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LETTER FROM HOLLYWOOD

WHATEVER IT TAKES

The politics of the man behind “24.”

BY JANE MAYER

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The office desk of Joel Surnow—the co-creator and executive producer of “24,” the popular counterterrorism drama on Fox—faces a wall dominated by an American flag in a glass case. A small label reveals that the flag once flew over Baghdad, after the American invasion of Iraq, in 2003. A few years ago, Surnow received it as a gift from an Army regiment stationed in Iraq; the soldiers had shared a collection of “24” DVDs, he told me, until it was destroyed by an enemy bomb. “The military loves our show,” he said recently. Surnow is fifty-two, and has the gangly, coiled energy of an athlete; his hair is close-cropped, and he has a “soul patch”—a smidgen of beard beneath his lower lip. When he was young, he worked as a carpet salesman with his father. The trick to selling anything, he learned, is to carry yourself with confidence and get the customer to like you within the first five minutes. He’s got it down. “People in the Administration love the series, too,” he said. “It’s a patriotic show. They *should* love it.”

Surnow’s production company, Real Time Entertainment, is in the San Fernando Valley, and occupies a former pencil factory: a bland, two-story industrial building on an abject strip of parking lots and fast-food restaurants. Surnow, a cigar enthusiast, has converted a room down the hall from his office into a salon with burlwood humidors and a full bar; his friend Rush Limbaugh, the conservative talk-radio host, sometimes joins him there for a smoke. (Not long ago, Surnow threw Limbaugh a party and presented him with a custom-made “24” smoking jacket.) The ground floor of the factory has a large soundstage on which many of “24”’s interior scenes are shot, including those set at the perpetually tense Los Angeles bureau of the Counter Terrorist Unit, or C.T.U.—a fictional federal agency that pursues America’s enemies with steely resourcefulness.



Joel Surnow calls the show he helped create “patriotic.” Photograph by Martin Schoeller.

Each season of “24,” which has been airing on Fox since 2001, depicts a single, panic-laced day in which Jack Bauer—a heroic C.T.U. agent, played by Kiefer Sutherland—must unravel and undermine a conspiracy that imperils the nation. Terrorists are poised to set off nuclear bombs or bioweapons, or in some other way annihilate entire cities. The twisting story line forces Bauer and his colleagues to make a series of grim choices that pit liberty against security. Frequently, the dilemma is stark: a resistant suspect can either be accorded due process—allowing a terrorist plot to proceed—or be tortured in pursuit of a lead. Bauer invariably chooses coercion. With unnerving efficiency, suspects are beaten, suffocated, electrocuted, drugged, assaulted with knives, or more exotically abused; almost without fail, these suspects divulge critical secrets.

The show’s appeal, however, lies less in its violence than in its giddily literal rendering of a classic thriller trope: the “ticking time bomb” plot. Each hour-long episode represents an hour in the life of the characters, and every minute that passes onscreen brings the United States a minute closer to doomsday. (Surnow came up with this concept, which he calls the show’s “trick.”) As many as half a dozen interlocking stories unfold simultaneously—frequently on a split screen—and a digital clock appears before and after every commercial break, marking each second with an ominous clang. The result is a riveting sensation of narrative velocity.

Bob Cochran, who created the show with Surnow, admitted, “Most 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.” According to Darius Rejali, a professor of political science at Reed College and the author of the forthcoming book “Torture and Democracy,” the conceit of the ticking time bomb first appeared in Jean Lartéguy’s 1960 novel “Les Centurions,” written during the brutal French occupation of Algeria. The book’s hero, after beating a female Arab dissident into submission, uncovers an imminent plot to explode bombs all over Algeria and must race against the clock to stop it. Rejali, who has examined the available records of the conflict, told me that the story has no basis in fact. In his view, the story line of “Les Centurions” provided French liberals a more palatable rationale for torture than the racist explanations supplied by others (such as the notion that the Algerians, inherently simpleminded, understood only brute force). Lartéguy’s scenario exploited an insecurity shared by many liberal societies—that their enlightened legal systems had made them vulnerable to security threats.

“24,” which last year won an Emmy Award for Outstanding Drama Series, packs an improbable amount of intrigue into twenty-four hours, and its outlandishness marks it clearly as a fantasy, an heir to the baroque potboilers of Tom Clancy and Vince Flynn. Nevertheless, the show obviously plays off the anxieties that have beset the country since September 11th, and it sends a political message. The series, Surnow told me, is “ripped out of the Zeitgeist of what people’s fears are—their paranoia that we’re going to be attacked,” and it “makes people look at what we’re dealing with” in terms of threats to national security. “There are not a lot of measures short of extreme measures that will get it done,” he said, adding, “America wants the war on terror fought

by Jack Bauer. He's a patriot."

