

The Ever-Ticking Bomb: Examining 24's Promotion of Torture against the Background of 9/11

Magnus Nissel
Gießen, Germany

Abstract: Drawing on the theory of collective trauma and the increased display of torture on TV since 2001, this paper investigates how the repercussions of 9/11 serve as a basis for the popularity of the TV series *24* and how its success impacts the cultural and political landscape of the US. This article argues that *24* justifies and promotes the use of torture as a method of interrogation and cites evidence of references to the series in political and juridical discourse. It shows how national trauma may increase the appeal of extreme violence against suspected terrorists and how *24*'s conflation of fact and fiction falls on fertile ground in a post-9/11 culture of fear. Examples from *24* are used to give insight into the way the audience is confronted with so-called ticking bomb scenarios in order to increase acceptance for the criminal and unethical behavior of *24*'s protagonist Jack Bauer. Furthermore, I will cite government reports and observations from military instructors as examples of the influence Jack Bauer's use of torture has had on soldiers and interrogators in Iraq and Afghanistan. In order to complement the existing evidence of a political bias towards the legitimization of torture in *24*, my article inspects statements from the creators and writers of *24* and scrutinizes their choice to respond to criticism within a subplot of the seventh season.

We will be all right. Jack Bauer will be here soon" ("Day 7: 2:00 PM - 3:00 PM" 0:11:13). In the television action series *24*, the ruthless counterterrorist Jack Bauer is the nation's only hope when civilization is faced with attacks from in- and outside the USA. Accordingly, this paper examines the role of *24* as a vehicle for pro-torture politics in a country that has been changed by the traumatic qualities of the 9/11 attacks, whose media coverage has, in turn, been likened to catastrophe movies by Slavoj Žižek and others. The following argues that

national trauma and a rekindled fear of loss of control have been the perfect environment for a show that blurs the borders between reality and fiction. *24* mimics the aesthetics of real-time news broadcasting and combines them with a politically charged narrative to advocate unethical and illegal measures as the only solution to time-critical scenarios of extraordinary proportions. I will provide examples of the use of torture in *24* to illustrate the series' striking deviation from reality in the portrayal of torture by contrasting them with facts from real-life interrogation experts. Further, this article will include references to *24* by pro-torture activists to underline the intentionality of the show's bias. Finally, in a brief analysis of the seventh season, I will highlight how its producers attempted to discredit their critics within the framework of the show itself.

24's constant focus on time serves to heighten “the tension and anxiety of the race-against-time” (Furby 63) which the main characters face in each episode and season. Created by Joel Surnow and Robert Cochran, *24* was first broadcast in November 2001 and has been running for eight seasons at the time of writing. Each season of *24* describes a single day in the life of Jack Bauer, an agent of the fictional Counter Terrorist Unit (CTU). The show's title is in reference to the fact that each of the twenty-four episodes of a season again deals with a single hour of said day, giving the impression of everything occurring in real time (Chamberlain and Ruston 19). Episodes actually run for forty-two minutes on average, with commercial breaks filling the rest of the one-hour time slot. Incidentally, a digital clock is shown before and after each commercial break, implying that the plot has continued unseen during the advertisements. The same timer appears during the ending of each episode, counting down the remaining seconds to the next full hour and thereby linking the episodes. This effect is achieved both via the clock and through lines in the script in which characters comment on something happening—or having to happen—within the next hour or at a certain time of the day.

Since its premiere, the series's ratings have been a success. After a first season with an average of 8.6 million viewers per episode, the series's popularity has risen by several million during later seasons (Chamberlain and Ruston 13), reaching a peak of 13.78 million during the fifth season (American Broadcasting Company). This ongoing popularity shows the size of the possible audience that the rhetorics of *24* have, but can, of course, not be equated with the same level of support for its underlying political themes. As a cultural phenomenon that is prominently featured on weblogs and web sites, *24* maintains a balance between being mainstream and having a cult following (Peacock, “Introduction” 5), making it a particularly interesting object of analysis. Further indicators of *24*'s mainstream appeal are the existence of a spin-off video game and television movie as well as the large amount of *24*-related

The Ever-Ticking Bomb: Examining 24's Promotion of Torture against the Background of 9/11

merchandise, ranging from a self-help book titled *24 and Philosophy: The World According to Jack* to energy drinks branded with the series's logo.

