

Jack Bauer: The Post-9/11 American Hero by Whitten Maher

As a student hoping to double major in Political Science and Media Arts & Design, I find nothing more interesting than when politics and popular culture intersect. Moreover, I delight in finding entertainment that tackles important political questions head on and proves relevant to society. The character of Jack Bauer, played by Kiefer Sutherland on FOX Network's primetime hit *24*, certainly fits the bill. Jack Bauer has become, at the very least, a cultural phenomenon, spawning a trend of jokes based on his seemingly outrageous capacity to survive and to protect American citizens whatever the cost. With such fans as senior officials in the Bush Administration, former President Bill Clinton, and even horror novelist Stephen King, *24* has a wide fan base and broad appeal. But there is a deeper significance to the lure of Bauer, a compelling reason as to why Jack has become ingrained in the nation's collective consciousness. So let's answer the question few ask: why exactly and to what extent is Jack Bauer the new American hero?

Since its premiere on November 6th, 2001, *24* has become one of the most popular primetime shows FOX has to offer—an anchor in the network's primetime programming. The show focuses on Jack Bauer, who works for the Los Angeles Counter Terrorism Unit (CTU). CTU, a fictional offshoot of the CIA, is dedicated to gathering intelligence and neutralizing terrorist threats within U.S. borders (isolated to Los Angeles for the purposes of the show). As the threats are usually of great magnitude, the show also features the American president. While the main focus is on field operations and the attempt to thwart attacks, *24* also devotes a considerable amount of time to office politics, both in the White House and CTU. While the President serves mainly as executive decision-maker, the political ramifications of his decisions, as well as his constitutional obligations, are also kept in mind.

An integral part of *24*'s identity and appeal is the show's format. The concept is bold: each episode comprises one hour of real time, and 24 episodes in a season (rather than the standard 22) move the story forward through a full day. The concept is executed with incredible precision, with each character keeping the same outfit and hairstyle throughout an entire season (cast members are required to have their hair trimmed every five days to maintain continuity). Each episode starts with a two-minute recap of previous events and then Bauer's voice explaining that "the following takes place between [hour 1] and [hour 2]." Before and after each commercial break, the show cuts to black with a yellow digital clock in the center, counting down the exact seconds of the *24* timeframe. This device makes the "action [seem] so pressing that even commercial breaks cannot interrupt it" (Zizek). The clock also appears at the end of each episode, usually cutting abruptly from a cliffhanger to heighten tension. Another effective device employed by *24* is split screen. A technique seemingly long forgotten or reserved for telephone conversations, split screen has been used unconventionally on *24* to great effect. Subtle comparisons or contrasts are drawn, emotional connections are outlined, and multiple storylines are connected. The use of split screen is a perfect choice for a show that features multiple plots and subplots all interwoven by a writing team that deftly dovetails them all into one coherent experience.

A groundbreaking show in its own right, *24* should also be examined within the context of primetime television's history, as its inception might have begun the biggest trend in entertainment this decade. Television in the 1980s saw the peak of primetime soap operas such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty*. The 1990s was dominated by mostly self-contained dramas

featuring cops, doctors, and lawyers: the so-called “holy trinity of television.” This trend was practical and economic, essentially ensuring the shows were viable for syndication on multiple networks. At the start of the 21st century, it seemed as though reality TV had offered the American public a fresh, authentic genre with unlimited possibilities. But that fad strayed far from its initial premise, and as heavily edited “reality” flooded network schedules, the true trend of the decade arose: the revitalization of serialized dramas. These shows are as smart a move as the self-contained dramas of the ’90s, but in a different way. They tend to produce more faithful and intense audiences. ABC has been at the forefront of this trend, with such dramas as *Lost*, *Desperate Housewives*, and *Grey’s Anatomy*. NBC responded with its own hugely popular show, *Heroes*. Indeed, there is even already a backlash against such shows as the networks race to catch up. They’ve been “so seduced by the success of *24* and *Lost* that they’ve overthought ideas for television” in an effort to produce their own hit serialized dramas with successful gimmicks (Humphrey). ABC’s *The Nine* and *Six Degrees*, NBC’s *Kidnapped*, and FOX’s own *Vanished* (starring a *24* alumnus) are all failed attempts at networks trying to contrive compelling serialized shows. The trend began in earnest with the premiere of *Lost* and *Desperate Housewives* in 2003. Jack Bauer, however, arrived on the scene in 2001, putting him at the cutting edge of this mass movement.

