



Television Portrayals of the U.S. Intelligence Community Before and After 9/11

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After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, a palpable fear swept the nation. Citizens across the country focused on news coverage about the cause of the attacks and the reaction of the United States government. When the United States invaded Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, it did so by convincing the American public that it was necessary to fight terrorism, those sympathetic to terrorists, and those who could pass on the weaponry and destruction capabilities to terrorists. While news programs provide a plethora of information the general public, entertainment series' can be seen as another source of current events. In efforts to keep up with public opinion and the times, producers and writers of primetime television update their shows to provide relevance and a purpose of viewing to audiences nationwide.

During the height of the Cold War, the intelligence community was one of the forces of "good" fighting against the evil Soviet Union. Even when those activities were illegal (such as in *Mission: Impossible*), their actions were portrayed as being for the greater good, at least from a US-centric perspective. In the 1970s, media portrayals switched from positive to negative. For this period, the role of intelligence agencies was to either serve as villains using extra-legal means (*The X-Files*) or buffoons (*Spy Game*) (Peterson, 2001). After the end of the Cold War, there was a lapse in spy television series because the imminent threat was missing. However, this changed after 9/11 and the emergence of television shows such as *Alias* and *24* brought the intelligence community and its agents back to life.

The goal of our research was to examine the characteristics of both *Alias* and *24* that encouraged support for extra-legal policies, reinforced fears of terrorism, and allowed viewers to see torture as an acceptable tool of government policy.



ALIAS

The television series *Alias* kept the imminent threat focused on Russia

Competing agencies, family members, and terrorist groups are former Soviet operatives or Russian terrorists

After 9/11, the series did not shift the focus to Middle Eastern xenophobia; instead the series maintained the Russian enemy image

Alias did not stray away from the topics of torture, civil liberties, and biological weapons

Torture scenes in *Alias* focus on interagency rivalry and lack of communication

"Some people think it's a conspiracy. That the government eavesdrops on everyone. It's no conspiracy."

The number of bio-weapons increased in the show around the time public opinion showed an increased concern of a bio-weapon attack

Other research shows that the fear of external threats can be amplified by exposure to television depictions of threats. Additional research shows that people that feel a greater level of threat from terrorism are more likely to accept limitations on their civil liberties for an increased sense of safety. Finally, we know that in the post 9/11 era, public trust in government jumped, showing a willingness to support government policies. When you combine these factors together, the final product is a policy environment that is a volatile mix of high levels of trust in government, a powerful interaction of external threats, a willingness to surrender civil liberties for personal safety, and an entertainment media willing to reinforce the message that government actions are necessary for the safety of the nation.

24

The first season focused on Balkan terrorists, a continuation of the "Soviet threat"; it eventually shifted towards the Middle East

The series hero and Counter Terrorist Unit agent Jack Bauer's torturous interrogation methods normally produced results in high-stakes situations

Lawyers who approved US interrogation methods cite Jack Bauer more often than the Constitution to justify their opinions

Bauer's interrogation methods gave military officials at Guantanamo ideas for their own techniques

"The disturbing appeal of Jack the Torturer reflects a wounded and frightened national psyche, a desire to lash out at those responsible for 9/11, and the frustration of the superpower unable to defeat a ragged band of terrorists"

