foreign policy primarily through the speeches of Bush. There are, of course, many other possible sources. Condoleezza Rice's article "Campaign 2000: Promoting the National Interest" in *Foreign Affairs*, Jan/Feb 2000, vol. 79, N° 1 is of seminal importance. Note that she singles out three nations who will later become the "Axis of evil". Dick Cheney's role is discussed in Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, London, Simon & Schuster, 2004 and Douglas Foyle, "Leading the Public to War? The Influence of American Public Opinion on the Bush Administration's Decision to Go to War in Iraq" in *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 16: 3, pp. 269-294. For a good discussion of the subject see James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet*, London, Penguin, 2004. Also of interest is Stefan Halper & Jonathan Clarke, *America Alone: The Neo-Conservatives and the Global Order*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

region, by bringing hope and progress into the lives of millions. America's interests in security, and America's belief in liberty, both lead in the same direction: to a free and peaceful Iraq¹².

Notice the moral language here and the overwhelmingly positive vision of the war. It does not appear as something that might be difficult or demand much sacrifice. But it is clearly presented as something that will bring immense good to the United States, to Iraq and, indeed, to the whole world through a redeemed domino effect. However, the absence of weapons of mass destruction, the revelation of torture at Abu Ghraib in 2004 and the continual instability in both Iraq and Afghanistan (including suicide bombings) made the simple premise of America as champion of justice, welcomed by the people whose nation she had invaded, seem extremely hollow.

Indeed, the writers of *Battlestar* discredit this style of rhetoric and deliberately break with it for they have Adama, after these words, put the prepared speech aside and comment that the cost is sometimes "too high". He then continues speaking but this time the words come from his heart and the message is very different:

You know, when we fought the Cylons we did it to save ourselves from extinction. But we never answered the question, why? Why are we as a people worth saving? We still commit murder because of greed, spite, jealousy. And we still visit all of our sins upon our children. We refuse to accept the responsibility for anything that we've done. Like we did with the Cylons. We decided to play God... create life. When that life turned against us, we comforted ourselves in the knowledge that it really wasn't our fault, not really. You cannot play God and wash your hands of the things that you've created. Sooner or later, the day comes when you can't hide from the things that you've done any more.

And so the gauntlet is thrown down: *Battlestar Galactica* will not accept the conventional interpretations put forward by those in authority but will question all aspects of the conflict. Adama's comment: "Sooner or later the day comes when you can't hide from the things you've done", implies that humans are far from innocent and bear some responsibility for the past war and, by implication in the coming attack. Indeed, as we shall discover in season three, the humans, and Adama in particular, did behave with a certain provocation towards the Cylons¹³. As Adama explains: "You cannot play God and wash your hands of what you've created." This is quite

¹² George W. Bush, "State of the Union Address", 29 January 2002, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html> (accessed 17 February 2011)

¹³ See the episode "Hero", 3. 8, airdated 17 November 2006.

possibly a comment by the writers on America's own actions, for example, in the case of Afghanistan. After the Soviet invasion in 1979, the West, and particularly the United States, became heavily involved in providing assistance to the Mujahideen, anti-communist, Islamist guerrilla groups. However, once the Soviets left, Western nations lost most of their interest in Afghanistan – at least until the attacks of 11 September 2001 thrust it back on world consciousness. It could be argued that in some sense the West had helped in the creation of an Islamist movement in Afghanistan and then, when circumstances changed, lost all interest in the country – thus leaving it open to anarchy and extremism.¹⁴ To some extent, America had a role in creating its future enemy.

