

AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM IN TELEVISION SPY DRAMAS:  
MAINSTREAMING AMERICA WITH *I SPY*, *SLEEPER CELL*, AND *24*?

A Thesis  
submitted to the Faculty of the  
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences  
of Georgetown University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of  
Master of Arts  
in Communication, Culture and Technology

By

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Washington, DC  
April 24, 2007

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**ABSTRACT**

This thesis explores the potential for American television spy dramas to mainstream their viewers to see America as exceptional, thereby seeing America as superior and in a unique position of power to inflict its beliefs on the rest of the world. This notion of American exceptionalism has existed since the founding of the United States and has often been a source of pride for the country. However, in the post-9/11 world, this component of American nationalism continues to contribute to the disdain terrorists feel in response to the Western world and American ideology. TV spy shows, through their established conventions and norms, potentially perpetuate the American characteristics that fuel terrorism aimed toward the West and the United States.

As such, America was engaged in some historic events during the 1960s. The civil rights movement, being among them, had a tremendous impact on the makeup and ideology of the country. Accordingly, the television also played a role. By using

media, cultural, and psychological theories, three American spy shows and their potential effects they had on viewers will be explored. *I Spy*, a mid-1960s television spy drama, portrayed the ideal America, an America immune to the problems associated with race. This thesis will examine the show's positive portrayal of an exceptional America. Then, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, TV spy dramas centered on the threat of terrorism and America's preparation and response to possible threats, which became a part of the nation's character. In contrast to *I Spy* and the 1960s, examples from *Sleeper Cell* and *24* will exemplify how these current shows depict a post-9/11 world in which America's exceptionalism seemingly could feed the terrorism it fights against.

I would like to dedicate my Master's Thesis to my family, especially my parents, John and Pat Keane. They have all been an incredible source of support throughout my life.

Special thanks go to Professor Michael Coventry and Professor Thomas Mascaro for their guidance in this challenging endeavor.

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## Chapter 1. Preface

After the third season of *24*, I decided to jump on the culture bandwagon and find out more about the life and antics of the culture phenomenon known as Jack Bauer. I started out by renting the DVDs of the first season. From the outset, I was hooked. I would sometimes watch all four episodes on a single DVD in one sitting. Many times after doing so, I would run back to the store for the next one. I frequently planned my day around fitting in an episode or two. It would be an understatement to say I had succumbed to this object of cult television. In just a couple months, I had watched all seventy-two episodes that had previously aired and were available on DVD. Unfortunately, for seasons four and five, I had to wait months until they were released on DVD. It was not until season six that I began watching the show on television when they originally aired.

Soon, I began to notice the effects the show was having on me. I wondered how Jack would have handled real life situations I learned about on the news or whether discussions of national security in the real world pertained to the information gathering techniques utilized on *24*. I often wondered if the strategies worked in *24*, would they also work in the real world? Would they be of necessity? This got me to think about the possible effects this show could have on viewers in respect to a variety of culturally relevant topics. In particular, I became interested in the ways this show potentially influences viewers in their conceptualization of America and Americans, especially in

light of America's global concerns and frequent depiction of America on this show and shows similar to it.

While watching season five of the series, I repeatedly thought about the show's messages, particularly with the threat and resulting fear associated with terrorism. At the time, I knew a little about the use of spy shows as propaganda during the Cold War and I began to question whether post-9/11 spy shows had any similarities to these earlier American spy dramas.

I soon discovered the tremendous positive impact of *I Spy* on American nationalism during the civil rights movement of the 1960s and found the show to offer a solid basis for the analysis of spy shows. Using *24* and another post-9/11 spy drama, *Sleeper Cell*, I was able to examine the possibilities for spy shows to influence their American viewers. What resulted was an analysis of these spy dramas and their potential effects on society's conventionalization of American exceptionalism.



## Chapter 2. Introduction and Literature Review

The foundations of mainstreaming were implicit in our early theoretical and conceptual considerations of the role of television in our society. We stressed television's role in the mainstream of the culture, its celebration of conventional morality, and its potential for promoting homogeneity by crossing class, age, ethnic, and other boundaries. The repetitive pattern of television's mass-produced messages and images forms the mainstream of the common symbolic environment that cultivates the most widely shared conceptions of reality.

