

24, torture and prime-time US television

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An article in the February 14 issue of the *New Yorker* magazine describes an extraordinary meeting that took place in Hollywood in mid-November 2006. David Danzig of Human Rights First and other participants took to task writers and producers for their depiction of torture on the popular Fox television series *24*. For several years the show's writers have made sadistic portrayals central to fueling "an addictive, adrenaline-fueled thriller," as the show is hyped on one of its DVD jackets.

The series' protagonist, Jack Bauer, is played by actor Kiefer Sutherland. He works for the Los Angeles bureau of a fictional federal agency, the Counter Terrorist Unit (CTU). The show relentlessly portrays Bauer initiating torture against designated enemies of the state. He races around Los Angeles playing out various "ticking time bomb" scenarios. Unthinkable (and implausible) consequences such as the nuclear annihilation of the city are averted through Bauer's ruthless actions.

What made the Hollywood meeting particularly unusual were concerns like those voiced by the dean of the US Military Academy at West Point and several former American government interrogators. Brigadier General Patrick Finnegan is a lawyer who has for a number of years taught a course on the laws of war to West Point senior cadets. He said *24* was exceptionally popular with his students and told the *New Yorker's* Jane Mayer, "The kids see it, and say, 'If torture is wrong, what about *24*?'"

His description of experiences in the academy's classrooms was confirmed by Gary Solis, another retired law professor who designed and taught the Law of War for Commanders curriculum at West Point. He told Mayer that his students embrace the fictional Bauer's motto, "whatever it takes."

Mayer also quoted Tony Lagouranis, a former US Army interrogator at the notorious Abu Ghraib prison

in Iraq, describing the show's effect in the field. "Everyone wanted to be a Hollywood interrogator. That's all people did in Iraq was watch DVDs of television shows and movies. What we learned in military schools didn't apply anymore."

Concerns about the effect of the show on international audiences were also raised. The show is broadcast on television and distributed on DVD in numerous countries. Finnegan told the producers that *24*, by suggesting that the American government perpetrates myriad forms of torture, hurts the country's image internationally.

Other participants in the November meeting presented chilling statistics about the growing incidence of violence and torture on television dramas. The Parents Television Council reports on their web site that Fox's *24* showed 67 scenes of torture in the first five seasons, making it number one in torture depictions. They reviewed prime-time broadcast programming from 1995 to 2001, finding 110 scenes of torture. From 2002 to 2005, the number increased to 624 such scenes.

Mayer notes: "The increase in quantity is not the only difference. During this uptick in violence, the torturer's identity was more likely to be an American hero like *24's* Jack Bauer than the Nazis and drug dealers in pre-9/11 days. The action-packed show, which drew a hefty 13.6 million viewers last week, was among the first and certainly the most prominent to have its main character choke, stab, or electrocute—among other techniques—information out of villains."

The situation is so bad on American television that Human Rights First launched a special initiative, the Prime-Time Torture Project [!], headed by Danzig, to address "negative fallout from the way that torture is presented on US TV shows like *24*, *Lost*, *The Wire*, *Sleeper Cell*, etc." Danzig is charged, according to the human rights group, with "working closely with

military officials to develop educational tools to ensure that junior soldiers know that what they see on TV is meant to be entertainment.”

A Human Rights First video about torture produced with the cooperation of *24*'s lead writer Howard Gordon is expected to be used next fall at West Point and perhaps in other military organizations. The video will attempt to underscore the fictional character of the television show.

The events of September 11 have allowed the American ruling elite and its hangers-on in the legal profession and media to carry on a non-stop debate on the efficacy of torture. A November 5, 2001, article in the *New York Times* revealed that “torture is already a topic of discussion in bars, on commuter trains, and at dinner tables.” For their part the Bush administration and Justice Department lawyers have advanced initiatives to legalize interrogation procedures now prohibited under US and international law. These were exemplified in former Justice Department lawyer John Yoo’s “torture memo” of 2002 authorizing detainee abuse.

A number of the writers and producers of *24* have been feted in Washington. Since the November 2001 Hollywood meeting at which Bush’s adviser Karl Rove called on Hollywood to sign on to the “war on terror,” administration interest in a Goebbels-style propaganda machine to defend their geopolitical ambitions has not lessened.

Rove showed up at a private luncheon for *24* staff last June in the Wardrobe Room of the White House. Series co-creator Joel Surnow, who describes himself as “a right-wing nut job,” was there as well as White House press secretary Tony Snow and Vice President Cheney’s daughter, Mary Cheney, and wife Lynn (reportedly a fan of the program).

That same day Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff participated in a discussion on *24* organized by the Heritage Foundation. The right-wing Washington think tank’s participants heard Chertoff praise the show’s depiction of the war on terrorism. Mayer reports that Chertoff is a devoted viewer of *24* and that he told the assembled audience his view of the show. “Frankly, it reflects real life,” he said.

That the US military has had to make an effort to rein in the right-wing fanatics at Fox television is some gauge of the latter’s filthy efforts.



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