THEORIES ON THE POPULARITY OF 24: COLLECTIVE TRAUMA AND THE BLURRING OF LINES

While the series's twenty-four-hour structure and its fast-paced, high-tech aesthetics can certainly be seen as a reason for 24's appeal, there seems to be another, more important variable to its success: The first season of 24 debuted shortly after the 9/11 attacks. In his essay "9/11 as a Collective Trauma," psychoanalyst Hans-Jürgen Wirth points out that the events of the September 11 attacks bear a close resemblance to popular scenarios in Hollywood movies that have "entertained, fascinated, and horrified" millions of viewers (14). Žižek comes to a similar conclusion, noting that the camera setups used for news coverage of the actual attacks were "reminiscent of spectacular shots in catastrophe movies" (11). In turn, 24 plays with "its status as a television programme" (Peacock, "24: Status" 26), using split screens and an on-screen digital clock known from live sports broadcasts or news programs (Chamberlain and Ruston 17). The first season of 24 was written and produced before 9/11, but part of its success can be attributed to the fact that it plays on fears of the audience and satisfies an emergent desire for vindictive action. In his essay, Wirth argues that the attacks on the World Trade Center have left America in a state of collective trauma¹ and emphasizes that the lack of success in dealing with trauma can lead to a mental fixation on the events and can thereby nurture feelings of paranoia and aggression (37-38).

In a similar vein, Arthur G. Neal argues in *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Extraordinary Events In The American Experience* that a preexisting "culture of fear" (192) has been amplified and extended by the terrorist attacks and that security measures by the government and at airports have served as reminders of this perceived level of threat (192-93). He further states that a prolonged "sense of vulnerability leads to a preoccupation with defensive measures" (193). However, while personal trauma often correlates with feelings of isolation and stigmatization, collective trauma is a shared experience (4). This means that personal emotional distress caused by large-scale events such as 9/11 can be affirmed through contact with others. The resulting network of shared thoughts and personal feelings is described as the "collective

1 Trauma, according to Wirth, is "an experience of such intensity that it overwhelms the mind's capability for dealing with it" (37).

consciousness” of a nation or culture (4). When strong emotions such as fear and anger become underlying parts of cultural and social life, trauma can have a lasting effect on dominant political and social attitudes (4-6).

In the case of 9/11, the trauma was experienced as a mediated event, since many witnessed the actual attacks only through television or the Internet. Unlike other traumatizing events in the past, modern technology facilitated a “rapid relay of information” (Neal 180), making 9/11 a visual and vivid experience that was emotionally intensified by the media’s focus on heroic and patriotic acts in the context of 9/11 (179-80). Considering the heightened fear of terrorism after 9/11 as well as the similarities in presentation and content between catastrophe fiction and reality observed by Žižek and Wirth, possible traumatization makes the over-the-top plots of *24* both more believable and more appealing.

The intentionality of the connection between *24* and 9/11 is evidenced by creator Joel Surnow’s open admission to exploiting the “paranoia that we’re going to be attacked” (qtd. in Mayer) in later seasons. Additionally, *24*’s executive producer Howard Gordon suggests that, to some degree, *24* may be “an expression of our anger and our helplessness” (qtd. in Bauder). Since the traumatized civilian has feelings of anger but is unable to take direct revenge for 9/11, Jack Bauer may serve as a proxy. The portrayal of torture and graphic violence towards terrorists in *24* may possibly scratch “that secret sadistic itch we consciously cannot dare to admit” (Howard 139).

All seasons of *24* are built around complex high-risk scenarios with strong time constraints. While countdowns and time-critical operations are common in the genre of thrillers as a way of generating suspense and keeping the audience hooked, *24* takes this concept to a new level. As the media watchdog group Parents Television Council points out, every season has an average of twelve such situations (qtd. in Lithwick). Similar to a live news report, the show is constructed around the concept of “assumed liveness” (Peacock, “24: Status” 27) and enforces a feeling of urgency (26). This simulated immediacy and the background of a real-world disaster compliment each other and serve to blur the lines between reality and fiction. The “layering of talking heads, graphics and backdrops” (Chamberlain and Ruston 16) presents the fictional exploits of Jack Bauer much in the same way that news outlets have broadcast the traumatizing images of 9/11. Furthermore, the overwhelming feelings of fear and loss of control experienced during personal and collective trauma become valid in the scenarios of *24*. In these, attacks are indeed followed up by further threats and government specialists are in charge of time-critical objectives, such as preventing a nuclear bomb from exploding in downtown Los Angeles (Howard 136) while the public remains unaware of the complete picture.