–George Gerbner, et al. (1986), *Living with television*, (p. 18)

From its inception, television has been an influential medium and a prominent part of American society. As such, it has depicted monumental turning points in the history of the United States. In a sense, as TV historian Mary Ann Watson (1998) conveys in the title of her book, television has been given and accepted its role of “defining visions,” being a source of expression for society to explore and digest a variety of topics. For decades, television has visually confronted numerous social issues. As a result, scholars of all disciplines have studied television's relationship and influence with topics such as gender, race, feminism, class, sexuality, body image, the concept of “celebrity,” and religion.

The effects of television on viewers have been studied for decades. George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, and Nancy Signorielli (1986), communication professors, say that instead of religion or education, “Television is the source of the most broadly shared images and messages in history” (p. 17). Gerbner, et al. (1986)

say, “television cultivates from infancy the very predispositions and preferences that used to be acquired from other primary sources” (pp. 17-18). Cultivation theory in its most basic form, then, suggests that exposure to television, over time, subtly “cultivates” viewers’ perceptions of reality. This cultivation can even have an impact on light viewers of TV because the impact on heavy viewers has an impact on our entire culture. In *Living with Television: The Violence Profile*, Gerbner and Gross (1976, April) say, “Television is a medium of the socialization of most people into standardized roles and behaviors. Its function is in a word, enculturation” (p. 175). Gerbner, et al. (1986) go on to say the impact of television on its viewers is not unidirectional, that the:

use of the term cultivation for television’s contribution to conception of social reality... (does not) necessarily imply a one-way, monolithic process. The effects of a pervasive medium upon the composition and structure of the symbolic environment are subtle, complex, and intermingled with other influences. This perspective, therefore, assumes an interaction between the medium and its publics (p. 23).

These studies by Gerbner, et al. led to the establishment of the concepts known as mainstreaming and resonance.

According to Katherine Miller (2005), in *Communication Theories: Perspectives, Processes, and Contexts*, two ways “in which cultivation theorists have extended their theory to account for small effects and differences in effects among subgroups” are the concepts of mainstreaming and resonance (p. 286). Mainstreaming,

according to Miller (2005), “means that television viewing may absorb or override differences in perspective and behavior that stem from other social, cultural, and demographic influences. It represents the homogenization of divergent views and a convergence of disparate viewers” (K. Miller, 2005, p. 286). Resonance:

is another concept proposed to explain differential cultivation effects across groups of viewers. The concept suggests that the effects of television viewing will be particularly pronounced for individuals who have had related experience in real life. That is for a recent mugging victim or someone who lives in a high crime neighborhood, the portrayal of violence on television will resonate and be particularly influential (K. Miller, 2005, p. 286).

Paul Hirsch (1980), a media theorist, is a critic of Gerbner, particularly regarding Gerbner and his group’s methodology. Hirsch (1980) suggests that Gerbner’s theories could be applied to frequent viewers of television, but not necessarily to the average viewer. Gerbner, as well as others, have stood by the findings and most would agree that television has some effect on viewers. The debate is often about how much.

This participation comes in different forms, whether it’s the local news, soap operas, game shows, or dramas involving the next top government spy, all bring the viewers of television closer to an understanding of the world outside the TV. For instance, television viewers have long been accustomed to stories with governmental themes, including those that involve spies. In 1951, less than a decade since the implementation of the television, TV shows *Doorway to Danger*, *Dangerous Assignment*, and *Foreign Intrigue* were among the first to include spies (Britton, 2004).

The timing for such shows was no accident. According to Wesley Britton (2004), a TV scholar, “There was nothing subtle about America’s use of TV spies in the 1950s for Cold War indoctrination” (p. 22). Even still, the suspense and seemingly real world relevance made the shows intriguing and captivating.

In the 1960s, shows about espionage found an accepting audience and *I Spy* was among the many spy shows that used current events to engage an audience. As Elaine Pennicott (2001) points out in *Action TV: Tough Guys, Smooth Operators and Foxy Chicks*, the shows of that time had to contend with a nation that was in the midst of the Cold War, America’s fear of losing world economical dominance, and the civil rights movement. Not surprisingly, many parallels can be drawn between the Cold War’s relevance to these early spy shows and current TV shows’ relevance associated with the United States’ involvement in post-9/11 global affairs.