For all its fictional liberties, "24" depicts the fight against Islamist extremism much as the Bush Administration has defined it: as an all-consuming struggle for America's survival that demands the toughest of tactics. Not long after September 11th, Vice-President Dick Cheney alluded vaguely to the fact that America must begin working through the "dark side" in countering terrorism. On "24," the dark side is on full view. Surnow, who has jokingly called himself a "right-wing nut job," shares his show's hard-line perspective. Speaking of torture, he said, "Isn't it obvious that if there was a nuke in New York City that was about to blow—or any other city in this country—that, even if you were going to go to jail, it would be the right thing to do?"

Since September 11th, depictions of torture have become much more common on American television. Before the attacks, fewer than four acts of torture appeared on prime-time television each year, according to Human Rights First, a nonprofit organization. Now there are more than a hundred, and, as David Danzig, a project director at Human Rights First, noted, "the torturers have changed. It used to be almost exclusively the villains who tortured. Today, torture is often perpetrated by the heroes." The Parents' Television Council, a nonpartisan watchdog group, has counted what it says are sixty-seven torture scenes during the first five seasons of "24"—more than one every other show. Melissa Caldwell, the council's senior director of programs, said, "'24' is the worst offender on television: the most frequent, most graphic, and the leader in the trend of showing the protagonists using torture."

The show's villains usually inflict the more gruesome tortures: their victims are hung on hooks, like carcasses in a butcher shop; poked with smoking-hot scalpels; or abraded with sanding machines. In many episodes, however, heroic American officials act as tormentors, even though torture is illegal under U.S. law. (The United Nations Convention Against Torture, which took on the force of federal law when it was ratified by the Senate in 1994, specifies that "no exceptional circumstances, whatsoever, whether a state of war or a threat of war, internal political instability or any other public emergency, may be invoked as a justification of torture.") In one episode, a fictional President commands a member of his Secret Service to torture a suspected traitor: his national-security adviser. The victim is jolted with defibrillator paddles while his feet are submerged in a tub filled with water. As the voltage is turned up, the President, who is depicted as a scrupulous leader, watches the suspect suffer on a video feed. The viewer, who knows that the adviser is guilty and harbors secrets, becomes complicit in hoping that the torture works. A few minutes before the suspect gives in, the President utters the show's credo, "Everyone breaks eventually." (Virtually the sole exception to this rule is Jack Bauer. The current season begins with Bauer being released from a Chinese prison, after two years of ceaseless torture; his back is scarred and his hands are burnt, but a Communist official who transfers Bauer to U.S. custody says that he "never broke his silence.")

C.T.U. agents have used some of the same controversial interrogation methods that the U.S. has employed on some Al Qaeda suspects. In one instance, Bauer denies painkillers to a female terrorist who is suffering from a bullet wound, just as American officials have acknowledged doing in the case of Abu Zubaydah—one of the highest-ranking Al Qaeda operatives in U.S. custody. “I need to use every advantage I’ve got,” Bauer explains to the victim’s distressed sister.

The show sometimes toys with the audience’s discomfort about abusive interrogations. In Season Two, Bauer threatens to murder a terrorist’s wife and children, one by one, before the prisoner’s eyes. The suspect watches, on closed-circuit television, what appears to be an execution-style slaying of his son. Threatened with the murder of additional family members, the father gives up vital information—but Bauer appears to have gone too far. It turns out, though, that the killing of the child was staged. Bauer, the show implies, hasn’t crossed the line after all. Yet, under U.S. and international law, a mock execution is considered psychological torture, and is illegal.

On one occasion, Bauer loses his nerve about inflicting torture, but the show implicitly rebukes his qualms. In the episode, Bauer attempts to break a suspected terrorist by plunging a knife in his shoulder; the victim’s screams clearly disquiet him. Bauer says to an associate, unconvincingly, that he has looked into the victim’s eyes and knows that “he’s not going to tell us anything.” The other man takes over, fiercely gouging the suspect’s knee—at which point the suspect yells out details of a plot to explode a suitcase nuke in Los Angeles.