But perhaps the most significant comment by Adama is when he observes that humans never asked why they are worth saving. Much of the series is actually concerned with this question. The characters are put in the most difficult situation imaginable: the genocide of humanity. On the one hand, in spite of this catastrophe, they seek to preserve hope and civilization: trying to respect constitutional legalities and seeking to enforce order. Adama himself gives the survivors an ideal to reach for – the quest for the lost thirteenth colony, known as Earth. But the need to survive and, perhaps even more strongly, the inability to forgive and thus stop the quest for vengeance, make them do horrible things. In the miniseries, for example, Laura Roslin, the Secretary of Education who, as sole surviving member of the government, becomes President, tries to gather together as many survivors as she can. However, under threat of attack by the Cylons, she orders those who can (including her own ship) to jump away – leaving behind ships without jump capacity and these will face certain death. Just before this the Cylons have attacked Galactica, hitting one section of the battleship and causing violent decompressions. The Executive Officer, Col Tigh decides that there is no time to evacuate everyone – that the threat is too great to the rest of the ship – and so seals the area. By doing this he condemns 85 people to their deaths. Unlike in many other series, *Star Trek*, for example, everyone cannot be saved at the last minute and waiting in the hope of doing so is generally rejected as a policy.

In the early part of the series, the viewers' sympathies are directed toward the humans whose society resembles our own in so many ways: democratic, pluralistic, and generally pacifistic. The

¹⁴ The Afghan-born, American scholar and diplomat, Zalmay Khalilzad was one of the first to argue this in *The Washington Post* "Afghanistan: Time to Reengage" on 7 October 1996, p. A21 where he wrote: "Given the sacrifices made by the Afghans in the Cold War's final struggle, we had a moral obligation to assist them in achieving peace. We did not." See also Seth G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan*, New York, Norton, 2009 or Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010.

seemingly unprovoked attack by the Cylons engages our empathy although the series is much too clever to ever take a simple black and white view. To begin with, most of the humans are terribly flawed – forcing us to ask the same question as Adama: are they really worth saving? As time goes on, the vision becomes even more complex.

One of the major questions discussed in the series is how to preserve democracy in an atmosphere of threat and disaster, and this obviously reflects the debate in the United States at the time over the Patriot Act¹⁵. Laura Roslin, the Secretary of Education, upon learning that she is the sole surviving member of the government, has herself sworn in as president of the Colonies according to the laws of the constitution. But the force of events will put extraordinary pressures on the very democracy she swears to protect and she herself will try to subvert it.

By the end of the first season, the military has – not without reason – called into question one of her decisions, arresting her and declaring martial law. The question posed here is profound: must democracy be respected even when a legitimate leader's decisions seem irrational and even place others in danger? Of course, the military is not presented in a particularly favorable light either. Adama, having been critically wounded in an assassination attempt, is unconscious and so power is exercised by Tigh who is clearly overwhelmed, weak and indecisive. He makes one bad decision after another until finally the fleet is split apart. It is Adama, after his recovery, who must seek the President and restore unity as well as a certain level of democratic rule.

This debate reappears later, at the end of season 2 when a presidential election occurs with Roslin against Gaius Baltar the self-centred, amoral scientific genius who had earlier, although unwittingly, betrayed humanity to the Cylons. Pledging that, if elected, he will establish a colony on a harsh but livable planet they have discovered, he wins votes from a population tired of running. Roslin, convinced that they must continue to flee or the Cylons will find them, openly opposes this plan. When it becomes clear that Baltar will win, Roslin and her supporters decide to rig the election¹⁶. In both cases, democracy triumphs, largely because of Adama's decision to respect it – thus showing how seriously he takes his initial statement about the need for humanity to be worthy of survival. Despite the fact that he believes, like Roslin, that Baltar's desire to colonize the planet will lead to disaster (as, indeed, it does), he feels that the decision of the people must be respected, explaining to Roslin:

¹⁵ For more on this subject see Tristan Tamplin, "Knowing We're Frakked: Democracy and Bad Decisions" in Josef Steiff and Tristan Tamplin, eds., *Battlestar Galactica and Philosophy: Mission Accomplished or Mission Frakked Up?* Chicago, Open Court, 2008; Rubio, *op. cit.*, and Adam Roberts, "Adama and Fascism, both in Hatch, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ For more on this see Tamplin, *op. cit.*

Do we steal the results of a democratic election or not? That's the decision. Because if we do this, we're criminals. Unindicted maybe but criminals just the same... You won't do it. We've gone this far but that's it... You try to steal this election you'll die inside. Likely move your cancer right to your heart. People made their choice. You're going to have to live with it¹⁷.