In recent terms, September 11<sup>th</sup> (9/11) had a profound impact on these types of stories on television. Soon after, the conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the broader “War on Terror” also played significant roles. Since then, a large number of American TV dramas with spy-related themes have experienced great success. *The Agency*, *24*, and *Alias* were just some of the spy shows that were released shortly after September 11, 2001 (Hark, 2004). In 2005, Showtime began airing a new show, *Sleeper Cell*, which uses the stereotype of Islamic extremists as terrorists. Fox’s *24* is another show that conveys a post-9/11 world in which terrorism is always a threat.

By looking at three TV spy dramas, this will be a cultural, political, and, to some degree, a psychological paper. It is relevant to the political world, as well as a close reading of these popular culture artifacts. As such, I approach this endeavor with my own perspective and biases. For instance, I have often been suspect of the government subtly (or not so subtly) pushing a political agenda through all aspects of the media. This study does not intend to pass judgment as to the “correctness” of the United States’ foreign affairs, but to examine closely the implications of certain tendencies and trends, especially in the way these attitudes affect television fiction and vice versa.

Specifically, this thesis intends to examine the ways NBC’s *I Spy* reflected American ideology and American nationalism of the 1960s and made it possible for later shows to do the same during their respective eras. This analysis will then explore ways post-9/11 television spy dramas, like Showtime’s *Sleeper Cell* and Fox’s *24* help to evoke the belief that America is constantly under threat of another terrorist attack and, in turn, creates a climate that further supports and encourages America to embrace the notion of American exceptionalism, as well as take a messianic role in inflicting its beliefs on other people and countries. Therefore, in order to examine the ways these spy shows potentially perpetuate the current state of American exceptionalism in the United States and elsewhere, several concepts will have to be explored.

### *Media and Culture Theories and Concepts*

Several theories pertaining to the media and culture will be utilized. First, media and cultural theorists have explored the means by which people interact with mediums and the resulting effects of such interactions. The notion of “all the world’s a text,” a concept widely accepted in the field of media studies and other fields, could be applied to all cultural artifacts. The idea that cultural artifacts could be “read” make it possible for a closer look at the ways the media and its viewers received art. For instance, Stuart Hall (1993), a cultural theorist, proposed the concept of reception theory, which focused on the readers of artifacts and their resulting “reception” of the artifacts’ messages. Consequently, Hall’s (1980) theory of encoding and decoding soon followed. This theory was an expansion on the reception theory, because it accounted for an artifact’s producers as well as its audience (Hall, 1980). Understanding the process in which messages are formed and received make it possible for determining the success of such messages.

While Hall’s theories focus on the literal ways a reader or viewer takes in an artifact’s messages, several theorists hone in on the actual components that make up an artifact. Marshall McLuhan (1994), considered by many to be the grandfather of media studies, coined the phrase, “the medium is the message” (p. 7).<sup>1</sup> This concept

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<sup>1</sup> Marshall McLuhan’s article was originally written in 1964 and was reprinted in 1994. McLuhan died in 1980.

established the awareness that the medium does just as much, if not more, than content for expressing an artifact's message (McLuhan, 1994). In many cases, according to McLuhan (1994), the medium itself expresses the message. The particular narrative structure of "real time," while discussed by other scholars, will be examined using Ira Hark's (2004) analysis of Fox's show, 24.

While McLuhan and Hark focus on the structure of an artifact, several scholars focus on content oriented concepts and theories. Pierre Bourdieu (1994) and William Kurtz Wimsatt (1954) examine the ways social fiction reflects, as well as the opportunity for these social fiction to create, culture icons. Similarly, Jean Baudrillard's (1994) theory of simulation conveys how simulation is more than social representation. Simulation attempts to be beyond representation by conveying messages and depicting images that are collectively a part of society. Thomas Roberts (1990) takes into account the varying entities of a story (actors, producers, complete show) and story space and explains their roles in what he terms "story space."

When dealing with the effects of television on society, psychological theories and concepts must account for some of the analysis. George Gerbner and company (1976, April; 1986; 1979, Summer), in *Living with Television: The Violence Profile*, *Growing up with Television the Demonstration of Power: Violence Profile no. 10*, and *Living with Television: The dynamics of the cultivation process*, present the theories of mainstreaming and cultivation, whereby they argue that television instills certain ideas

and traits into viewers. Similarly, Jacques Lacan's (1977) three registers, in *Écrits*, explores the use of symbolic images and their role in how people perceive reality. Then, Umberto Eco (1987), in *Casablanca: Cult movies and intertextual collage*, describes what he termed cult television, which explains how some shows acquire large viewer followings and what takes place when that happens.