Throughout the series, secondary characters raise moral objections to abusive interrogation tactics. Yet the show never engages in a serious dialogue on the subject. Nobody argues that torture doesn’t work, or that it undermines America’s foreign-policy strategy. Instead, the doubters tend to be softhearted dupes. A tremulous liberal, who defends a Middle Eastern neighbor from vigilantism, is killed when the neighbor turns out to be a terrorist. When a civil-liberties-minded lawyer makes a high-toned argument to a Presidential aide against unwarranted detentions—“You continue to arrest innocent people, you’re giving the terrorists exactly what they want,” she says—the aide sarcastically responds, “Well! You’ve got the makings of a splendid law-review article here. I’ll pass it on to the President.”

In another episode, a human-rights lawyer from a fictional organization called Amnesty Global tells Bauer, who wants to rough up an uncharged terror suspect, that he will violate the Constitution. Bauer responds, “I don’t wanna bypass the Constitution, but these are extraordinary circumstances.” He appeals to the President, arguing that any interrogation permitted by the law won’t be sufficiently harsh. “If we want to procure any information from this suspect, we’re going to have to do it behind closed doors,” he says.

“You’re talking about torturing this man?” the President says.

“I’m talking about doing what’s necessary to stop this warhead from being used against us,” Bauer answers.

When the President wavers, Bauer temporarily quits his job so that he can avoid defying the

chain of command, and breaks the suspect's fingers. The suspect still won't talk, so Bauer puts a knife to his throat; this elicits the desired information. He then knocks the suspect out with a punch, telling him, "This will help you with the pain."

Howard Gordon, who is the series' "show runner," or lead writer, told me that he concocts many of the torture scenes himself. "Honest to God, I'd call them improvisations in sadism," he said. Several copies of the C.I.A.'s 1963 KUBARK interrogation manual can be found at the "24" offices, but Gordon said that, "for the most part, our imaginations are the source. Sometimes these ideas are inspired by a scene's location or come from props—what's on the set." He explained that much of the horror is conjured by the viewer. "To see a scalpel and see it move below the frame of the screen is a lot scarier than watching the whole thing. When you get a camera moving fast, and someone screaming, it really works." In recent years, he said, "we've resorted a lot to a pharmacological sort of thing." A character named Burke—a federal employee of the C.T.U. who carries a briefcase filled with elephantine hypodermic needles—has proved indispensable. "He'll inject chemicals that cause horrible pain that can knock down your defenses—a sort of sodium pentothal plus," Gordon said. "When we're stuck, we say, 'Call Burke!'" He added, "The truth is, there's a certain amount of fatigue. It's getting hard not to repeat the same torture techniques over and over."

Gordon, who is a "moderate Democrat," said that it worries him when "critics say that we've enabled and reflected the public's appetite for torture. Nobody wants to be the handmaid to a relaxed policy that accepts torture as a legitimate means of interrogation." He went on, "But the *premise* of '24' is the ticking time bomb. It takes an unusual situation and turns it into the meat and potatoes of the show." He paused. "I think people can differentiate between a television show and reality."

This past November, U.S. Army Brigadier General Patrick Finnegan, the dean of the United States Military Academy at West Point, flew to Southern California to meet with the creative team behind "24." Finnegan, who was accompanied by three of the most experienced military and F.B.I. interrogators in the country, arrived on the set as the crew was filming. At first, Finnegan—wearing an immaculate Army uniform, his chest covered in ribbons and medals—aroused confusion: he was taken for an actor and was asked by someone what time his "call" was.

In fact, Finnegan and the others had come to voice their concern that the show's central political premise—that the letter of American law must be sacrificed for the country's security—was having a toxic effect. In their view, the show promoted unethical and illegal behavior and had adversely affected the training and performance of real American soldiers. "I'd like them to stop," Finnegan said of the show's producers. "They should do a show where torture backfires."

The meeting, which lasted a couple of hours, had been arranged by David Danzig, the Human Rights First official. Several top producers of "24" were present, but Surnow was conspicuously

absent. Surnow explained to me, “I just can’t sit in a room that long. I’m too A.D.D.—I can’t sit still.” He told the group that the meeting conflicted with a planned conference call with Roger Ailes, the chairman of the Fox News Channel. (Another participant in the conference call attended the meeting.) Ailes wanted to discuss a project that Surnow has been planning for months: the debut, on February 18th, of “The Half Hour News Hour,” a conservative satirical treatment of the week’s news; Surnow sees the show as offering a counterpoint to the liberal slant of “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart.”

Before the meeting, Stuart Herrington, one of the three veteran interrogators, had prepared a list of seventeen effective techniques, none of which were abusive. He and the others described various tactics, such as giving suspects a postcard to send home, thereby learning the name and address of their next of kin. After Howard Gordon, the lead writer, listened to some of Herrington’s suggestions, he slammed his fist on the table and joked, “You’re hired!” He also excitedly asked the West Point delegation if they knew of any effective truth serums.