These questions are posed in even more depth in another series of episodes from season 2 and in the made-for TV movie, *Razor*, which concern the Pegasus¹⁸. To Galactica's surprise and joy, they discover the existence of another Colonial battlestar that has survived the Cylon attack, the Pegasus, commanded by Admiral Helena Cain. While Adama, under the influence of Roslin, has placed the survival of humanity first – and a reasonably civilized humanity as well – Cain has sought primarily vengeance against the Cylons and survival at all costs for those she deems worthy (and those she considers worthy possess abilities necessary for fighting). This has led her to use any methods to continue the war. Early on, when the executive officer refuses an order that he considered suicidal, she kills him on the bridge in front of everyone. After this, no one else dares to disobey her but the crew progressively loses their humanity. Two events dramatize this. First, the brutal torture of Gina, a number 6 Cylon found among the crew. A number of commentators have analyzed this event and related it to the scandal at Abu Ghraib¹⁹. Indeed, the revelation that American soldiers had been torturing Iraqi prisoners there occurred in 2004 while the Pegasus story began in 2005. There is no doubt that the creators were providing a commentary on very real occurrences.

But while this is the most devastating instance of torture, it is not the first – Starbuck tortures one of the Leoben Cylons in an early episode, even using water, which seems a clear allusion to the controversy over waterboarding²⁰. This episode also shows Roslin at her worst. After asking Leoben to trust her and actually gaining his confidence, she has him thrown into outer space. She succeeds in shocking Starbuck who, until then, has consistently dehumanized the Cylon. Furthermore, in each case, torture leads to false or no information while treating the prisoner humanely leads to valuable knowledge. Baltar himself remarks to Cain that they had received a lot

¹⁷ "Lay Down Your Burdens (2)", 2. 20, air date 10 March 2006;

¹⁸ For an extended analysis of these stories see Rikk Mulligan, "The Cain Mutiny : Reflecting the Faces of Military Leadership in a Time of Fear" in *Cylons in America*, *op.cit.*

¹⁹ See, for example, Woody Goulart & Wesley Joe "Inverted Perspectives on Politics and Morality in *Battlestar Galactica*" in Donald Hassler and Clyde Wilcox, eds. *New Boundaries in Political Science Fiction*, Columbia, SC., University of South Carolina Press, 2008.

²⁰ See "Flesh and Blood", 1. 8, first aired on 25 February 2005. See also Ott's analysis of the torture scene in "(Re)Framing Fear", *op. cit.*

of intelligence from the Athena Sharon. When Cain authorizes Baltar to interrogate Gina, he even manages to get extremely significant information from her. So torture is not only inhuman and morally wrong, it is ineffective too.

The second story is even more disturbing, for the Pegasus had also once had a civilian fleet which had been sacrificed. Finding these spaceships, Cain considers them only from the point of view of her own need for vengeance. She commandeers anything that she can use from these ships – even their FTL drives which means they could no longer escape the Cylons. She also forces all people on those ships who possess technical skills to leave, and draft them into service on Pegasus. When a number of civilians, all unarmed, refuse, she orders her officers to open fire on them – in the end killing a number of them. Indeed, the officer who begins the massacre, Kendra Shaw, weighed down with guilt, is forced to ask herself whether her own survival is worthwhile and finally, in *Razor*, sacrifices herself to save others – thus winning some redemption.²¹

Cain does not even have the chance of redemption. Certainly she makes clear that she has no interest in civilians and in particular no respect for any civilian assertion of authority over the military. Cain repeatedly ignores Roslin and acts without consulting her. The only thing that Cain still values is vengeance and the means to vengeance – military power. Given Adama's devotion to the survival of ideals, he and Cain are certain to clash. Since she outranks him, he has few options to counter her brutality. Indeed, at one moment, Roslin tells him that the only way the civilian fleet can survive is if he has Cain killed – an act which he is initially ready to do.²² At one point both Cain and Adama have ordered people to assassinate the other but, fortunately, both renounce it – showing that even Cain has some remnants of civilization left in her. Significantly, Adama decides not to go ahead with the assassination after the Athena Sharon refers to his earlier speech saying, "Humanity never asked itself why it deserved to survive. Maybe you don't". This leads him to remark to Starbuck: "It's not enough to survive. One has to be worthy of surviving²³." In the end, Adama and the civilian fleet are saved by poetic justice: Cain is finally killed by the number 6 whose torture she had ordered. The point is made very clear that violence only leads to more violence – and it is not difficult to apply this moral to real life events in Afghanistan and Iraq.