**LEGITIMIZING TORTURE: THE PORTRAYAL OF TORTURE IN *24* AND ITS IMPACT
ON POLITICS AND CULTURE**

In *24*, the fate of the world always rests on the shoulder of a single person: Jack Bauer. In order to overcome situations of impending doom, he acts in ways that are frequently unlawful, unethical, or both, but somehow he almost never fails to achieve the necessary results (Sutherland and Swan 119). In order to justify most of these actions—and in an effort to help distinguish protagonists from antagonists—a device, the so-called ticking bomb scenario, is employed.

The Association for the Prevention of Torture (APT), a nongovernmental organization based in Geneva, Switzerland, describes the ticking bomb scenario as “a hypothetical ‘thought experiment’ that is used to question the absolute prohibition of torture” (1). It is based on the assumptions that a planned attack will happen soon, will cause a high number of casualties, and can be reliably prevented by using torture techniques on suspects. Secondary assumptions brought up by the APT include that this situation is truly exceptional and that all other ways of preventing said attack will fail due to time constraints, while torture will yield the required information in time (4-10).

This scenario is, of course, highly hypothetical since its assumptions are impossible to verify in real life. Both veteran US military interrogators and agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) have stated that torture as a means of interrogation is likely to result in unreliable information (Miller). It could take several weeks for suspects to “break,” and, additionally, there is a high risk that they die or go into shock before any information can be gained (Miller). Often, there is no way to be sure that suspects actually have essential information, nor is there a way to prove that ethical means of preventing the attack are not feasible (Association for the Prevention of Torture 9-11). In the fictional world of *24*, in contrast, the ticking bomb scenario is genuine and the usually successful torture procedures are a matter of a few minutes. Unsurprisingly, the people behind the show are well aware of this difference. Creator Robert Cochran acknowledges that “[m]ost terrorism experts will tell you that the ‘ticking time bomb’ situation never occurs in real life, or very rarely. But on our show it happens every week” (qtd. in Mayer).

In addition to ticking bomb scenarios, *24* exploits the concept of ‘states of exception’ to rationalize the actions undertaken by Jack Bauer and his allies. Philosopher Giorgio Agamben describes a state of exception as a “suspension of the juridical order” (qtd. in Monahan 112) that, in turn, is not regulated by any laws. During states of exception, a government can attempt to justify almost any action, including the breach of civil rights, by portraying it as the only solution to an

overwhelming menace (Monahan 112). Fittingly, threats are absolute and numerous in the fictional world of *24*. Assaults on the President and nuclear or biochemical attacks on US cities or military facilities follow each other in quick succession, with smaller or more personal disasters thrown in to create more complex plots (111). As these situations escalate, the perceived necessity for “radical intervention and individual sacrifice” (112) quickly becomes a moral imperative for Jack Bauer.

Throughout the series, Bauer fulfills this ideal of self-sacrifice for a utilitarian notion of a greater good, whose eventual future benefits often remain vague (Sutherland and Swan 127). For instance, he becomes voluntarily addicted to heroin in order to infiltrate a drug cartel in season three, watches his love interest’s husband die while saving an informant in season four, and chooses rescuing the President over his family, which ultimately results in his wife getting killed in season one (Monahan 113; cf. Sutherland and Swan 127-28). When family members or love interests appear in the plot, they quickly become the source of tension and complications, enforcing the notion that the private sphere and personal well-being are prone to becoming casualties in the “twenty-four-hour danger” (Monahan 114) scenarios of *24*. In the same way that many of these sacrifices can only be marketed to the audience as necessary and believable actions under the overwhelming threat of terrorism, “the suspension of the law [...] and the reduction of people to mere bodies that can be manipulated by the state” (110) are closely tied to the idea of states of exception. While the portrayed success of extreme measures is a striking deviation from reality, the rhetoric of states of exception and ticking bombs has strong ties to the political aftermath of 9/11.

During the George W. Bush administration, several laws regarding civil liberties were changed or simply transgressed due to a perceived state of exception after the 9/11 attacks (Caldwell and Chambers 105). For example, Caldwell and Chambers hint at a secret order signed in 2002 by then-President Bush (105-06) authorizing the National Security Agency (NSA) to “[monitor] the e-mail, telephone calls and other communications” of US citizens and foreign nationals (Eggen). This order was given despite the fact that domestic spying—outside narrow circumstances—has been prohibited by law (Eggen). Caldwell and Chambers go on to note that there has been “a variety of justifications for exceptional measures” after 9/11, among them some practices that only recently became public (105). Several Republicans advocate this behavior by claiming that a supposedly evident state of war after the attacks serves to legitimize the empowerment of the President beyond the scope of law (106). As this kind of rhetoric has been part of the Bush administration’s policy ever since 9/11, it seems unreasonable to talk about a seven-year-long so-called national crisis as a state of exception, since such a situation can, by its very definition, only be temporary.