At other moments, the discussion was more strained. Finnegan told the producers that “24,” by suggesting that the U.S. government perpetrates myriad forms of torture, hurts the country’s image internationally. Finnegan, who is a lawyer, has for a number of years taught a course on the laws of war to West Point seniors—cadets who would soon be commanders in the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan. He always tries, he said, to get his students to sort out not just what is legal but what is right. However, it had become increasingly hard to convince some cadets that America had to respect the rule of law and human rights, even when terrorists did not. One reason for the growing resistance, he suggested, was misperceptions spread by “24,” which was exceptionally popular with his students. As he told me, “The kids see it, and say, ‘If torture is wrong, what about “24”?’ ” He continued, “The disturbing thing is that although torture may cause Jack Bauer some angst, it is always the patriotic thing to do.”

Gary Solis, a retired law professor who designed and taught the Law of War for Commanders curriculum at West Point, told me that he had similar arguments with his students. He said that, under both U.S. and international law, “Jack Bauer is a criminal. In real life, he would be prosecuted.” Yet the motto of many of his students was identical to Jack Bauer’s: “Whatever it takes.” His students were particularly impressed by a scene in which Bauer barges into a room where a stubborn suspect is being held, shoots him in one leg, and threatens to shoot the other if he doesn’t talk. In less than ten seconds, the suspect reveals that his associates plan to assassinate the Secretary of Defense. Solis told me, “I tried to impress on them that this technique would open the wrong doors, but it was like trying to stomp out an anthill.”

The “24” producers told the military and law-enforcement experts that they were careful not to glamorize torture; they noted that Bauer never enjoys inflicting pain, and that it had clearly exacted a psychological toll on the character. (As Gordon put it to me, “Jack is basically damned.”) Finnegan and the others disagreed, pointing out that Bauer remains coolly rational after committing

barbarous acts, including the decapitation of a state's witness with a hacksaw. Joe Navarro, one of the F.B.I.'s top experts in questioning techniques, attended the meeting; he told me, "Only a psychopath can torture and be unaffected. You don't want people like that in your organization. They are untrustworthy, and tend to have grotesque other problems."

Cochran, who has a law degree, listened politely to the delegation's complaints. He told me that he supports the use of torture "in narrow circumstances" and believes that it can be justified under the Constitution. "The Doctrine of Necessity says you can occasionally break the law to prevent greater harm," he said. "I think that could supersede the Convention Against Torture." (Few legal scholars agree with this argument.) At the meeting, Cochran demanded to know what the interrogators would do if they faced the imminent threat of a nuclear blast in New York City, and had custody of a suspect who knew how to stop it. One interrogator said that he would apply physical coercion only if he received a personal directive from the President. But Navarro, who estimates that he has conducted some twelve thousand interrogations, replied that torture was not an effective response. "These are very determined people, and they won't turn just because you pull a fingernail out," he told me. And Finnegan argued that torturing fanatical Islamist terrorists is particularly pointless. "They almost welcome torture," he said. "They expect it. They *want* to be martyred." A ticking time bomb, he pointed out, would make a suspect only more unwilling to talk. "They know if they can simply hold out several hours, all the more glory—the ticking time bomb will go off!"

The notion that physical coercion in interrogations is unreliable, although widespread among military intelligence officers and F.B.I. agents, has been firmly rejected by the Bush Administration. Last September, President Bush defended the C.I.A.'s use of "an alternative set of procedures." In order to "save innocent lives," he said, the agency needed to be able to use "enhanced" measures to extract "vital information" from "dangerous" detainees who were aware of "terrorist plans we could not get anywhere else."

Although reports of abuses by U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan and at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, have angered much of the world, the response of Americans has been more tepid. Finnegan attributes the fact that "we are generally more comfortable and more accepting of this," in part, to the popularity of "24," which has a weekly audience of fifteen million viewers, and has reached millions more through DVD sales. The third expert at the meeting was Tony Lagouranis, a former Army interrogator in the war in Iraq. He told the show's staff that DVDs of shows such as "24" circulate widely among soldiers stationed in Iraq. Lagouranis said to me, "People watch the shows, and then walk into the interrogation booths and do the same things they've just seen." He recalled that some men he had worked with in Iraq watched a television program in which a suspect was forced to hear tortured screams from a neighboring cell; the men later tried to persuade their Iraqi translator to act the part of a torture "victim," in a similar intimidation ploy. Lagouranis intervened:

such scenarios constitute psychological torture.

