
Jeffersonians in Space

BY RAYMOND J. KEATING

Some of us occasionally have stumbled on a television show actually worth watching, only to see it cancelled perhaps after just a season or two on the air.

For defenders of freedom and individualism, it was even worse. In 2002 a science-fiction show with unmistakable libertarian leanings wound up lasting only four months. “Firefly” premiered on Fox in September and was gone by the end of December. In fact, three of the 14 shows created never aired. But all was not lost thanks to DVDs and the movie theater.

Back in the 1960s, Gene Roddenberry pitched a science-fiction show to NBC as a “Wagon Train to the Stars.” “Wagon Train” was a television western, and TV executives were far more enamored with westerns than with sci-fi at the time. NBC signed on, and Roddenberry’s “Star Trek” was born, which turned out to be television’s greatest science-fiction success, encompassing six television series and ten motion pictures over nearly four decades.

But “Star Trek” was not a western in outer space. For that, viewers had to wait for Joss Whedon to create “Firefly.” Here was a fascinating merger of the Old West with space travel five hundred years in the future. Gun belts and six-shooters went along with lasers. Cowboys on horseback rode next to hover cars. Cattle were moved via spaceship.

“Firefly” also placed some classic western-type characters in outer space. The spaceship’s captain—Malcolm Reynolds—was a bit of the rogue, plagued by his past,

but with a streak of nobility. There’s also the prostitute with the big heart and a preacher onboard.

In addition, much of the television show played out on a wild-west-like frontier, sprinkled with brothels, dust, shootouts, rough-and-tumble saloons, and even a train heist.

The stories neatly melded action, interesting characters worth caring about, western dialogue, and humor. But it wasn’t just the concept behind “Firefly” that was truly unique; it also was an unabashed anti-big-government

and pro-freedom philosophy. Clearly, the bad guys in the television series were the Alliance, that is, the government that defeated the Independents—for whom Reynolds and his first officer Zoe fought—in a war several years earlier.

Reynolds most often communicated hostility toward the Alliance and government. In one episode, he declares: “That’s what governments are for—to get in a man’s way.” At another point, he says: “That sounds like the

Alliance—unite all the planets under one rule, so everybody can be interfered with or equally ignored.”

When Reynolds was buying his spaceship *Serenity*, he spoke poetically about it representing “freedom,” and said that he and his crew “ain’t never have to be under the heel of nobody ever again. No matter how long the arm of the Alliance might get, we’ll just get ourselves a little further.” As in many westerns, pushing further out

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on the frontier in “Firefly” meant greater freedom for the individual.

Even the preacher—known as the Shepherd—adds: “A government is a body of people, usually notably ungoverned.” Indeed, how deliciously libertarian.

Fortunately, fans did not lose “Firefly” after its cancellation. The series arrived on DVD, including the episodes that never made it on television, and became a surprise big seller.

So in September 2005, this tragically truncated, cancelled television series came to the silver screen as a film titled *Serenity*. It earned widespread solid reviews. In fact, Jan Stuart in *Newsday* proclaimed that “George Lucas could learn a thing or two from Whedon. ‘Serenity’ flies with sass and spirit, qualities that have been in palpably short supply in that ‘Star Wars’ series since, well, ‘Star Wars.’” That’s high praise.

The film was even more aggressive in its warnings about the ills of unchecked big government. A scene at the start of the movie features a tranquil setting of children in class learning about the war between the Alliance and the Independents. Most of the children wonder why anyone would oppose the wonderful and civilized things they enjoy under the Alliance. A girl named River responds: “We meddle. People don’t like to be meddled with. . . . We’re meddling.” We eventually discover just how meddling.

A few years later a ruthless assassin is dispatched by the Alliance to kill River, who turns out to be a mind reader and is part of the *Serenity* crew. The mission of the Alliance is summed up when the assassin declares: “We’re making a better world.”

As Reynolds and his shipmates eventually discover, part of that effort to make people better was a failed experiment on one planet. Trying “to keep people safe,”

a drug was added to air processors to weed out aggression and stop all fighting. The result was that 30 million people gave up and let themselves die, while a small share of the population went mad and became cannibals, known as Reavers, who terrorize certain parts of space.

The assassin is after River, on whom, by the way, the government performed all sorts of horrible experiments because she was exposed to members of parliament who knew about the planet-wide experiment going awry. Reynolds notes that the government “buried” this gross atrocity, is certain it will try again someday, and is determined to get the word out to all. As he puts it, “I aim to misbehave.”

It’s easy to envision Captain Reynolds agreeing when

Thomas Jefferson said: “A little rebellion now and then is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical.” Indeed, one might refer to the crew of *Serenity* as “Jeffersonians in Space.” They certainly practice in these tales what Jefferson said about the price of liberty: “The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants.”

Perhaps more applicable to our day-to-day lives, Whedon’s television show “Firefly” and movie *Serenity* but-

tress the doubts many of us have on hearing from the mouth of a politician or bureaucrat, “I’m from the government, and I’m here to help.”

In the end, serenity comes not from the so-called safety of the Nanny State, but from individual freedom—even in outer space. And if no more space westerns are forthcoming featuring the crew of *Serenity*, I have both the television series and the movie on DVD to provide enjoyable reminders that—even though imperfect and messy, as exhibited in Whedon’s vision—freedom must be treasured.



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