

[all terror, all the time]

What Would Jack Bauer Do?

Fox's hit drama normalizes torture, magnifies terror, and leaves conservatives asking why George W. Bush can't be more like *24*'s hero.

By Michael Brendan Dougherty

AGENT JACK BAUER has tortured his own brother, used household appliances to electrocute a terror suspect, staged the execution of a child, and even shot a man's wife to get information from him. On any given day, he will disarm suitcase nukes and presidential assassins. The orders of superior officers at the Counter Terrorist Unit don't deter him, the rule of law and even the threat of death do not diminish Bauer's iron will to defend America.

But this hero isn't real. He lives for one suspense-filled hour each week on Fox's cult series *24*.

It's not just Bauer's over-the-top methods that keep audiences gripping their barcaloungers, it's also the show's novel format, which relies on "real-time" storytelling. Each episode reveals the events of one hour; each season adds up to one frenetic day. The common thread is terrorism—that constant existential threat demanding self-sacrifice and frequent disregard for the polite rules of procedure and diplomacy. It's Us or Them.

In a gentler time, conservatives would have deplored this gory primetime fare. But now, finding a worldview consonant with their hawkish tendencies, they have embraced Jack Bauer as their pop-culture icon, his name uttered as an invocation of the grit and guts needed in the Age of Terror.

Now in its sixth season, *24* claims ever more critical and commercial success. Nominated for 12 Emmys in 2006, it won four, including awards for Outstanding Drama Series and Outstanding Lead Actor for Keifer Sutherland's Jack Bauer. The latest season premiere drew nearly 16 million viewers, its largest audience ever.

For those unfamiliar with the pace and tone of the show, an example: in one story arc, Jack Bauer, retired from counterterrorism and still grieving the loss of his wife, is brought back into the CTU by a personal phone call from the president. Based on information obtained through torture under the rules of rendition in South Korea, the commander in chief begs the old soldier to save Los Angeles from an imminent threat. Within an hour Bauer suits up, shoots a witness, demeans his boss's unwillingness to "get his hands dirty," and just before a commercial break grabs a dead man's fleshy neck and announces, "I'm gonna need a hacksaw." Using the severed head to infiltrate a domestic right-wing terror group, he participates in the deaths of 30 co-workers and shoots a half dozen bad guys (and their pitbull) to obtain information about an impending nuclear attack. All this before lunch.

Producers Joel Surnow and Robert Cochran originally conceived *24* as a

way to shake up the police procedural genre by replacing violent crime with terrorism and compressing the drama with their real-time gimmick. It was a shot in the dark. Sutherland told *Interview* magazine that he didn't believe the show would get picked up, owing to its unusual structure and multilayered plotting. But during production, before the show aired, the perennial topic of *24* was seared into America's consciousness. The first season debuted just eight weeks after 9/11, initially attracting a small but passionate audience and then emerging as a cultural phenomenon, inspiring slick references on ESPN and humor websites celebrating the cartoonish antics of the protagonist: "Jack Bauer has been to Mars. That's why there's no life on Mars."

Even though *24* has millions of hardcore fans, conservative opinion makers have distinguished themselves among fervent devotees of the show. Bauer's shade lingers over their imagination. Last May, Kathryn Jean Lopez, editor of *National Review Online*, asked *What Would the Founders Do?* author Richard Brookheiser, "Does the 8th Amendment suggest ... that the Founders would not side with Jack Bauer (pro) on torture?" In September, giving the impression that books make her think of television shows, when interviewing *Washington*

Times national security reporter Bill Gertz about his latest tome, Lopez said, “Most of us think Jack Bauer nowadays when we think of counterintelligence. Is there anything real about him?” This January, after the latest season premiere, Lopez couldn’t help herself. In a conversation with Republican presidential candidate Mike Huckabee, she bumbled, “Do you watch *24*? If so: Can we learn anything from Jack Bauer to help us win this war we’re in?” Huckabee put her down easy, noting that his wife enjoyed the show.