“In Iraq, I never saw pain produce intelligence,” Lagouranis told me. “I worked with someone who used waterboarding”—an interrogation method involving the repeated near-drowning of a suspect. “I used severe hypothermia, dogs, and sleep deprivation. I saw suspects after soldiers had gone into their homes and broken their bones, or made them sit on a Humvee’s hot exhaust pipes until they got third-degree burns. Nothing happened.” Some people, he said, “gave confessions. But they just told us what we already knew. It never opened up a stream of new information.” If anything, he said, “physical pain can strengthen the resolve to clam up.”

Last December, the Intelligence Science Board, an advisory panel to the U.S. intelligence community, released a report declaring that “most observers, even those within professional circles, have unfortunately been influenced by the media’s colorful (and artificial) view of interrogation as almost always involving hostility.” In a clear reference to “24,” the report noted:

Prime-time television increasingly offers up plot lines involving the incineration of metropolitan Los Angeles by an atomic weapon or its depopulation by an aerosol nerve toxin. The characters do not have the time to reflect upon, much less to utilize, what real professionals know to be the “science and art” of “educing information.” They want results. Now. The public thinks the same way. They want, and rightly expect, precisely the kind of “protection” that only a skilled intelligence professional can provide. Unfortunately, they have no idea how such a person is supposed to act “in real life.”

Lagouranis told the “24” team what the U.S. military and the F.B.I. teach real intelligence professionals: “rapport-building,” the slow process of winning over informants, is the method that generally works best. There are also nonviolent ruses, he explained, and ways to take suspects by surprise. The “24” staff seemed interested in the narrative possibilities of such techniques; Lagouranis recalled, “They told us that they’d love to incorporate ruses and rapport-building.” At the same time, he said, Cochran and the others from “24” worried that such approaches would “take too much time” on an hour-long television show.

The delegation of interrogators left the meeting with the feeling that the story lines on “24” would be changed little, if at all. “It shows they have a social conscience that they’d even meet with us at all,” Navarro said. “They were receptive. But they have a format that works. They have won a lot of awards. Why would they want to play with a No. 1 show?” Lagouranis said of the “24” team, “They were a bit prickly. They have this money-making machine, and we were telling them it’s immoral.”

Afterward, Danzig and Finnegan had an on-set exchange with Kiefer Sutherland, who is reportedly paid ten million dollars a year to play Jack Bauer. Sutherland, the grandson of Tommy Douglas, a former socialist leader in Canada, has described his own political views as anti-torture, and “leaning toward the left.” According to Danzig, Sutherland was “really upset, really intense” and stressed that he tries to tell people that the show “is just entertainment.” But Sutherland, who claimed to be bored with playing torture scenes, admitted that he worried about the “unintended consequences of the show.” Danzig proposed that Sutherland participate in a panel at West Point or appear in a training film in which he made clear that the show’s torture scenes are not to be

emulated. (Surnow, when asked whether he would participate in the video, responded, “No way.” Gordon, however, agreed to be filmed.) Sutherland declined to answer questions for this article, but, in a recent television interview with Charlie Rose, his ambivalence about his character’s methods was palpable. He condemned the abuse of U.S.-held detainees at Abu Ghraib prison, in Iraq, as “absolutely criminal,” particularly for a country that tells others that “democracy and freedom” are the “way to go.” He also said, “You can torture someone and they’ll basically tell you exactly what you want to hear. . . . Torture is not a way of procuring information.” But things operate differently, he said, on television: “24,” he said, is “a fantastical show. . . . Torture is a dramatic device.”

The creators of “24” deny that the show presents only a conservative viewpoint. They mention its many prominent Democratic fans—including Barbra Streisand and Bill Clinton—and the diversity of political views among its writers and producers. Indeed, the story lines sometimes have a liberal tilt. The conspiracy plot of Season Five, for example, turns on oligarchic businessmen who go to despicable lengths to protect their oil interests; the same theme anchors liberal-paranoia thrillers such as “Syriana.” This season, a White House directive that flags all federal employees of Middle Eastern descent as potential traitors has been presented as a gross overreaction, and a White House official who favors police-state tactics has come off as scheming and ignoble. Yet David Nevins, the former Fox Television network official who, in 2000, bought the pilot on the spot after hearing a pitch from Surnow and Cochran, and who maintains an executive role in “24,” is candid about the show’s core message. “There’s definitely a political attitude of the show, which is that extreme measures are sometimes necessary for the greater good,” he says. “The show doesn’t have much patience for the niceties of civil liberties or due process. It’s clearly coming from somewhere. Joel’s politics suffuse the whole show.”