The Ever-Ticking Bomb: Examining 24's Promotion of Torture against the Background of 9/11

While that is true in reality, the panic-filled days in the story line of *24* take this rhetoric to its extreme. By continuously depicting states of exception and ticking bomb scenarios, *24* evokes the illusion of an absolute battle of good against evil² in which the protagonists appear to be forced to transgress laws and moral conventions in order to prevent something even worse from happening (103-04).

One of the key methods used in *24* to achieve security is torture. Over the course of the first six seasons, more than eighty-nine scenes of torture were shown. With the exception of season seven, the general level of violence has gradually risen with each season (Danzig). In season four, the majority of episodes focus on torture in one way or another (Howard 137). The series's 'hero' alone has killed more than 185 people within six days, i.e. seasons one to six (Kruttschnitt), including several civilians and colleagues.³ Since 9/11, the general display of torture on prime-time television has risen dramatically (Miller). According to the Parents Television Council, there were only 102 scenes of torture from 1996 to 2001, but that number rose to 624 between 2002 and 2005, with *24* showing more torture than any other television program (qtd. in Miller). This includes Jack Bauer torturing not only suspected terrorists but also innocent citizens (Howard 138). Additionally, these unethical and illegal activities are, at times, executed under official command. In one scene of season two, the torture of an NSA official is explicitly authorized by the President, although this radical decision is merely based on the suspicion that he might have information about a bomb (Caldwell and Chambers 104). In a similar scene during the third season, the President asks Jack Bauer to kill his supervisor at CTU, which he does without hesitating (Monahan 112).

In the fan community of *24*, these extreme acts are debated. As web sites such as the *Jack Bauer Torture Report* show, there are fans that count, analyze, and discuss these torture scenes vividly. Apart from blog entries about episodes, the aforementioned site prominently displays a counter on its main page that shows consistently updated statistics of the number of people Jack Bauer has killed and tortured so far.⁴ A web site called *Jack Bauer Kill Count* goes even further.⁵ On this page, fans of the series have compiled a very detailed list of every person Jack Bauer has killed during *24*, including estimates in case an explosion took out multiple people. This rather morbid site lists

-
- 2 An image President Bush used himself in 2001 when speaking of a "crusade" against terrorism (Philps).
 - 3 *Wiki 24* lists 227 on-screen kills by Jack Bauer between "Day 1" and "Day 7: 6:00 PM - 7:00 PM" ("On-Screen").
 - 4 According to the *Jack Bauer Torture Report*, season seven had Jack Bauer kill twenty-six people and torture four.
 - 5 This site has recently been removed, but an outdated version can still be found via the *Internet Archive* (VanLandschoot and Fuller).

the episode in which a murder takes place, the “[p]erson [p]erishing,” and a description of the method or weapon used. Almost every entry is accompanied by a screenshot and a video clip taken directly from the corresponding scene in the episode. While these web sites certainly are extreme examples of devotion to the protagonist of *24*, they are indicative of the fandom *24* has amassed.⁶

Jack Bauer’s moral transgressions, which one would expect to “elicit a moral disquiet from the observing audience” (Sutherland and Swan 119), appear to be balanced by the fact that the viewer of the show experiences again and again that these questionable choices ultimately lead to the right results (119). The viewers usually know that a suspect “is guilty and harbors secrets” (Mayer) and they may therefore wish to see torture work successfully. After incidents such as 9/11 and the 2005 London bombings, *24* does not only continue to evoke similar situations, but also shows a convenient and reliable solution (Howard 143), which might appeal to what *24*’s executive producer Howard Gordon has called “the public’s ‘fear-based wish fulfillment’” (qtd. in Howard 143). Showing torture as a very successful interrogation strategy can be seen as carrying a strong political agenda on its own. If only one incident of torture were to be responsible for the prevention of a potentially devastating terrorist attack in real life, advocates of “extreme interrogation measures” would argue that this was worth the ineffective ones (142).

