

# Hot Type

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## They Don't Know Jack

The pundits are missing what really makes 24 tick.

By Michael Miner

**T**wenty-four is the Fox drama where one day a year Jack Bauer takes the law into his own hands and saves the republic. It's always a day when the president happens to be visiting Los Angeles, and maybe the show's real message is that the president should stay back east.

But anyway, this season, 24's fifth, the pundits are descending on the show to assign it its place in the American gestalt. The reason why is clear: the premiere last month coincided with a moment when George W. Bush was telling every friendly audience he could find that a president's gotta do what he's gotta do and besides, if he does it it's legal. And here's Jack Bauer on TV once a week grimly doing the doing. Whose side is 24 on? Liberals watch the show by the millions—should they denounce it? Is 24 happy hour for crypto-fascists?

The *New Yorker's* Nancy Franklin had never seen 24 at all until recently, when she buckled down and watched every one of the 102 episodes that've aired since 2001. This kind of marathon does most shows no favor. You spot its tics. "I tended to notice annoying repetitions," Franklin wrote this month. "It seemed to me that Jack whispered 'We'll get through this' to his daughter, Kim... at least five times in every episode she was in." But Franklin was impressed. She was affected—as are we all—by the "cloud of existential doom" that hangs over Jack Bauer and by the way Bauer and his comrades at the LA Counter

Terrorist Unit "find themselves perpetually at the crossroads of urgency and ethics."

In the *New York Times* on February 5, Sarah Vowell hailed 24 as a liberal's guilty pleasure. Describing a recent scene in which Bauer, interrogating a treacherous aide to the president about missing canisters of nerve gas while time was, as time always is on 24, fast running out, points a knife at his face and tells him that if he doesn't talk, "the first thing I'm going to do is, I'm going to take out your right eye. I'll move over and take out your left." Vowell admits, "Sitting on my couch, under the watchful stare of no fewer than six busts of Lincoln, while wearing a sweatshirt given to volunteers at a children's tutoring center, as Bauer's knife was poised to break the man's skin, what I was thinking was: Do it."

She went on to conclude, "Unconstitutional fantasies are normal (I hope), and on TV dramas they can be entertaining and cathartic. Let's just keep them off the TV news."

Vowell should scratch a little deeper: 24 is not your garden-variety unconstitutional fantasy. Jack Bauer is one of the greatest TV characters because he does what needs to be done with deep regard for what the constitution—not to mention his conscience—has to say about his behavior. Unlike, just perhaps, some present leaders of our government, Bauer knows what needs to be done for what it is—evil. He spies and abducts and



Kiefer Sutherland as Jack Bauer in 24

tortures and then gives himself up. Let me finish this one mission, he's always dolefully telling the CTU brass, and then you can take me in. We don't see Bauer praying, but then we don't see him taking a leak either. Those are things that must happen during commercials, and if his prostate's in no better shape than his soul the peeing is agony. Bauer knows he's in bad with God. He knows that doing the wrong thing for the right reason doesn't make it the right thing—

which separates him by leaps and bounds from the theologians running the country.

Wussy secular humanists love Bauer because he's a moral relativist. Cowboys like him because he's an absolutist. He gets that some things are black-and-white and some things are gray. He knows the only way to distinguish the greater evil from the lesser is to measure them both against the yardstick of categorical evil, the yardstick the great religions keep in their top draw-

er. In a crisis Bauer is pretty quick to identify the lesser evil, but I don't think he's ever 100 percent sure, and as the lesser evil is still evil, it's pretty clear to him he's going to hell.