But singing Bauer’s hosannas isn’t restricted to *National Review Online*. It’s also the practice of syndicated columnists. In his Jan. 17, 2007 column, Ben Shapiro declared, “torture will often serve a useful purpose,” and proposed a utilitarian ethic for its use, saying, “If torturing a particular terrorist is useful—if we engage in the complicated calculus that tells us that the benefits outweigh the harms—torture is not only justified, it is morally right.” The title of his column: “Where’s Jack Bauer When You Need Him?”

Cal Thomas has also devoted column space, diagramming the plots of *24* to make a pro-torture point. In one 2005 episode, Bauer confronted a new challenge: the law. Thomas mourned, “An ACLU-type lawyer shows up at CTU headquarters ... with a court order forbidding torture of the suspect.” Life was imitating art, Thomas warned, “the scarier drama that is being played out by the United States Army, which last week announced it is preparing to issue a new interrogations manual that specifically bars the use of ‘harsh’ techniques of the type used at Abu Ghraib prison.” Luckily, in the show Bauer hatched a plan to release the suspect then detain and torture him outside of CTU headquarters.

The frequent recourse to torture has attracted the attention of both the military and veteran interrogators in the

FBI. As reported by Jane Mayer in *The New Yorker*, several experts advised *24*’s creative team about techniques that are more effective than torture at obtaining information. Army Brigadier Gen. Patrick Finnegan, dean of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, let producers and writers know that the show exerted a strong and noxious influence over his students. The newest recruits have been watching Jack Bauer since they were 14. The general told Mayer, “The disturbing thing is that although torture may cause Jack Bauer some angst, it is always the patriotic thing to do.” One former Army interrogator related how soldiers in Iraq watch DVDs of the show and then try to imitate Bauer’s interrogation methods on their own prisoners.

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The show not only informs or reinforces views on torture, it shapes viewers’ perspective of the entire war on terror. Each day in *24* is filled with exotic threats, byzantine intrigues in the White House, and a dash of domestic turmoil. Typically, while Jack runs across Los Angeles in search of bad guys to beat down, a subplot will develop in the suburbs. In one instance, we’re introduced to a family in which a vivacious blonde is about to wed a Persian-American who works with her father. Is the groom a terrorist, or is it the father, or both? The effect is to acclimate the audience to a world in which the threat of spectacular terrorist violence is white noise—a constant, omnipresent force in the day-to-day lives of Americans, if only they will stop and notice it. Don’t let your mind fix

itself entirely on wedding centerpieces and catering: there may be a terrorist in your house.

The latest season, which premiered in January, placed Jack Bauer in an alarming situation. Instead of trying to prevent potential attacks, Bauer had to fight a wave of terrorism already in progress on American soil, culminating in a nuclear detonation in the Valencia section of Los Angeles. This dramatic turn inspired comment around the ideological spectrum.

Liberal newscaster Keith Olbermann saw the ramifications of this high-wire drama: “In case you missed the point, the show finished up with a nuclear weapon detonating in a major American city, literally conjuring up the administration’s imagery for the war in Iraq: the

good old mushroom cloud.” One is tempted to dismiss the oleaginous Olbermann’s speculations about the connection between *24* and the political passions of the Right until confronted by the rapturous testimony of conservatives themselves.

Feeling the weight of public opinion turning against the war in Iraq and the waning of enthusiasm for the war on terror, some conservatives saw in this fictional nuclear attack a reason to believe again. On *NewsBusters.org*, a project of the conservative Media Research Center, contributing editor Noel Sheppard was overcome as he stared at the computer-generated mushroom cloud: “Personally, I was left speechless for several minutes after the stunning conclusion, and had to watch the second hour again to convince

myself that I had actually seen what I had seen..." He went on, "this ... should be required viewing for all media members who question what's at risk, and whether there really is a war on terror." Sad news when a real war needs fictional proof. Kathryn Lopez was also moved by this sight of carnage, blogging on *The Corner*: "To everyone who goes to work today protecting you, me, our families, freedom: Remember Valencia."