This kind of affirmation in a show as popular as *24* facilitates the public discourse on the legitimacy of torture by proxy of casual conversations about *24*. In a similar vein, Monahan notes that the legitimization of transgressions of law through government agencies might be “increasingly normalised by entertainment programmes such as *24*” (110). Unsurprisingly, this advocacy for torture is a focal point of the criticism the show has received. On the other hand, it may come as a surprise that a small group of experts from the US military are some of the most vocal critics. Surnow, who has sardonically called himself a “right-wing nut job,” has mentioned that his show is very popular with the US military and members of the former Bush administration (qtd. in Mayer). As the criticism coming from the military proves, this popularity carries a negative influence. According to former US Army specialist Tony Lagouranis, many interrogators are young, relatively untrained, and frequently under pressure to extract information as quickly as possible (qtd. in Bauder). While questioning prisoners in Abu Ghraib and other facilities in Iraq, Lagouranis witnessed *24*-esque mock executions as well as fellow interrogators copying strategies they had just watched on DVD (qtd. in Bauder). The fact that there is “no official doctrine

6 www.24-knives.com is another site of this type: It compiles all the brands and types of knives that have appeared on the show (Müller).

The Ever-Ticking Bomb: Examining 24's Promotion of Torture against the Background of 9/11

about what to do” (Lagouranis qtd. in Human Rights First) has led to people copying ideas from television and movies. Lagouranis, however, notes that he has never seen “pain produce intelligence” (qtd. in Mayer) while he worked in Iraq. Another former member of the armed forces, Colonel Stuart Herrington, notes that if Jack Bauer had worked for him, Bauer would have faced a military court for his actions, and adds that he is “distressed by the fact that the good guys are depicted as successfully employing [...] illegal, immoral and stupid tactics” (qtd. in Bauder). Gary Solis, a retired law professor who has taught the law of war to US Army commanders for years, also emphasizes that Jack Bauer would be a criminal in real life under both US and international laws, but that many of his students sympathize with Jack Bauer. Solis says that he “tried to impress on them that this technique would open the wrong doors, but it was like trying to stomp out an anthill” (qtd. in Mayer).

Gordon responded to criticism by saying that *24* is “not a documentary or a manual on interrogation [...] not a primer on the war on terror. [It is] a television show” (qtd. in Bauder). However, Solis and Lagouranis are not the only experts who witness the direct impact of the show on soldiers, intelligence agents, and the viewing public. General Patrick Finnegan, dean of the United States Military Academy at West Point, feels that the show “promote[s] unethical and illegal behavior and [...] adversely affect[s] the training and performance of real American soldiers.” When it comes to international viewers, Finnegan fears that *24* may reinforce negative stereotypes about the US and that it “hurts the country’s image” (qtd. in Mayer). A government report released in 2004 also confirms the imitation of techniques shown in popular culture by the US military in Iraq (Human Rights First). According to Jane Mayer, the 2006 Intelligence Science Board (ISB) alludes to several scenarios shown on *24* and their implications for intelligence professionals. The ISB’s consensus is that the public opinion as to how and how fast threats need to be averted is directly influenced by television. The public expects agents to behave similar to Jack Bauer since they “have no idea how such a person is supposed to act ‘in real life’” (qtd. in Mayer). The people behind *24* are well aware of this. Despite the fact that Gordon claims that they had not “really thought a lot about torture as anything more than a dramatic device” (qtd. in Miller), comments from Surnow feed the suspicion of an intentional political agenda behind *24*. While Gordon stresses the fictionality of *24*, Surnow is of the opinion that “America wants the war on terror fought by Jack Bauer” (qtd. in Mayer).

Apparently, some politicians and government lawyers share this sentiment: John Yoo, a former official of the Department of Justice who played an important role in the Bush administration’s authorization of “abusive treatment of detainees” (Mayer), published the book *War by Other Means: An Insider’s Account of the War on Terror*. He cites Bauer in making an argument for the justification of torture in extreme cases, i.e.

ticking bomb scenarios (Lithwick), which shows that the blurring of boundaries between reality and *24* is, at times, initiated from outside the series. Specifically, Yoo's willingness to make direct use of the show's pro-torture logic highlights the political dimension—and thus real-world influence—of *24* even more. A similar instance of *24* serving as the background for real-life legal rhetoric can be found in the question asked by Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia during a speech in Canada: "Jack Bauer saved Los Angeles . . . He saved hundreds of thousands of lives [...] [a]re you going to convict Jack Bauer?" (qtd. in Lithwick). Another moment in which "conservatives speak of '24' as if it were real" (Mayer) was broadcast on Fox News when talk-radio host Laura Ingraham interpreted *24*'s popularity as being "as close to a national referendum that it's O.K. to use tough tactics against high-level Al Qaeda operatives as we're going to get" (qtd. in Mayer). These quotations can be seen as examples of how collective trauma—i.e. changed attitudes after the shock of 9/11—has made arguments based on *24* politically viable.