Kiefer Sutherland’s performance should, of course, be noted. Collaborating with the creative team, Sutherland has fashioned a brilliant, versatile character in Jack Bauer: an approachable yet dedicated man of action who serves his country with distinction. His performance has been described as “unsentimental and yet not heartless,” a sympathetic but serious character who “never comes within a hundred yards of a joke [and] never raises a Simon Templar eyebrow.” Somehow, though, “Sutherland is neither humourless nor unknowing in the role” (Billen). The man has immediate and obvious surface appeal. A man of action who will break protocol when necessary and do whatever it takes to protect American citizens, Jack Bauer is a true American hero. This offers intrinsic appeal to law-and-order concerned citizens. He is also hugely popular with younger audiences because of his “badass” image. There are even websites devoted to archiving “Jack Bauer Facts,” outlandish and humorous statements that “demonstrate” Jack Bauer’s physical prowess and dedication. One such fact states that “every time Jack Bauer yells ‘NOW!’ at the end of a sentence, a terrorist dies.” Jack’s popularity with such a wide audience could be summarily explained by the simple premise that America always needs a hero and that he has simply filled that vacuum.

However, there are deeper reasons for Jack’s popularity and why he has penetrated through the cultural zeitgeist to become such a prominent icon in the minds of Americans. He is both a political and visceral entity, a reflection of the current American mindset. Returning to the topic of earlier television, it’s important to note the political climates of the ’80s and ’90s. The “enemy within us” aspect of the Cold War brought on by McCarthyism had faded far away by the time Reagan took office, and Americans, while concerned, were not bombarded with outright conflict. Likewise, the Clinton presidency focused largely on domestic policy, without any of the major, global conflicts we face today. Viewers of the primetime soaps of the ’80s basked in the camp and vice of *Dynasty*, essentially reinforcing the infamous credo that “greed is good.” Viewers in the ’90s had the luxury of not having to deal with major and urgent threats to the homeland, of keeping issues at arm’s length—of tuning in to *Friends*, *Seinfeld*, and other such comedies to escape their lives or sometimes venturing into the territory of *NYPD Blue* and *Law & Order* to experience something like a gritty reality. Viewers today, however, have no such luxury. The old paradigm that contained our national confidence and comfort didn’t shift: it suffered a

thunderous, public collapse in a blue September sky, and the new paradigm is National Security. With the unprecedented surge in terrorism that the Bush administration has dealt with, Americans are force-fed stories about conflicts with rogue nations. Even more chilling, we now must deal with “the ability [and intent, in contrast to Cold War Russians and the Balkans of the ’90s] of *non-state actors* to wreak mass destruction” – with their sights aimed at America (Heisbourg, emphasis mine). Terrorism, the focus of *24* and the one constant in the life of the weary Jack Bauer, has never been more relevant than in the years following 9/11.

With America entrenched in a never-ending War on Terror, *24* could not be a more topical show. Though *24* deals mainly with terrorists’ plots and devotes many a dimly lit scene to their machinations, those who work to thwart terrorism are the heart of the show. A key to *24*’s popularity is its many levels: for some viewers, it’s whether America will stop its enemies, but for others, it’s how. As Jane Mayer writes in *The New Yorker* magazine, *24*’s appeal “lies less in its violence than in its giddily literal rendering of a classic thriller trope: the ‘ticking time bomb’ plot” (Mayer), a conceit that threats of imminent danger require a different approach to the rules. Ethical issues persistently haunt the politicians, officials, and agents of *24*. Presidents are routinely faced with the dilemma of sacrificing several lives in exchange for the safety of millions. CTU officials must address the issues of civil liberties and citizens’ rights while trying to apprehend and question suspects. More often than not, though, it is Jack who makes the final call, oftentimes disobeying orders and circumventing the law in order to save American lives. This dichotomy between the virtue of constitutional rights and the urgent need to protect innocent lives lies at the core of *24*. The show’s sixth season begins *in media res*, as Jack Bauer’s America had already suffered a series of devastating terrorist attacks. In response, the President was considering the instatement of internment camps to hold American citizens. The sixth season, more than any other, is very much involved with constitutional rights (which manifest for CTU as roadblocks) and the scope of the government’s authority with regards to the War on Terror. Operating within a greater jurisdiction than the cops, lawyers and doctors of traditional television, Jack, CTU, and the American government are entrusted with protecting millions of Americans. In doing so efficiently, however, they are faced with constant political questions and controversies. The mindset of *24* is not *how* to follow the rules, but *which* rules to follow and *when* to follow them.