Surnow, for his part, revels in his minority status inside the left-leaning entertainment industry. “Conservatives are the new oppressed class,” he joked in his office. “Isn’t it bizarre that in Hollywood it’s easier to come out as gay than as conservative?” His success with “24,” he said, has protected him from the more righteous elements of the Hollywood establishment. “Right now, they have to be nice to me,” he said. “But if the show tanks I’m sure they’ll kill me.” He spoke of his new conservative comedy show as an even bigger risk than “24.” “I’ll be front and center on the new show,” he said, then joked, “I’m ruining my chances of ever working again in Hollywood.”

Although he was raised in Beverly Hills—he graduated in 1972 from Beverly Hills High—Surnow said that he has always felt like an outsider. His classmates were mostly wealthy, but his father was an itinerant carpet salesman who came to California from Detroit. He cold-called potential customers, most of whom lived in Compton and Watts. Surnow was much younger than his two brothers, and he grew up virtually as an only child, living in a one-bedroom apartment in an unfashionable area south of Olympic Boulevard, where he slept on a foldout cot. If his father made

a sale, he'd come home and give him the thumbs-up. But Surnow said that nine out of ten nights ended in failure. "If he made three sales a month, we could stay where we lived," he recalled. His mother, who worked as a saleswoman in a clothing store, "fought depression her whole life." Surnow, who describes his parents as "wonderful people," said, "I was a latchkey kid... I raised myself." He played tennis on his high-school team but gave it up after repeatedly losing to players who could afford private lessons.

Roger Director, a television producer and longtime friend, said that he "loves" Surnow. But, he went on, "He feels looked down upon by the world, and that kind of emotional dynamic underpins a lot of things. It's kind of 'Joel against the world.' It's as if he feels, I had to fight and claw for everything I got. It's a tough world, and no one's looking out for you." As a result, Director said, "Joel's not sentimental. He has a hard-hearted thing."

Surnow's parents were F.D.R. Democrats. He recalled, "It was just assumed, especially in the Jewish community"—to which his family belonged. "But when you grow up you start to challenge your parents' assumptions. 'Am I Jewish? Am I a Democrat?'" Many of his peers at the University of California at Berkeley, where he attended college, were liberals or radicals. "They were all socialists and Marxists, but living off their family money," he recalled. "It seemed to me there was some obvious hypocrisy here. It was absurd." Although he wasn't consciously political, he said, "I felt like I wasn't like these people." In 1985, he divorced his wife, a medical student, who was Jewish, and with whom he has two daughters. (His relationships with them are strained.) Four years later, he remarried. His wife, who used to work in film development, is Catholic; they have three daughters, whom they send to Catholic schools. He likes to bring his girls to the set and rushes home for his wife's pork-chop dinners. "I got to know who I was and who I wasn't," he said. "I wasn't the perfect Jewish kid who is married, with a Jewish family." Instead, he said, "I decided I like Catholics. They're so grounded. I sort of reoriented myself."

While studying at Berkeley, Surnow worked as an usher at the Pacific Film Archive, where he saw at least five hundred movies. A fan of crime dramas such as "Mean Streets" and "The Godfather," he discovered foreign films as well. "That was my awakening," he said. In 1975, Surnow enrolled at the U.C.L.A. film school. Soon after graduation, he began writing for film; he then switched to television. He was only modestly successful, and had many "lost years," when he considered giving up and taking over his father's carpet business. His breakthrough came when he began writing for "Miami Vice," in 1984. "It just clicked—I just got it!" he recalled. "It was just like when you don't know how to speak a language and suddenly you do. I knew how to tell a story." By the end of the year, Universal, which owned the show, put Surnow in charge of his own series, "The Equalizer," about a C.I.A. agent turned vigilante. The series was a success, but, Surnow told me, "I was way too arrogant. I sort of pissed off the network." Battles for creative control have followed Surnow to "24," where, Nevins said admiringly, he continues to push for "unconventional and dangerous choices."

Surnow's tough stretches in Hollywood, he said, taught him that there were "two kinds of people" in entertainment: "those who want to be geniuses, and those who want to work." At first, he said, "I wanted to be a genius. But at a certain point I realized I just desperately wanted to work." Brian Grazer, an executive producer of "24," who has primarily produced films, said that "TV guys either get broken by the system, or they get so tough that they have no warmth at all." Surnow, he said, is "a devoted family man" and "a really close friend." But when Grazer first met Surnow, he recalled, "I nearly walked out. He was really glib and insulting. I was shocked. He's a tough guy. He's a meat-eating alpha male. He's a monster!" He observed, "Maybe Jack Bauer has some parts of him."