While the fictional Jack Bauer openly admits to breaking the law (Lithwick), the aforementioned utterances were made in the context of attempts to partially legalize torture, a cause the creators of *24*—Surnow and Cochran—both believe in. Cochran stated that he supports torture in what he calls "'narrow circumstances' and believes that it [could] be justified under the [US] Constitution" (qtd. in Mayer). Surnow has close ties to the "conservative think tank" Heritage Foundation and several members of the former Bush administration, including Karl Rove and the Cheney clan (Mayer). Whereas executive producer Gordon is a self-described "moderate Democrat" and lead actor Kiefer Sutherland stated that he is worried about the "unintended consequences of the show" (qtd. in Mayer), Surnow appears to be the driving force behind *24*'s conservative undertones, especially considering his statements about *24* and Bauer's patriotism. David Nevins, the former Fox Television network official responsible for acquiring the pilot of *24*, further reinforces this notion by saying that "[Surnow's] politics suffuse the whole show" (qtd. in Mayer). He also adds that "[t]here's definitely a political attitude of the show, which is that extreme measures are sometimes necessary for the greater good" (qtd. in Mayer). Surnow was also noticeably absent during a meeting in 2006 organized by David Danzig (Mayer), project director of the anti-torture campaign Primetime Torture, initiated by the advocacy group Human Rights First (Finn). In this meeting, the aforementioned General Finnegan and three other professional interrogators discussed their concerns regarding the impact of *24*'s portrayal of torture with some of the producers and writers of the show (Finn). The experts also expressed the desire to see a more realistic display of interrogation techniques in general and were willing to demonstrate several legal and nonviolent techniques to the staff of *24* (Mayer). During the meeting, at least one writer admitted

The Ever-Ticking Bomb: Examining *24*'s Promotion of Torture against the Background of 9/11

to having previously believed torture to be a very effective method of extracting information (Finn).

In an interesting move that once again mixes fact and fiction, the writers of *24* chose to respond to some of the criticism within the framework of the show itself. A controversy about Jack Bauer's use of torture serves as a subplot in season seven. While this fits into the recurring theme of Jack Bauer having to deal with both inner turmoil and criticism from the outside, it can also be seen as *24*'s writers "taking on their critics" (Danzig 00:29:36). In any case, this constitutes another kind of blurring between reality and fiction. Yoo's and Scalia's treatment of Jack Bauer as if he were real and *24*'s borrowing from real-life events were discussed earlier, as was *24*'s profiting from trauma-induced, culturally rooted anxiety and fear after 9/11. In the plot of season seven, the writers essentially attempt to use *24*'s unrealistic premise as a response to criticism based on facts and theories from reality. The following summary of the torture subplot shows how the writers use it as an opportunity to mock one of their most vocal critics and, ultimately, to affirm *24*'s pro-torture bias.

In the first episode of season seven, Jack Bauer is questioned in a Senate hearing regarding human rights violations committed by the now-disbanded CTU. During the hearing, he admits the use of torture "[a]ccording to the definition set forth by the Geneva Convention" (qtd. in Finn) only to stress the necessity of his actions in order to protect his country. He then admits that he does not regret the choices he has made. Before any meaningful response from the Senate subcommittee can be uttered, the scene is interrupted by an FBI agent allowing Bauer to leave this hearing because the FBI needs his help ("Day 7: 8:00 AM - 9:00 AM"). This early scene of the seventh season reinforces the alleged necessity of torture and reminds the audience that Jack Bauer's help is essential, while ethical and legal consequences are only of lesser importance. Although *24* acknowledges the existence of critics, their position is immediately weakened by the intervention. Not only is this approach antithetical to a genuine critical reflection on torture, the scene is also the lead-in to a prank on one of *24*'s more prolific critics. The name of the man leading the charges, Senator Blaine Mayer, is a reference to *New Yorker* journalist Jane Mayer (Finn). Her article "Whatever It Takes: The Politics of the Man Behind '24'" has been one of the most discussed publications on *24*'s political agenda in general and Surnow's influence in particular. Gordon has confirmed that this name was chosen for the writers' "own amusement" (Finn). The fact that Senator Mayer is killed by terrorists later in the season while Jack Bauer tries to protect him ("Day 7: 9:00 PM - 10:00 PM")⁷ seems to confirm Danzig's

⁷ Jack Bauer also initially gets framed for the murder ("Day 7: 9:00 PM - 10:00 PM").

fear about *24* trying to take away credibility from their critics by using analogies in the story.