That being said, no other current cultural icon has as much political baggage as Jack does. Critics of *24* have claimed that the show furthers the political agenda of conservatives, depicting torture and the violation of civil rights as necessary to protect Americans. There is some truth to these allegations, as *24* finds its home on FOX network, whose sister channel FOX NEWS is infamous for its supposed conservative bias. Media Matters for America, a progressive non-profit organization that acts as a media watchdog, has pointed out that several conservative pundits “continue to use FOX’s *24* to support hawkish policies” (Ironsides). On that note, the conservative Heritage Foundation organized a panel entitled “*24* and America’s Image in Fighting Terrorism: Fact, Fiction or Does It Matter,” hosted by none other than conservative talk radio icon Rush Limbaugh, an outspoken fan. Moreover, the show’s creator Joel Surnow is an avowed conservative who prides himself on *24*’s patriotic overtones. Patriotism, as defined in the world of Jack Bauer, is the willingness to step over the line in order to protect one’s country. Slavoj Žižek is a writer for *In These Times*, a publication of libertarian political theory. A philosopher and psychoanalyst, Žižek contends that *24* glorifies torture by depicting Jack and others who engage in such “heavy acts” as having a “tragic-ethic grandeur” (Žižek). Jack’s methods do evince a decidedly conservative mindset: he not only condones torture, but routinely administers it. In one episode, a well-connected terrorist alerts Amnesty Global (a fictional organization with obvious ties to

reality) that CTU is holding a suspected terrorist without due process. Jack proceeds to circumvent the Amnesty lawyer and interrogates the suspect as a private citizen. After torturing the information out of the suspect, Jack explains to the man that “this will help with the pain” before promptly knocking the man unconscious. Scenarios like these are what have endeared *24* to conservatives, who insist that we need Jack Bauers in the real world.

Though conservative pundits praise *24* for its pro-America message, respected left-wing blogger Taylor Marsh wrote a short essay proudly proclaiming that “Jack Bauer is a Democrat” (Marsh). Marsh’s comments are interesting because they show Jack’s appeal is based not solely on his methods or alleged politics but rather his goals. He is presented as a dedicated man of the people, in stark contrast to certain characters who prioritize their ambition over their duty. He shows immense respect for his country and is not afraid to break from his superiors to save lives. To his credit, he is probably the noblest man ever to adhere to Machiavellian principles. “Bauerism” has been described as a fight “for people, not politics;” the political struggles of *24* “lie not so much in between left and right as it is outside them, impatient with both A.C.L.U. niceties and Bushian moral absolutes” (Poniewozik). The fact that Jack Bauer is even at the center of such partisan debate and controversy proves his relevance.

As the figurehead for *24*, Jack Bauer is the key element in any controversy the show causes. The Council for American-Islamic Relations has mounted numerous criticisms against the show, claiming that the portrayal of Islamic terrorists could be responsible for a surge in anti-Islamic sentiment in America. This prompted FOX to issue a statement, claiming that *24*’s “villains have included shadowy Anglo businessmen, Baltic Europeans, Germans, Russians, Islamic fundamentalists, and even [American government officials].” The statement went on to explain that “the show has made a concerted effort to show ethnic, religious and political groups as multi-dimensional, and political issues are debated from multiple viewpoints” (Council, “No Ethnic Group”). Two years prior, FOX had reached out to the public with a public service announcement featuring Kiefer Sutherland reiterating that “the American Muslim community stands firmly beside their fellow Americans in denouncing and resisting all forms of terrorism” (Council, “Disclaimer”). Interestingly enough, *24* seems to adhere to a policy wherein alternate seasons feature terrorists of Arab descent: seasons 2, 4, and 6 have featured Arab terrorists, acting either as a smaller threat in conjunction with other agents or as the main antagonists of the season. Seasons 1, 3, and 5 featured a Serbian family, Mexican drug lords, and post-Soviet Russian radicals, respectively.