²¹ For more on this see Sara Livingston, "The Razor's Edge: Galactica, Pegasus and Lakoff" in Steiff and Tamplin, *op. cit.*

²² There has been a debate on American presidents' ordering the assassination of those considered a threat to the nation. After various revelations of CIA involvement in assassinations, Gerald Ford signed Executive Order 11905 which banned political assassination in 1976. Jimmy Carter further strengthened the ban with Executive Order 12036 from 1978 but it was later weakened by George W. Bush.

²³ See "Resurrection Ship (2)", 2. 12, airdate 13 January 2006.

Perhaps the most fascinating and complex commentary on democracy is given through the character of Tom Zarek – former terrorist or freedom fighter, depending on your point of view. Zarek is first introduced in season one as a prisoner. He takes a number of characters hostage in the name of promoting democracy – one of his demands is that Roslin must hold an election. Mixing honor and a devotion to democracy with utter ruthlessness and even corruption, he eventually betrays all his highest ideals by massacring the Quorum of 12 – the governing body of the Colonies. He does not even try to justify his actions, telling Gaeta: “This is a coup...To take command and destroy our enemies before they destroy us...This is what happens... The truth is told by whoever’s left standing²⁴.” Like Cain, Zarek has come to place simple survival – and the thirst for power above all – at the expense of any ideals.

It is season three that has attracted the greatest amount of scholarly attention with its unexpected commentary on the degeneration of the occupation of Iraq²⁵. Baltar, now president, establishes the colony, called New Caprica, on the planet they have discovered only to have the Cylons – as Roslin had feared – discover it. The Cylons, however, have changed. Under the influence of Caprica 6 (who earlier had been Baltar’s lover and a major figure in the genocide) and Boomer, a model of number 8 who had acted as a sleeper agent on Galactica but has, at the same time, discovered love there, the Cylons have voted to make peace with humanity. Not surprisingly, after all that has happened, the humans are not that keen on peace and the Cylon presence degenerates into an occupation. The humans, naturally, resist with increasing desperation since the Cylons cannot die (they just download into a new body). Therefore they have no real hope of actually freeing themselves (unless Galactica which fled when the Cylons appeared, can return and take them away). Their desperation reaches such a point that Col. Tigh and other leaders of the human resistance turn to suicide bombing. Many people, both journalists and scholars, have noted the resemblance to the situation at the time in Iraq. But, of course, the brilliance of the series is that they reverse places. Until then, the viewer has always sympathized with the humans who have been the victims of the Cylons. But here, it is the Cylons who hold a similar position to the Americans in Iraq while the humans are the suicide bombers attacking any of their own who are

²⁴ “Blood on the Scales” 4. 14, airdate 6 February 2009.

²⁵ See, for example, Andrew Terjesen, “Resistance vs Collaboration on New Caprica: What Would You Do?” in Jason Eberl, ed. *Battlestar Galactica and Philosophy*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2008; Michael Dudley, “*Battlestar Galactica*: Immersion Therapy for Post 9/11 World”, 25 March 2009, http://www.alternet.org/movies/133419/battlestar_galactica%3A_immersion_therapy_for_post_9_11_world/ (accessed 29 June 2011). There are a number of articles in Steiff and Tamplin, *op. cit.*

willing to work with the enemy and doing their best to cause disturbances. The series goes out of its way to present both views. We see the despair of Tigh, Tyrol and Anders, the leaders of the resistance (who will, paradoxically, later be revealed as Cylons) as they try to sow disorder in the hope of making a rescue by Galactica possible. We also come to understand the anguish of Duck just before he blows himself up. But we also see the opposing view. Baltar tells Roslin that those humans who have agreed to join a police force under the Cylons were “trying to bring some order to the chaos out there²⁶.” The webisodes went even further showing how two humans, Duck and Jammer, could arrive at diametrically opposed conclusions: Duck becoming a suicide bomber while Jammer joined the New Caprica police and thus became a “collaborator”²⁷.