During three decades as a journeyman screenwriter, Surnow grew increasingly conservative. He "hated welfare," which he saw as government handouts. Liberal courts also angered him. He loved Ronald Reagan's "strength" and disdained Jimmy Carter's "belief that people would be nice to us just because we were humane. That never works." He said of Reagan, "I can hardly think of him without breaking into tears. I just felt Ronald Reagan was the father that this country needed. . . . He made me feel good that I was in his family."

Surnow said that he found the Clinton years obnoxious. "Hollywood under Clinton—it was like he was their guy," he said. "He was the yuppie, baby-boomer narcissist that all of Hollywood related to." During those years, Surnow recalled, he had countless arguments with liberal colleagues, some of whom stopped speaking to him. "My feeling is that the liberals' ideas are wrong," he said. "But they think I'm evil." Last year, he contributed two thousand dollars to the losing campaign of Pennsylvania's hard-line Republican senator Rick Santorum, because he "liked his position on immigration." His favorite bumper sticker, he said, is "Except for Ending Slavery, Fascism, Nazism & Communism, War Has Never Solved Anything."

Although he is a supporter of President Bush—he told me that "America is in its glory days"—Surnow is critical of the way the war in Iraq has been conducted. An "isolationist" with "no faith in nation-building," he thinks that "we could have been out of this thing three years ago." After deposing Saddam Hussein, he argued, America should have "just handed it to the Baathists and . . . put in some other monster who's going to keep these people in line but who's not going to be aggressive to us." In his view, America "is sort of the parent of the world, so we have to be stern but fair to people who are rebellious to us. We don't spoil them. That's not to say you abuse them, either. But you have to know who the adult in the room is."

Surnow's rightward turn was encouraged by one of his best friends, Cyrus Nowrasteh, a hard-core conservative who, in 2006, wrote and produced "The Path to 9/11," a controversial ABC miniseries that presented President Clinton as having largely ignored the threat posed by Al Qaeda. (The show was denounced as defamatory by Democrats and by members of the 9/11 Commission; their complaints led ABC to call the program a "dramatization," not a "documentary.") Surnow and

Nowrasteh met in 1985, when they worked together on “The Equalizer.” Nowrasteh, the son of a deposed adviser to the Shah of Iran, grew up in Madison, Wisconsin, where, like Surnow, he was alienated by the radicalism around him. He told me that he and Surnow, in addition to sharing an admiration for Reagan, found “L.A. a stultifying, stifling place because everyone thinks alike.” Nowrasteh said that he and Surnow regard “24” as a kind of wish fulfillment for America. “Every American wishes we had someone out there quietly taking care of business,” he said. “It’s a deep, dark ugly world out there. Maybe this is what Ollie North was trying to do. It would be nice to have a secret government that can get the answers and take care of business—even kill people. Jack Bauer fulfills that fantasy.”

In recent years, Surnow and Nowrasteh have participated in the Liberty Film Festival, a group dedicated to promoting conservatism through mass entertainment. Surnow told me that he would like to counter the prevailing image of Senator Joseph McCarthy as a demagogue and a liar. Surnow and his friend Ann Coulter—the conservative pundit, and author of the pro-McCarthy book “Treason”—talked about creating a conservative response to George Clooney’s recent film “Good Night, and Good Luck.” Surnow said, “I thought it would really provoke people to do a movie that depicted Joe McCarthy as an American hero or, maybe, someone with a good cause who maybe went too far.” He likened the Communist sympathizers of the nineteen-fifties to terrorists: “The State Department in the fifties was infiltrated by people who were like Al Qaeda.” But, he said, he shelved the project. “The blacklist is Hollywood’s orthodoxy,” he said. “It’s not a movie I could get done now.”

A year and a half ago, Surnow and Manny Coto, a “24” writer with similar political views, talked about starting a conservative television network. “There’s a gay network, a black network—there should be a conservative network,” Surnow told me. But as he and Coto explored the idea they realized that “we weren’t distribution guys—we were content guys.” Instead, the men developed “The Half Hour News Hour,” the conservative satire show. “‘The Daily Show’ tips left,” Surnow said. “So we thought, Let’s do one that tips right.” Jon Stewart’s program appears on Comedy Central, an entertainment channel. But, after Surnow got Rush Limbaugh to introduce him to Roger Ailes, Fox News agreed to air two episodes. The program, which will follow the fake-news format popularized by “Saturday Night Live,” will be written by conservative humorists, including Sandy Frank and Ned Rice. Surnow said of the show, “There are so many targets, from global warming to banning tag on the playground. There’s a lot of low-hanging fruit.”