The conservative obsession with *24* has gone beyond popular audiences into think tanks. Last summer the Heritage Foundation assembled a panel on the show, including not only producers, writers, and actors, but Heritage scholars and Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, who praised the series for "reflect[ing] real life." Emcee Rush Limbaugh asked the stars whether they "had problems with their friends" in Hollywood because the show is pro-American. "Just jealousy," replied Carlos Bernard to the audience's laughter.

AFTER THE PREMIERE OF THE **FIFTH SEASON**, *NATIONAL REVIEW*'S JOHN J. MILLER RELISHED THE "**BEST LINE**": "YOU ARE GONNA TELL ME WHAT I WANT TO KNOW. **IT'S JUST A QUESTION OF HOW MUCH YOU WANT IT TO HURT.**"

James Jay Carafano, a Heritage Senior Research Fellow in counterterrorism and defense, dissented from the conservative consensus, noting that the ticking time bomb situation, "has no basis in reality." Instead of the heroics of Bauer, Carafano explained that effective counterterrorism is accomplished through "good law enforcement" and hundreds of people diligently performing tedious security tasks at our borders and in intelligence agencies. Limbaugh struggled to restore the pep-rally atmosphere—"The vice president's a huge fan. Secretary Rumsfeld's a huge fan."—but

even executive producer Howard Gordon reminded the audience: "It's just a show."

Still, conservative adoration carries on undiminished. On the HBO panel show "Real Time with Bill Maher," economist Stephen Moore, praised the Military Commissions Act as "Jack-Bauer justice." "He should run the CIA," Moore continued. "I love this guy. I wish it were real life. ... This guy knows how to interrogate guys. He takes them in, shoots them in the leg, 'Tell me where the bomb is,' and most Americans want those kind of tactics because they know tens of thousands of lives are at risk."

Moore's appropriation of Bauer for political debating points may be silly, but it shouldn't surprise. Our superheroes are often the product of politics. In bright colors and fantastic arcs, the wizards of our popular culture conjure stories by redrawing the ideological conflicts of their time. In the 1950s, Captain America became an anticommunist, pitted against Red Skull. In the

'60s, the X-Men self-consciously paralleled the debates surrounding civil rights. Rocky Balboa found himself confronting a communist during the Reagan years. In a nod to the culture war, comic books now traffic in the dramatic tropes of teenagers "coming out" as mutants to their parents. When threats from terrorism fill the headlines, Jack Bauer naturally appeals to our imagination.

When we are lazy, he is up all night. Where we cut and run from adversity, he cuts and runs right through his enemies. And a nation of cubicle-dwellers,

daily harassed by the bureaucratic minutia of their hum-drum jobs, can't help being attracted to a man who barks at his superiors, "We don't have time for this!" as he takes on the ultimate job of keeping his country and his family safe. In the *Weekly Standard*, Martha Bayles rhapsodized, "When imagining a nuclear bomb about to explode in L.A., or a weaponized virus about to be released in eleven major cities, we welcome Jack's Odyssean alertness, courage, and cunning." One could add to this list Jack's indomitable patriotism—his willingness to suffer any fate rather than see his nation harmed. To Bayles's credit, she voices what she believes to be the mixed feelings of Americans about his methods: "it is harder to swallow his readiness to torture. For most of its history, American entertainment has depicted torture as pure evil. So it is jarring to see it routinely ordered, even inflicted, by the good guys."

But for so many, even in the conservative movement, it is exactly Jack Bauer's brutal tactics that make him worth admiring. After the premiere of the fifth season, *National Review*'s John J. Miller relished the "best line": "You are gonna tell me what I want to know. It's just a question of how much you want it to hurt."

In *24*, the war on terror is an omnipresent ticking clock, pitting our legitimate security needs against the most cherished tenets of our civilization. The stress one hour of this imposes on Jack Bauer alone makes good drama, but its extension to all America, for an indefinite time, is a farce. The devotion to *24* and its protagonist demonstrates what few may care to admit: in the war on terror, the conservative movement has become willing to sacrifice principle to passion and difficult moral reasoning to utility. As escapism, *24* is riveting; as a parable for our time, it is revolting. ■

Bloggers vs. the Lobby

Israel's propaganda fortress faces a surprising new challenge.