But regardless of the politics, the controversy, and the morality of it all, Jack Bauer is relevant because of one thing: 9/11. It’s not that simple, of course, but it is the root of all that has tied Jack Bauer to our collective consciousness and made him such a person of interest for the past few years. 9/11 changed this nation’s direction, our outlook, and our politics. The term “post-9/11” is an all too common term used to describe a kind of heightened alert that pervades our daily lives. 2007, in stark contrast to 1997, is a time when the Iraq War dominates the evening news. America’s sole interest seems to be the War on Terror, and Jack Bauer is the poster boy for this War. Despite its grounding in reality, *24* presents a hyperreal depiction (one which blurs the lines of reality and fantasy) of America: a nation already infiltrated by terrorists, ultra-nationalists, and religious extremists – an America where terrorist cells operate within McMansions posing as friendly Arab-American neighbors. This hyperreality is crucial, because the America Jack serves shows us what this nation is currently capable of becoming: a nation ruled by the fear of attack, where everything that serves us can all too easily be used against us. All the technological advances

Jack has at his convenience have only served to heighten this paranoia, as the show deftly underscores through its editing techniques and cinematic style. Split screens following multiple characters imply we cannot turn our backs on anyone. Roving cameras track characters from long distances with zoom lenses, often framed by blurry foreground objects, suggesting the feeling of surveillance. Secrets are revealed through “secure channels,” only to be decrypted and analyzed minutes later by third parties. Stylish electronic beats pulse throughout, building a very real tension while enforcing a modern sensibility. This paranoia is pervasive and unsettling, something audiences have not had thrust upon them quite so forcefully in the past. Lawrence Russell, in reviewing previous seasons of *24* for *CultureCourt.com*, presents interesting contrasts between Jack Bauer and a more traditional government agent:

Historically speaking, [James] Bond was a projected fantasy of the near future, whereas Bauer is the blunt realization of the sordid present. The Bond dramas were dreams, products of the sleeping mind; the Bauer dramas are insomnia, the paranoid clippings of surveillance cameras. If Bond was Demerol for the Cold War and nuclear anxiety, then Bauer is an amphetamine fix for the Age of Terrorism.

But if Jack is a mirror of the current political and diplomatic climate in the United States, then his state of mind and well-being must be carefully noted. Over the course of six seasons, he has lost more than he has won. The American public is safe, of course, but the toll Jack’s service has taken on his family and his personal life is immense: he has lost his job several times, his wife, several romantic relationships, and his relationship with his daughter. He is, in a sense, a modern day Job, punished not by God but by the government he lives to serve. However, Jack refuses to betray his government and his fellow man, whatever the tragic cost. The life of Jack Bauer is one big Pyrrhic victory that flies in the face of the insurmountable odds of the 21st century. The prolific Stephen King writes in a 2007 issue of *Entertainment Weekly* about Jack’s evolution – or, as some might say, devolution. King describes Bauer’s face as “increasingly lined, increasingly haggard,” suggesting that “extreme measures [such as torture] eventually catch up with the human soul.” Having watched the course of Jack’s adventures so far, one can see his soul slowly chipping away as he’s continually drawn back into the fight. Each season he comes back harder, more determined. While this makes for great entertainment, it’s also saddening to think about: “the line shifts to the right each season as Bauer becomes more ruthless and vengeful” (Billen). Despite his evolution, though, Jack remains human at his core. He still refuses to sacrifice innocent life, and the rules that he breaks are largely procedural, rather than moral. Accepting torture as a necessary evil, Jack remains an untarnished hero. Whether or not to accept torture is the question that keeps the character of Jack Bauer so culturally important.

All of this leads to the inescapable conclusion that Jack Bauer is the quintessential American hero in a post-9/11 cultural landscape. In a time of chaos, paranoia, and the threat of imminent danger, Americans need someone to embody the fight against a sleepless and ruthless enemy. More importantly, Jack Bauer presents viewers with an incredibly relevant hero, one who is on the pulse of the issues this nation faces in its interminable War on Terror. Whether or not he is a true hero is a question *24* has posed to America. His views and methods are similar to that of our current administration, allowing Americans to think about issues while still escaping into a fantasy realm. That fantasy realm so closely mirrors our own, though, that Jack Bauer remains an echo of America. Authentic, driven, patriotic, noble and yet Machiavellian, Jack Bauer has not only mass appeal as an entertainment icon but also a cultural importance, a deep resonance in the soul of America.

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