Despite criticism regarding the display of torture prior to season seven, Jack Bauer continues to use torture as an effective interrogation tool in subsequent story lines. In season seven's eleventh episode, the Secretary of Defense asks Senator Mayer to drop the charges against Bauer. A few scenes later, the President herself talks to the Senator while, in the next room, Jack Bauer is secretly torturing Senator Mayer's Chief of Staff Ryan Burnett, who eventually turns out to be working for the terrorists. Bauer is caught and arrested for this incident shortly before he can obtain a confession, but is redeemed during later episodes. In the eleventh episode, the President tells Jack Bauer to rely on his own judgment about what is right ("Day 7: 6:00 PM - 7:00 PM"), echoing situations from previous seasons in which Bauer acted outside the law and received either spoken or unspoken support from the President for breaking the law (Caldwell and Chambers 104; Monahan 112). Unsurprisingly, the writers of *24* did not seize the opportunity to genuinely reflect on the criticism, nor did they have Jack Bauer give up torture and other criminal activities. Essential arguments against torture, such as the attested unreliability of extreme interrogation techniques, are omitted completely. Instead, the utilitarian creed of ends justifying the means is once again exemplified: The last episode of season seven has Jack Bauer point out that he does not regret his actions, but would prefer them not to be needed ("Day 7: 7:00 AM - 8:00 AM"). His opinion thus constitutes a missed opportunity for a change of direction and can be seen as further proof for the intentionality of *24* acting as a vehicle for the legitimization of torture.⁸

CONCLUSION

It is well established that *24* is a commercial success and reaches a large audience. The stories of *24* depict extreme situations that are set in a climate of high levels of fear and danger not unlike 9/11 and its repercussions on society. Story lines following the first season were purposefully written with this context in mind. The appeal of a ruthless and vindictive character like Jack Bauer is amplified by feelings of fear and

8 While it is impossible to tell how fans of Jack Bauer would have reacted to the character's renouncement of torture, neither the display nor the justification of torture is an inherent requirement for dramatic action and suspense. Furthermore, seeing as the character has frequently suffered physically and emotionally for his questionable choices (Monahan 113), a more ethical *modus operandi* could be believably written as an attainable form of character development for Jack Bauer.

The Ever-Ticking Bomb: Examining 24's Promotion of Torture against the Background of 9/11

revenge towards real-world terrorists. These emotions can be seen to be rooted in a collective trauma caused by the sudden shock of attacks on America.

The fact that *24* continues to earn high ratings shows the scope of its area of influence. Additionally, the quality of this influence can be traced back to numerous references to *24* in Republican political discourse on torture and terrorism. By portraying torture as successful and equating a world that does need torture with an unattainable utopia, *24* promotes the use of extreme methods of interrogation. This has led to Jack Bauer's methods being emulated in reality. Indeed, reports from former government officials and military instructors cite evidence of the series's negative impact on soldiers and interrogators.

Continuing support for Jack Bauer within *24*'s growing fan base serves to establish a presence of rhetorical devices, such as ticking bomb scenarios and states of exception, among the general population and outside the realm of political discussion. These rhetorical devices help normalize pro-torture logic and overstate the likelihood of similar scenarios in the real world. Despite statements that seemed to suggest that season seven would reflect critically on the show's effect, the writers used this opportunity merely as a way to make fun of one of *24*'s most vocal critics and to reinforce the trope of ticking bomb scenarios that presumably necessitate the breaking of the law.

Considering the observations compiled in this paper, it seems important to continue to monitor the cultural and political impact of *24*, as it can provide clues about the political climate of the USA and the level of acceptance of extreme and punitive practices in the prevention of terrorism.

WORKS CITED

- American Broadcasting Company. "Season Program Rankings (Part One, 1-100): I. T. R. S. Ranking Report." *ABC Medianet*. ABC. 31 May 2006. Web. 21 Apr. 2009. <http://abcmedianet.com/web/dnr/dispDNR.aspx?id=053106_05>.
- Association for the Prevention of Torture. *Defusing the Ticking Bomb Scenario: Why We Must Say No to Torture, Always*. Geneva: Association for the Prevention of Torture, 2007. *APT*. Web. 31 Oct. 2009.
- Bauder, David. "Group: TV Torture Influencing Real Life." *washingtonpost.com*. Washington Post, 11 Feb. 2007. Web. 31 Oct. 2009. <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/11/AR2007021100440.html>>.

