

Doctor Who turns toward militarism

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Christmas 2014 marked the end of the eighth season of the rebooted British science fiction television series *Doctor Who* (the program first went on the air in 1963). It was also the end of the first season for veteran actor Peter Capaldi (*The Thick of It*, *In the Loop*) in the role of “The Doctor,” the twelfth incarnation of the time-traveling humanoid alien.

The most recent season brought the military almost immediately into the foreground. Given the state of the world, this was perhaps not entirely surprising, or even inappropriate. But what is the program’s attitude?

Much of the focus is on Danny Pink (Samuel Anderson), a war veteran turned math teacher and boyfriend of The Doctor’s companion Clara (Jenna Coleman). Questioned as to whether he killed anyone in the war, Danny demurs, troubled by what he has seen and done. He disabuses his students of the idea that war is anything to be glorified or celebrated.

The issue of what it takes to be a “good man” dominates this season. The Doctor repeatedly queries Clara about this, trying to reconcile his role in the Time War, on the one hand, and his attempts to be a “healer” and “wise man,” on the other. Danny asks himself the same question indirectly, and tries to respond positively that he is a decent person. One started viewing the season with a certain optimism.

Given this motif, it is worth tracing the course of The Doctor’s relationship with and attitude toward militarism and war. In earlier episodes of the renewed show, there is an open hostility towards soldiers, guns and war. An arms factory is destroyed and replaced with a banana grove because “bananas are good” (in “The Doctor Dances,” 2005). Mechanical Cybermen are not defeated with force but by restoring their emotions, incapacitating them (in “The Age of Steel,” 2006). Intergalactic police are introduced as “interplanetary thugs” (in “Smith and Jones,” 2007). The shooting of The Doctor’s daughter is used as a

lesson to demonstrate that killing, even in vengeance, should never be an option (in “The Doctor’s Daughter,” 2008).

In one especially moving sequence, The Doctor is faced with the dilemma of saving Earth through committing genocide against the enemy. He hesitates and is tauntingly asked by the Emperor Dalek, “What are you, coward or killer?” He struggles, obviously torn by the question of just how far one should go, no matter how murderous the enemy. Ultimately he answers, “Coward, any day,” and refuses to take part in the destruction (“The Parting of Ways,” 2005).

Ongoing antagonists have been various Earth-based military forces, including Torchwood and UNIT, both vast and well-funded armed state agencies. By and large, they are portrayed as ruthless organizations The Doctor and his companions are obliged to resist.

And yet there have been some cracks. In one episode (“Doomsday,” 2006), the leader of Torchwood is “upgraded” (forcibly transferred into a metal body), but then saves The Doctor and his companions, declaring she “did her duty, for queen and country.” Is this retrograde sentiment the only one that might withstand mechanical brainwashing?

Despite such exceptions, the first four seasons of the show advocated a refreshing rejection of violence in general, instead using the abilities, equipment and even the life of The Doctor to save people.

In the fifth rebooted season Steven Moffat took over as head writer and show runner after the previous head, Russell T. Davies, stepped down. In considering the Moffat era as a whole, one is forced to reflect on the other works he has overseen, particularly *Sherlock*. In that show, whatever its strengths (including the participation of Benedict Cumberbatch), the main character is constantly glorified as a “high-functioning sociopath” who goes out of his way to assist British imperialism.

Moffat's *Doctor Who* episodes reinforce this ~~turn of events~~ ^{turn of events} behind the idea of sending in the troops.

more than previously, they are turned inward. While this inwardness is something the lead character deals with, especially given that he is “the last” of the Time Lords, it has reached an unhealthy level. No longer do the seasons culminate in some great potential catastrophe for humanity that must be opposed and defeated, but rather in some personal problem for The Doctor. One used to feel something beyond a vague voyeurism when watching the season endings of *Doctor Who*—there was a sense of shared struggle, shared destiny and ultimately hope.

There is also The Doctor's constant interaction with the future army, which involves the integration of the church and the military. (Is this intended to be satirical?) There is confusion in many directions here. On the surface, it seems in some of these episodes that the militarization of every aspect of life is being questioned, but in the end, The Doctor works with the military more than he does against it.

When he does take on the army, it is with an army of his own (“A Good Man Goes to War,” 2011). Companions who in a previous era would have been shown the wonders of the universe are now merely draftees. Mass murder is committed in search of a kidnapped companion. With a cavalier attitude about knocking the enemy out, exploding things and leading an army, The Doctor goes to war.

And so we come to the most recent episodes, in which Capaldi's Doctor is at odds with Clara's boyfriend Danny. His insistence on calling the young man “P.E.” (for “physical education”), dismissing Danny-the-former-soldier's intellect, rankles.

The Doctor's relationship with UNIT, a military organization carried over from the show's earlier days, comes to a head here. Kidnapped and forced into the position of President of the World by members of the organization, The Doctor is then given an army by his current foe, who declares they are more alike than not.

The Doctor then turns to Danny, who, as the Torchwood director in an earlier season, has been rendered into a Cyberman. His transformation is not yet complete, and The Doctor gives him control of the army, with which he is to embark on a suicide mission. Danny's rousing pre-mission speech and his declaration that “This is not the order of an officer. This is the promise of a soldier!” are meant to rally the

The scene in which The Doctor salutes a returned UNIT soldier—something he had refused to do in previous years—is a capitulation. For generations, he had not saluted because the military had nothing to offer but destruction. The Doctor's rejection of aggressive methods and his frequent refusal to cooperate as long as guns were being pointed, his outrage at the needless deaths of even the most bumptious of aliens who had attacked Earth, all this appeared to be a thing of the past as he stood at attention to pay tribute to the Brigadier.

Moffat's aim seems to be to gratuitously knock this hero down, as if to say, peace is all well and good in theory, but when push comes to shove, strike first and shoot. Something about the belligerent mood of the affluent middle class in Britain, the US and elsewhere makes itself felt here.



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