The humans are finally rescued from New Caprica by Adama in Galactica but the quest for punishment of “traitors” persists. Tom Zarek, now president after Baltar’s departure with the Cylons, authorizes a group, called simply the Circle, to execute collaborators. After the return of Roslin to power – and a near miscarriage of justice – this is ended but bitterness continues. It reaches a climax with the trial of Baltar, obviously reminiscent of Nuremberg. However, Baltar is acquitted on the grounds that almost everyone had, since the initial attack, done highly unethical and even illegal things. Baltar was thus really no different from anyone else. As Lee Adama explains:

Did the defendant make mistakes? Sure, he did. Serious mistakes. But did he actually commit any crimes? Did he commit treason? No. I mean it was an impossible situation. When the Cylons arrived what could he possibly do? What could anyone have done? I mean, ask yourself, what would you have done? What would you have done? If he had refused to surrender, the Cylons would have probably nuked the planet right then and there. So did he appear to cooperate with the Cylons? Sure. But so did hundreds of others. What’s the difference between him and them? The president issued a blanket pardon. They were all forgiven. No questions asked [...] I’d say we’re very forgiving of mistakes. We make our own laws now, our own justice. And we’ve been pretty creative at finding ways to let people off the hook for everything from theft to murder. And we’ve had to be because we’re not a civilization any more. We are a gang and we’re on the run. And we have to fight to survive. We have to break rules; we have to bend law. We have to improvise²⁸.

So, in the end, everyone carries some guilt in the breakdown of

²⁶ “Precipice”, 3. 2, airdate 6 October 2006. For more on this see Terjesen, *op. cit.*

²⁷ *Battlestar Galactica: The Resistance* is a series of ten short scenes of life under the Cylon occupation on New Caprica. They aired from 5 September to 5 October 2006.

²⁸ “Crossroads (2)”, 3. 20, airdate 25 March 2007

civilization that has occurred and, since this also acts as a reflection on events in Iraq and Afghanistan, we can see how *Galactica* refuses any easy assignment of blame.

In the end, the Cylons themselves are torn apart by guilt and bitterness and dissolve into a civil war. Three models (2, 6 and 8) seek an alliance with the humans. This alliance is difficult to bring about and full of suspicion on both sides for the only thing that unites them at first is the search for Earth. Both sides come to realize they need each other to reach their goal. However, when they finally do so, they discover a ruin.

The loss of the dream of Earth and a new life in peace – practically the only thing that had been sustaining the humans – predictably devastates the survivors. It leads to individual tragedy like Dee's suicide but, even more than this, the despair also provokes a coup attempt in opposition to the Cylon alliance. Directed by Tom Zarek, on the political side and by Felix Gaeta for the military, it is a last, intense explosion of bitterness and violence. Most notably, it leads to the massacre of the Quorum of 12, the governing body of the Colonies, by Zarek because of their refusal to support his bid for power.

In the end, Adama and Roslin reassert control and both decide, in spite of the loss of Earth, to choose the future and hope. Earlier the hostile Cylons had kidnapped Hera, the half human, half Cylon child who, we have repeatedly heard, is the greatest hope for the future. Adama and Roslin, along with the rebel Cylon leaders, decide to go together to rescue her. This, they finally do and, afterwards, discover a new and inviting world which, we realize, is our planet. There the Cylons and humans begin a new life together. To hammer home the point, the final scene in the series takes place in New York today and the question is left open about whether history will – or will not – repeat itself. The moral of the story is clear: hatred and vengeance lead only to more hatred and vengeance. A true future can only be built when former enemies are willing to work together. As such, *Battlestar Galactica* completely rejects Bush's well known statement that: "Either you are with us or with the terrorists²⁹". Throughout the series it takes a resolutely critical view of America's actions in Iraq and Afghanistan, refusing all facile analyses and insisting on the complexity of the situation and on its moral aspects. America must live up to its ideals, it seems to say, or it will not be worthy of surviving.

²⁹ George W. Bush, Speech to a joint session of Congress, *op. cit.*