Culture theories that can be applied to America and its post-9/11 society will also be explored. First, Luis Althusser's (1969; 1978; 1998) concept of ideology in *Lenin and Philosophy, Ideology and State Apparatus* and *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. Second, Jean Baudrillard's (2003) understanding of terrorism in *The Spirit of Terrorism*. These concepts will help to conceptualize the culture within a post-9/11 world.

### *Spy Television*

The spy is often the one that works secretly for the government and deals with national and international issues (Britton, 2004). A spy, however, is different from a private eye, which also has found a niche with television viewers (Britton, 2004). A private eye does not work for the government per se, but deals more with more local type issues, which could include murder mysteries like *Murder She Wrote* (1984-1996) (Britton, 2004). Other names for spy-type characters include a sleuth, agent, detective, and private investigator (PI) (Britton, 2004). While all of these are different in nature,



all of the shows with these types of characters are considered a part of the spy genre (Britton, 2004). Before the 1950s, the spy fiction genre had already found homes in film, radio, and other mediums. However, the early 1950s brought the addition of television as a medium for the genre. Soon, several television series began airing.

Women quickly took center stage alongside men and minority leads in spy programs paved the way for future roles on the small screen. For half a century, television spies have been all types of characters with an array of personalities. Some have been “trained professionals, reluctant heroes, housewives, businessmen, criminals, and comedians” and some have been “glamorous, campy, reflective, sexy, and aloof” (Britton, 2004). Yet, through the establishment of the espionage television genre, several conventions were formed (T. Miller, 2003).

According to Wesley Britton (2005) in *Beyond Bond: Spies in Fiction and Film*, novelist Ian Lancaster Fleming became the most influential author of spy fiction in 1953. Fleming’s novel, *Casino Royale*, introduced the most popular fiction spy character, James Bond. Fleming would later write thirteen more books with Bond as the central character. Bond, a high-flying, womanizing, international spy, would also become known for his agent code name, 007. During the Cold War, other spy characters often took on anti-Bond characteristics. John G. Cawelti and Bruce A. Rosenberg (1987), in *The Spy Story*, point to Bond as the pivotal character of spy fiction, especially in regards to the mix of espionage and sex. The sexual exploits of

Bond were often seen as a part of making Bond the hero. As a result, the character of Bond has influenced much of the spy fiction genre, including books, film, television, comics, and the like.

During the initial time of Bond, the U.S. government used spy TV dramas as Cold War propaganda. Spy show, *I Led Three Lives* (1953-1956), was among these 1950s propaganda shows. According to Toby Miller (2003), a TV historian, shows like *I Led Three Lives*, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* (1964-1968), and *The FBI* (1965-1974) were “indebted to the endorsement of J. Edgar Hoover,” the head of the FBI (p. 106).

J. Fred MacDonald (1992) in *Blacks and White TV*, Elaine Pennicott (2001) in *Action TV: Tough Guys, Smooth Operators and Foxy Chicks*, and Michael Kackman (2005) in *Citizen Spy: Television, Espionage, and Cold War Culture* discuss the cultural and societal importance of *I Spy* with its “color-blind” depiction of blacks on TV during the time of the civil rights movement in the United States. Kackman (2005) examines *I Spy* by focusing on the show’s portrayal of what he termed “internationalism” (p. 127).

While *I Spy* had an international backdrop, *Sleeper Cell* and *24* deal with terrorism in the United States. Ian S. Lustick (2006), a professor of political science at the University of Pennsylvania, says in his book *Trapped in the War on Terror*:

These more recent prosecutions are often hailed as the discovery of al-Qaeda “sleeper cells.” The sleeper cell metaphor was borrowed from anticommunist campaigns in the early and mid-twentieth century. The image is of groups of

devoted and highly skilled terrorists, appearing as normal and loyal U.S. citizens, operating silently within American society, waiting for the signal or the opportunity to strike. Indeed, despite expert opinion suggesting that the fears of such undiscovered networks are wildly exaggerated, the image of sleeper cells has itself struck deep roots in the imagination of the American public. As noted previously, in 2005, the cable channel Showtime broadcast a miniseries entitled *Sleeper Cell*. The synopsis of the first episode read: “Darwyn Al-Hakim is a Muslim ex-con who has just been released from prison and finds his way to an Islamic extremist named Farik, who recruits him to join a terrorist sleeper cell planning an attack in Los Angeles” (p. 38).