By **Scott McConnell**

DESPITE THE FAILURE IN IRAQ, the repudiation of the president's foreign policy in opinion polls and the 2006 elections, and the collapse of respect for the U.S. in most other countries, support for the Bush Doctrine of preventive war remains surprisingly intact among one important slice of Americans: the presidential candidates of both major parties. *New York Times* columnist David Brooks recently lamented that Democratic contenders were sounding soft, crafting their foreign-policy positions to generate "applause lines in Iowa." He needn't have worried. The parade of White House aspirants to appear before a hawkish Israeli audience in Herzliya, and an equally hawkish AIPAC crowd in New York, is a truer gauge of where leading candidates stand.

On New Year's Day, Israeli superhawk Benjamin Netanyahu called for an "intense international public relations front" to persuade Americans of the need for military confrontation with Iran. The sight of John Edwards addressing a conference in Israel by satellite feed, along with John McCain, Rudy Giuliani, Newt Gingrich, and Mitt Romney—the latter two actually flew in to speak in person—indicated that the front already exists. All the candidates spoke as if preemptive war in the Middle East was a tried and true success. As a correspondent from *Jewish Week* summed it up, the U.S. presidential hopefuls were "competing to see who can be most strident in defense of the Jewish state." The consensus choice for the competition's winner was Romney,

but the putatively liberal Edwards, who described preventing Iran from securing nuclear weapons as "the greatest challenge of our generation," made a surprisingly strong showing. No leading presidential contender suggested that attacking Iran might be a bad idea.

This hawkishness is actually an outlier sentiment, popular only among those running for office. In Washington, it's difficult to find a foreign-policy expert who thinks that any good would come of a strike on Iran. Even the necons have their doubts. The Iraq War, miserable concept that it was, had far more respected backers.

American military options are poor. Surgical air strikes wouldn't do anything decisive to Iran's nuclear program, but they would create huge problems for Americans in Iraq and perhaps lead to a two or threefold rise in the price of oil. The U.S. lacks the troops to enforce regime change through a land invasion and has already demonstrated its inability to successfully occupy a Muslim country one-third Iran's size. Furthermore, Iran, according to U.S. intelligence estimates, is ten years away from a nuclear weapon. Its seemingly nutty current president is losing support in the country. Those most theologically opposed to the Shia Islam that Tehran espouses are the very al-Qaeda Sunnis who set this dreadful train of events in motion in the first place.

So why do leading politicians line up for "The Bush Doctrine: Take Two"? On the Republican side, it might be explained by a desire to cater to elements of the

Christian Right that believe a final showdown with Islam is called for on religious grounds, or to talk-radio listeners who want to nuke the "Islamofascists" because that's what weapons are made for. Such groups form part of the GOP base. But what of Edwards, what of Hillary Clinton—both eager to be on the record for keeping all options on the table? It's a question that cannot be truthfully answered without reference to the neuralgic subject of the Israel lobby.

It is a tough issue to address, as Gen. Wesley Clark, a middle-of-the-pack Democratic presidential contender in 2004, recently discovered. Upon reading an Arnaud de Borchgrave column that discussed a then incipient Israeli campaign to pressure Hillary Clinton and other Democrats to "publicly support immediate action by Bush against Iran," he lost his cool, saying to Arianna Huffington, "How can you talk about bombing a country when you won't even talk to them? It's outrageous. We're the United States of America; we don't do that." Pressed by Huffington to explain why he was sure Bush would attack Iran, he answered, "You just have to read what's in the Israeli press. The Jewish community is divided but there is so much pressure being channeled from the New York money people to the office seekers."

This was an awkward way to put it; the euphemism surely sounded more contentious than anything Clark might have said straightforwardly. And of course some people chose to ignore