

Prime-time torture: Jack Bauer as a hero of our time

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In an episode of the Fox television drama *24*, the hero Jack Bauer (played by Kiefer Sutherland) desperately needs information to protect national security. To get it, Jack knocks a man unconscious and ties him to a chair. Ripping the electrical cord out of a lamp, he applies the current to the man's bare chest when he refuses to cooperate with Jack's questioning. When Jack threatens to put the live wire into the man's ear, the captive finally relents.

The nonprofit organization Human Rights First reports that before 2001, fewer than four scenes of torture appeared on prime-time television each year. Last year, there were more than 100. The show *24* has been instrumental in this change: in its first five seasons, *24* showed 67 scenes of torture, the majority of them performed by Jack Bauer.

Each season of *24* chronicles the events of one day in the life of the fictional Counter Terrorist Unit (CTU) in Los Angeles. A ticking clock punctuates each scene. In the world of *24*, national security is constantly under attack, and Jack races against the clock to foil increasingly convoluted plots of mass destruction. In this race, Jack occupies a shadowy place as both a keeper and breaker of the law. He helps maintain national security by temporarily suspending the rule of law. In early seasons of the show, Jack would "go rogue" for short periods—he would turn off his cell phone, enter a building without permission, or break a prisoner out of a high-security prison in order to get the information that he needs. In recent seasons, Jack's rogue behavior has increasingly involved the use of torture.

Jack Bauer has become a hero of our time, and his heroics have lent an aura of inevitability to his violent methods. Antonin Scalia, Bill Clinton, Dick Cheney and Pat Buchanan are among those who have admiringly referred to him when discussing U.S. policy on torture.

Jack's defenders point out that he is not only a torturing hero, but also a suffering hero. He suffers because he tortures, and because he suffers, the torturing is somehow more justified. The figure of the suffering hero is a familiar one, of course—most of our favorite heroes pay a price for standing up for what is right. Often in American stories the price paid is exclusion from the very community that the hero seeks to protect. In classic westerns, the hero rides off into the sunset alone. Superheroes rarely get the girl, or they get her only to lose her when the world is once again threatened. Suffering heroes cannot be integrated members of the communities they defend.

Jack too is excluded from the society saved by his heroic acts of torture. He may save the nation, but in the end he is alone. Sutherland has mastered the art of conveying deep personal anguish in slight facial gestures, reminding us of Jack's inner pain in the midst of his outer bravado. In the ethos of *24*, Jack's suffering is central to his heroic work—proof that he is a worthy savior and not an antisocial madman.

The fantasy that Jack's suffering can save us is also a theological fantasy. The existential pain that he suffers is described by Howard Gordon, one of the show's creators, in theological language: Jack is "basically damned" for his extreme measures. This dimension of his suffering was heightened in season six by the show's tagline: "For America to survive, Jack Bauer must die." This dramatic proclamation was accompanied by images of Jack returning from a Chinese torture camp with long hair and an unkempt beard, his back crisscrossed with scars. The christological undertones were impossible to miss.

Perhaps what is most disturbing about the iconic image of Jack Bauer as hero is the way the theological motif merges with the political message: extralegal expediency in defense of national security is salvation. As political leaders repeatedly tell us, they—like Jack—will do "whatever it takes" to keep us safe. Jack provides the fantasy that one man might bear the sins of a whole nation, suffering for the necessary evil our security demands.

Sharp dialogue, unexpected plot twists, skilled cinematography and excellent acting make *24* a compelling show. In many ways, it resembles a traditional western or spy thriller. But *24* is also doing something new. It has transformed the icon of the suffering hero into the icon of the torturing hero.

At a time when the legality of torture is debated in our highest courts, this is not an insignificant transformation. Real-life debates about torture are shaped not only by legal and ethical concerns, but by the way torture is conceived in the popular imagination. *24* is a potent shaper of that imagination. Whether we are trying to keep the world safe for democracy or just keep America safe for ourselves, Jack Bauer is a hero of our time. He is willing to do whatever it takes, racing against a ticking clock, to save us.