Last March, Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas and his wife, Virginia, joined Surnow and Howard Gordon for a private dinner at Rush Limbaugh’s Florida home. The gathering inspired Virginia Thomas—who works at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank—to organize a panel discussion on “24.” The symposium, sponsored by the foundation and held in June, was entitled “‘24’ and America’s Image in Fighting Terrorism: Fact, Fiction, or Does It Matter?”

Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff, who participated in the discussion, praised the show's depiction of the war on terrorism as "trying to make the best choice with a series of bad options." He went on, "Frankly, it reflects real life." Chertoff, who is a devoted viewer of "24," subsequently began an e-mail correspondence with Gordon, and the two have since socialized in Los Angeles. "It's been very heady," Gordon said of Washington's enthusiasm for the show. Roger Director, Surnow's friend, joked that the conservative writers at "24" have become "like a Hollywood television annex to the White House. It's like an auxiliary wing."

The same day as the Heritage Foundation event, a private luncheon was held in the Wardrobe Room of the White House for Surnow and several others from the show. (The event was not publicized.) Among the attendees were Karl Rove, the deputy chief of staff; Tony Snow, the White House spokesman; Mary Cheney, the Vice-President's daughter; and Lynn Cheney, the Vice-President's wife, who, Surnow said, is "an extreme '24' fan." After the meal, Surnow recalled, he and his colleagues spent more than an hour visiting with Rove in his office. "People have this image of him as this snake-oil-dirty, secretive guy, but in his soul he's a history professor," Surnow said. He was less impressed with the Situation Room, which, unlike the sleek high-tech version at C.T.U., "looked like some old tearoom in a Victorian house."

The Heritage Foundation panel was moderated by Limbaugh. At one point, he praised the show's creators, dropped his voice to a stage whisper, and added, to the audience's applause, "And most of them are conservative." When I spoke with Limbaugh, though, he reinforced the show's public posture of neutrality. "People think that they've got a bunch of right-wing writers and producers at '24,' and they're subtly sending out a message," he said. "I don't think that's happening. They're businessmen, and they don't have an agenda." Asked about the show's treatment of torture, he responded, "Torture? It's just a television show! Get a grip."

In fact, many prominent conservatives speak of "24" as if it were real. John Yoo, the former Justice Department lawyer who helped frame the Bush Administration's "torture memo"—which, in 2002, authorized the abusive treatment of detainees—invokes the show in his book "War by Other Means." He asks, "What if, as the popular Fox television program '24' recently portrayed, a high-level terrorist leader is caught who knows the location of a nuclear weapon?" Laura Ingraham, the talk-radio host, has cited the show's popularity as proof that Americans favor brutality. "They love Jack Bauer," she noted on Fox News. "In my mind, that's 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." Surnow once appeared as a guest on Ingraham's show; she told him that, while she was undergoing chemotherapy for breast cancer, "it was soothing to see Jack Bauer torture these terrorists, and I felt better." Surnow joked, "We love to torture terrorists—it's good for you!"

As a foe of political correctness, Surnow seems to be unburdened by the controversy his show has stirred. "24," he acknowledged, has been criticized as racially insensitive, because it frequently depicts Arab-Americans as terrorists. He said in response, "Our only politics are that terrorists are

bad. In some circles, that's political." As he led me through the Situation Room set on the Real Time soundstage, I asked him if "24" has plans to use the waterboarding interrogation method, which has been defended by Vice-President Cheney but is considered torture by the U.S. military. Surnow laughed and said, "Yes! But only with bottled water—it's Hollywood!"

In a more sober tone, he said, "We've had all of these torture experts come by recently, and they say, 'You don't realize how many people are affected by this. Be careful.' They say torture doesn't work. But I don't believe that. I don't think it's honest to say that if someone you love was being held, and you had five minutes to save them, you wouldn't do it. Tell me, what would you do? If someone had one of my children, or my wife, I would *hope* I'd do it. There is nothing—nothing—I wouldn't do." He went on, "Young interrogators don't need our show. What the human mind can imagine is so much greater than what we show on TV. No one needs us to tell them what to do. It's not like somebody goes, 'Oh, look what they're doing, I'll do that.' Is it?" ♦

Letter from Hollywood, "Whatever It Takes," The New Yorker, February 19, 2007, p. 66

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