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# US military tells Jack Bauer: Cut out the torture scenes ... or else!

By Andrew Buncombe in Washington

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In the hugely popular television series 24, federal agent Jack Bauer always gets his man, even if he has to play a little rough. Suffocating, electrocuting or drugging a suspect are all in a day's work. As Bauer - played by the Emmy Award winner Kiefer Sutherland - tells one baddie: "You are going to tell me what I want to know - it's just a matter of how much you want it to hurt."

But while 24 draws millions of viewers, it appears some people are becoming a little squeamish. The US military has appealed to the producers of 24 to tone down the torture scenes because of the impact they are having both on troops in the field and America's reputation abroad. Forget about Abu Ghraib, forget about Guantanamo Bay, forget even that the White House has authorised interrogation techniques that some classify as torture, that damned Jack Bauer is giving us a bad name.

The United States Military Academy at West Point yesterday confirmed that Brigadier General Patrick Finnegan recently travelled to California to meet producers of the show, broadcast on the Fox channel. He told them that promoting illegal behaviour in the series - apparently hugely popular among the US military - was having a damaging effect on young troops.

According to the New Yorker magazine, Gen Finnegan, who teaches a course on the laws of war, said of the producers: "I'd like them to stop. They should do a show where torture backfires... The kids see it and say, 'If torture is wrong, what about 24'?"

"The disturbing thing is that although torture may cause Jack Bauer some angst, it is always the patriotic thing to do."

The meeting in November was arranged by Human Rights First, a non-profit organisation that has launched a campaign against torture both in the real world and on television. It says that since the terror attacks of September 11, the incidence of torture in television shows has soared. In 2000 there were 42 scenes of torture on prime-time US television while in 2003 there were 228.

The group's David Danzig said: "I think there is no question [it is having an effect]. We have spoken to soldiers with experience in Iraq who say, for young soldiers, there is a direct relationship between what they are doing in their jobs and what they see on TV... It's the same abroad.

"The image of the US and its military [being involved in torture] is being affirmed."

The show, first broadcast in November 2001, is produced by Joel Surnow, whose California office reportedly contains a Stars and Stripes that once flew over Baghdad. Mr Surnow boasts that both the military and the Bush administration are fans of his series and insists that 24 is "patriotic".

But during the fourth series of the show, broadcaster Fox was forced to air a series of public service announcements, following criticism about the series' portrayal of Muslims by the Council on American-Islamic Relations.

In addition, while Mr Surnow may not have any qualms about 24, it appears the show's main protagonist does. In a television interview last month, Sutherland said: "You torture someone and they'll basically tell you exactly what you want to hear, whether it's true or not, if you put someone in enough pain... Within the context of our show, which is a fantastical show to begin with, the torture is a dramatic device to show you how desperate a situation is."

Others point out that coercive interrogation techniques that some argue amount to torture, including the use of stress positions, military dogs and sleep deprivation, have been authorised by the highest levels of the Bush administration. Meanwhile, last year, when George Bush signed into law a piece of legislation authored by Senator John McCain to prohibit the "cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment" of prisoners, the White House issued a so-called signing statement in which it insisted the ban could be ignored if the President so authorised.

Wayne Smith, of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC), an international human rights group, said: "Even the FBI has

confirmed executive orders authorising the use of hoods and dogs and stress positions.

"If [these things] were being done to US troops we would call it torture."

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