*Sleeper Cell*, while unique with only an eight-episode season, seems to take the most accepted stereotypes of terrorist and terrorism and portrays them in this hour-long drama.

Jack Bauer, the lead character in *24*, is one of the most popular television spies of today. Although shows like *Scarecrow and Mrs. King* (1983-1987) or *MacGyver* (1985-1992) incorporated some element of government involvement in the use of their spies. *24* as a unique spy show and cultural artifact has been written about extensively. While much of the writing is from television critics, more media and culture scholars are taking a close look at the show. However, finding scholarly books entirely about *24* has been difficult. Most scholarly writings about the show are essays. Much of what is written in these essays about *24* focuses on the show’s format. Particularly, two distinct characteristics of its format set the show apart. First, periodic displays of a digital clock show the time ticking by in each episode (Hark, 2004). Since each episode represents one hour of a 24-hour day, the show attempts to portray the action in “real-time”

(Hark, 2004). Second, “the show’s frequent use of split screen to render actions occurring simultaneously [echo] the ‘multiple windows’ technique” (Hark, 2004, p. 122). Each of these structural characteristics has also been hailed as reasons for the show’s success, but the success could also be attributed to the timing of the show’s reception.

The difference between intention and reception is important in the analysis of television’s effects on its viewers, especially in relation to Hall’s theory of producer encoding and viewer decoding. *24* is a prime example. Michael Loceff, one of *24*’s key writers and producers since the show began, discussed the intent and purpose of the show in a 2006 interview by journalist James Surowiecki (2006) with *Slate Magazine*:

SLATE: Where did the concept for *24* come from? Did it start as a show about counterterrorism or as a show that would take place in 24 episodes over a single day?

LOCEFF: It really started with a single idea from a single person, Joel Surnow. He came up with the idea of a show that took place in 24 hour-length, real-time episodes over the course of one day, and he called Bob Cochran, his producing partner, and pitched it to him. And Bob said, “It’s a great idea, it’ll never work, don’t call me again.” The idea that you could stitch together every detail episode to episode and preserve continuity for the length of a season and tell a story while using no time cuts, no flashbacks, nothing but pure real time just seemed too difficult. To create a situation where each new episode has to start in the exact same place as the previous one, with the actors’ hair in the exact same place, seemed crazy. But Joel called Bob back the next day, and that was it.

According to Loceff, the concept of *24* was derived from its narrative convention and not as a show about counterterrorism (Surowiecki, 2006). Although the producers of the show did not intend the show to be about counterterrorism, the reception of the show, because it began airing in the autumn of 2001 it was greatly influenced by 9/11 and, therefore, made the viewers see the action of the show in light of the attacks. Since the early episodes of the first season were shot before 9/11 occurred, the early episodes were written without the influence of those events. However, Loceff does admit that 9/11 “obviously had a huge impact emotionally on all of us who were involved with” the writing of later episodes (Surowiecki, 2006). As a result, Loceff says the producers of the show “hired writers who have done heavy research in espionage and anti-terrorism and worked with the government” (Surowiecki, 2006). The producers and writers of *24*, as well as any other post-9/11 spy drama, may not have intended to convey messages specific to 9/11 and the world thereafter. However, separating the influences of that day on the audience’s reception of the show would be impossible, because this monumental event affected everyone and, ultimately, the way the world perceives such content.

There is great pertinence to the claims of shifting American ideals, especially since 9/11, the war in Iraq, and the over arching “War on Terror.” America has changed and, so too, has the media in response to those changes. Dennis Broe (2004, Summer), the coordinator of the graduate program in media arts at Long Island

University, points to *24*'s stopwatch technique as a symbol of Rupert Murdoch's Fox Network, describing the technique as "the sensationalism that marks Murdoch entertainment" and "is employed in the service of promoting and rationalizing the endless war" (p. 101). Broe (2004, Summer) adds, "The emphasis on the clock, on racing against time during both the hour of the show and the show's six-month running time, keeps the audience afraid of terrorists, nuclear bombs, and viruses" (p. 101). Meanwhile, "the sympathetic vigilante ignores legal rights and speeds rapidly ahead in his battle to save humanity (with humanity here reduced to the United States only) while, as Adorno would say, fear and anxiety replace contemplation" (Broe, 2004, Summer, p. 101). Furthermore:

The formal constraint of the clock—the signal of commodification, with the workplace time clock reproduced in the narrative space of the show—is combined with the aggressively militarist actions of the protagonist to represent the historical moment when global financial dominance merges with global warfare (Broe, 2004, Summer, p. 101).