Magnus Nissel

- Caldwell, Anne, and Samuel A. Chambers. "24 After 9/11: The American State of Exception." Peacock, *Reading* 97-108.
- Chamberlain, Daniel, and Scott Ruston. "24 and Twenty-First Century Quality Television." Peacock, *Reading* 13-24.
- Danzig, David. "Authors@Google: David Danzig, Primetime Torture." *YouTube*. Google, 29 Feb. 2008. Web. 31 Oct. 2009.
- "Day 7: 2:00 PM - 3:00 PM." *24*. Fox. 02 Feb. 2009. Television.
- "Day 7: 6:00 PM - 7:00 PM." *24*. Fox. 02 Mar. 2009. Television.
- "Day 7: 7:00 AM - 8:00 AM." *24*. Fox. 18 May 2009. Television.
- "Day 7: 8:00 AM - 9:00 AM." *24*. Fox. 11 Jan. 2009. Television.
- "Day 7: 9:00 PM - 10:00 PM." *24*. Fox. 16 Mar. 2009. Television.
- Eggen, Dan. "Bush Authorizes Domestic Spying: Post 9/11 Order Bypassed Special Court." *washingtonpost.com*. Washington Post, 16 Dec. 2005. Web. 31 Oct. 2009.
- Finn, Peter. "Day of Reckoning: As '24' Returns to Face Another Dawn, Jack Bauer Is Just as Tortured as Anyone." *washingtonpost.com*. Washington Post, 10 Jan. 2009. Web. 31 Oct. 2009.
- Furby, Jacqueline. "Interesting Times: The Demands 24's Real-Time Format Makes on its Audience." Peacock, *Reading* 59-70.
- Howard, Douglas L. "'You're going to tell me everything you know': Torture and Morality in Fox's 24." Peacock, *Reading* 133-45.
- Human Rights First. "Soldiers Have Imitated What They See on TV." *Human Rights First*. Human Rights First, n.d. Web. 31 Oct. 2009.
- Jack Bauer Torture Report*. N.p., n.d. Web. 31 Oct. 2009.
- Kruttschnitt, Christine. "Eigentlich muss Jack Bauer sterben." *stern.de*. Gruner, 11 Jan. 2009. Web. 31 Oct. 2009.
- Lithwick, Dahlia. "The Fiction Behind Torture Policy: The Lawyers Designing Interrogation Techniques Cited Jack Bauer More Frequently than the Constitution." *Newsweek*. Newsweek, 26 July 2008. Web. 22 Feb. 2010.
- Mayer, Jane. "Whatever It Takes: The Politics of the Man Behind '24.'" *The New Yorker*. Condé, 19 Feb. 2007. Web. 31 Oct. 2009.
- Miller, Martin. "'24' Gets a Lesson in Torture from the Experts." *Los Angeles Times*. Tribune, 13 Feb. 2007. Web. 31 Oct. 2009.
- Monahan, Torin. "Just-In-Time Security: Permanent Exceptions and Neoliberal Orders." Peacock, *Reading* 109-17.
- Müller, Martin. *www.24-knives.com*. N.p., 2008. Web. 23 Jan. 2010.
- Neal, Arthur G. *National Trauma and Collective Memory: Extraordinary Events in the American Experience*. New York: Sharpe, 2005. Print.

**The Ever-Ticking Bomb: Examining 24's Promotion of Torture against the
Background of 9/11**

- “On-Screen Kills by Jack Bauer.” *Wiki 24*. Wikia, 3 Sep. 2009. Web. 31 Oct. 2009.
- Peacock, Steven. “Introduction: It’s about Time.” Peacock, *Reading* 1-9.
- , ed. *Reading 24: TV Against the Clock*. London: Tauris, 2007. Print.
- . “24: Status and Style.” Peacock, *Reading* 25-34.
- Philps, Alan. “Ill-Chosen Word Fuels Claims of Intent to Wage War on Islam.” *Telegraph.co.uk*. Telegraph, 18 Sep. 2001. Web. 23 Jan. 2010.
- Sutherland, Sharon, and Sarah Swan. “‘Tell Me Where the Bomb Is or I Will Kill Your Son’: Situative Morality on 24.” Peacock, *Reading* 119-32.
- VanLandschoot, Wesley, and Jeffrey Fuller. *Jack Bauer [24] Kill Count*. N.p., 25 Feb. 2008. *Internet Archive*. Web. 23 Jan. 2010. <http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://www.bauercount.com>.
- Wirth, Hans-Jürgen. “9/11 as a Collective Trauma.” *9/11 as a Collective Trauma and Other Essays on Psychoanalysis and Society*. Ed. Hans-Jürgen Wirth. Gießen: Psychosozial, 2004. 13-54. Print.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *Welcome to the Desert of the Real! Five Essays on September 11 and Related Dates*. London: Verso, 2002. Print.