What's not to like about Jack Bauer? He's a great example to us all because he doesn't lie about the impossible nature of his choices. Fools and demagogues do. Let's consider briefly one of the few personal crises I don't believe Bauer has faced in his five seasons on the air: what

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## The Straight Dope® by Cecil Adams

In 1989, when I was a freshman at Baylor University in Texas, I was driving one evening to meet friends for dinner. I came over a hill and noticed a car on its last of several flips in a ditch on the side of the road. I quickly pulled over. The driver jumped out screaming—his buddy in the passenger seat had been thrown from the car. Another person stopped and noticed a body pinned under the front bumper in the ditch. I grabbed the driver's side of the car and lifted it up four-or-so feet, long enough to realize the guy was unfortunately dead. —**howardcrut**, via the **Straight Dope Message Board**

About 15 years ago I had a friend named Jerry who was about six-six and one of the strongest people I ever knew. He picked up cars regularly. I don't mean completely off the ground, but I do mean two wheels. He lifted the right half of my 1988 Toyota Corolla GT-S about 12 inches off the ground. —**Cheep**, via the **Straight Dope Message Board**

I am Anthony Vincent Cavallo II. I am writing you because I can. My mom did save my life! The story [in the January 20 column] was a little off. The wheel was never removed from the car, the rear suspension spring was (that's what holds up the rear of the car). I was clamped between the top of the rear wheel and the top of the fender. My mom may not have lifted it a full four inches, but she held it up so friends could get a jack under it and pull me out. Ironically I have continued my automotive education and now run five Goodyear tire stores. —**Anthony V. Cavallo II**, via e-mail

if Kim had gotten knocked up? The abortion debate has torn the country apart because neither side is honest about the choices. The debate is actually between the half of the country that thinks abortion is evil and the half that thinks it's a necessary evil. That's a divide that could be straddled. Jack Bauer could straddle it. Again, abortion must be one of those things that he talks about, if at all, only during the commercials. But in the early seasons, when Kim was a teenager, if his cell phone had rung and she'd told him in a quavering voice, "Daddy, I'm pregnant and I don't know what to do," I have no doubt what he'd have said.

He'd have whispered, "The terrorists are about to spot me hiding here and then I'm going to have to kill some people so this is a bad time to talk. But I want you to know I love you. We'll get through this." Whatever he thought, whatever she decided, she'd need his strength and not his sanctimony, and he'd be there for her. And it would occur to Jack Bauer that whichever way things played out, at some point down the road he'd be as sad as could be.

## The Movie Wraps Before the Story Ends

The curious thing about *Citizen Black*, a documentary on Conrad Black that makes its U.S. premiere on cable's Sundance Channel at 8 PM this Monday, is that it totally ignores Chicago. The movie was finished two years ago, when Black's media empire was beginning to splinter around him but before it col-

lapsed. He's since been indicted here in Chicago on charges of fraud, racketeering, money laundering, and obstruction of justice and he faces trial next year in our federal court. His longtime business partner, David Radler, who ran the *Sun-Times* and the rest of Hollinger International's Chicago Group, has pleaded guilty to fraud and agreed to testify against him.

*Citizen Black* offers us Black—aka Lord Black of Crossharbour—during somewhat happier times in other places. Filmmaker Debbie Melnyk chases him around trying to get him to agree to a formal interview, and we see enough of the banter between them to understand that Black can be a pretty witty and charming guy.

Melnyk and cowriter Rick Caine focus on Black's Canadian and British operations. He's a native Canadian, and London—where he owned the *Telegraph*—was the city he longed to matter in. It seems that Chicago, despite the Chicago Group, was barely on his radar.

"The truth be told," Caine says, "we had an internal conflict about it. I'm American. Debbie's Canadian." He wanted Chicago in the movie; she didn't see the point. "There's a Chicago section that runs about 12 minutes long that'll end up on DVD," he says, "but that's not the version on the Sundance Channel."

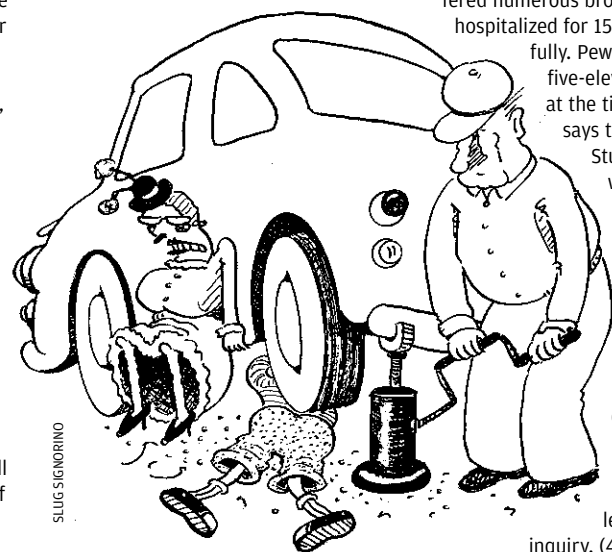
The absence of the Chicago section doesn't mean there's nothing in the film to interest a viewer here, but you need to pay close attention. There's a key scene late in the film at the 2003 Hollinger International shareholders meeting in New York. (Melnyk sneaked in with a camera.) By this point Black, still in control of Hollinger, is under siege, and he's being grilled about deals in which

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That was part of your automotive education? Man, kids think their homework *now* is a bitch. Thanks to testimonials like yours plus a little additional investigation, I'm now ready to deliver my solemn judgment on superhuman strength. First, a last few facts:

➤ I found out more about Sinjin Eberle, the guy who pushed the 500-pound rock off himself, having obtained the original report in *Accidents in North American Mountaineering* from editor Jed Williamson. On May 9, 1999, Eberle and Marc Beverly were climbing Hail Peak in New Mexico's Sandia Mountain Wilderness when Eberle inadvertently pulled loose a large boulder, which fell on top of him as Beverly watched helplessly from above. "All I could see of Sinjin was from the middle of his shins down and the top of his head," Beverly wrote. "The rock covered the rest of his body and was dragging him down the slope I had just crossed. . . . Somehow, with the inertia of the rock . . . and all of his strength, Sinjin was able to get the rock off himself" but sustained serious injuries and was eventually flown to a hospital by helicopter. Eberle himself minimizes his contribution: "The rock fell onto me, but I was on about a 45 degree slope," he tells me via e-mail. "The rock slid over me to the nearby cliff, where it went over and I did not."

➤ Little Ed, proving he's not a total waste of hydrocarbons, obtained the following



account from Wendell Pew, a retired minister. On July 27, 1957, Pew, then 29, was driving through eastern Nebraska with his wife, Lois, and their two small children. He pulled into a crossroads without noticing an approaching vehicle, which smashed into his right front side. Lois was thrown from the car, which then rolled over her, coming to rest with the right rear tire on her shoulder as she lay face down. Pew grabbed the fender and pulled up, taking enough weight off the still-conscious Lois that she was able to free herself. She suf-

fered numerous broken bones and was hospitalized for 15 weeks but recovered fully. Pew describes himself as five-eleven, 180-190 pounds at the time, and athletic, and says the car, a 1953 Studebaker Champion, was light. Could he have lifted it under normal conditions? No idea.

Conclusions: (1) Some people can lift up cars, etc, in moments of extremity. (2) Some people can lift up cars any old time. (3) Many supposedly superhuman feats of strength are less impressive on close inquiry. (4) Just the same, Sinjin Eberle, Angela Cavallo, and Wendell Pew aren't folks I'd care to cross during a crisis. (5) Science confirms that stimuli such as adrenaline can modestly boost performance. (6) No one seriously contends that humans can do things beyond the physiological limits of bone, muscle, and sinew, so none of the above is a real shockeroo. (7) No matter how superhumanly hard you try, you're still going to get some detail of a story told over the phone goofed up. Sorry about the accident specifics, Tony. And say hi to your mom.

Comments, questions? Take it up with Cecil on the Straight Dope Message Board, [www.straightdope.com](http://www.straightdope.com), or write him at the Chicago Reader, 11 E. Illinois, Chicago 60611. Cecil's most recent compendium of knowledge, *Triumph of the Straight Dope*, is available at bookstores everywhere.

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