Stuart Croft (2006), in his book *Culture, Crisis and America's War on Terror*, draws correlations between *24*'s second season, which was written and produced after 9/11, as "a storyline that played out carefully against the debate over the war in Iraq" (p. 209).<sup>2</sup> In this season, Jack "is called back to infiltrate a terrorist organization that plans to detonate a dirty bomb in Los Angeles" (Croft, 2006, p. 209).

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<sup>2</sup> Synopsis of *24*'s second season: Day two begins approximately eighteen months after day one. Jack struggles to deal with the death of his wife, Teri Bauer, and the estrangement of his daughter Kim. Jack is no longer working for CTU, but when the White House receives intelligence that a nuclear bomb will

### *American Nationalism*

The concept of “American ideals” has long been interwoven into the fabric of the United States, dating back long before the nation’s forefathers drafted the *Declaration of Independence* or the *United States Constitution* (Meacham, 2006). Two key ideals have had a tremendous impact on the character of the country. The difficulty arises in knowing whether these ideals are universally accepted. First, in his book, *The American Revelation*, Neil Baldwin (2005) presents several key American ideals that have helped to shape the United States from the days of the Puritans to the Cold War. This ideal dates back to 1630, when John Winthrop, “the first citizen of early New England,” makes a biblical reference by regarding the New World as a “city on a hill” (pp. 9, 21). According to Baldwin (2005), Winthrop believed that “the perseverance of its inhabitants will determine whether the city will stand or fall, stagnate or prevail. It would become the responsibility of every succeeding generation to reinvigorate the city on a hill” (p. 21). This notion of a nation or a city overlooking those below reveals the beginnings of how this nation was conceptualized as “overseeing” those countries below.

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be detonated in Los Angeles over the course of the day, Jack is forced back into action. The now President Palmer sees Jack as the only man he can trust to find the terrorist cell in possession of the bomb and stop its detonation. In the midst of political and social strife, another conspiracy arises when a taped conversation about an attack on America is uncovered after the initial bomb crisis (“24,” 2007).

Second, another ideal Baldwin (2005) presents is called “manifest destiny.”

John O’Sullivan, an American columnist and editor, writes the following in *The New York Morning News* in November 1845:

There are some things this nation will never do. It will never be the forcible subjugator of other countries, it will never despoil surrounding territories; it will never march through the blood of their offending inhabitants; it will never admit within its own Union those who do not freely desire the boon (p. 79).

While the two historical figures lived 200 years apart, these two ideals serve as staples of American life.

Several U.S. forefathers, such as George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, Benjamin Franklin, and James Madison, expressed their beliefs that God had and will have a hand in the development, governing, and future of the nation (Meacham, 2006). Some have taken that belief a step further. For example, some believe that it is a duty of the United States to be an agent for the entire world, while others conversely believe that it is not in the best interest of the country to meddle in the business of other countries (Kagan, 2006b). For instance, Robert Kagan (2006b), an American politics scholar and political commentator, names Robert A. Taft as a national leader that tried to change the “world-transforming policies of FDR, Harry Truman and Dean Acheson.” As a Republican senator, Taft once said that the United States “should not undertake to defend the ideals of democracy in foreign countries” or the country could become “meddlesome Mattie” with “fingers in every pie.” According to Kagan



(2006b), Taft “warned against the arrogance and temptations of dominant power” when Taft said that power “over other nations, however benevolent its purpose, leads inevitably to imperialism.”

In another of Kagan’s books, *Dangerous Nation*, Kagan (2006a) quotes John Quincy Adams as saying in 1817, “The universal feeling of Europe in witnessing the gigantic growth of our population and power is that we shall, if united, become a very dangerous member of the society of nations” (p. 130). Moreover, Jim Cullen (2003) argues that for centuries it has been this power that has influenced and encouraged people to strive towards the American dream.

Andrew Greeley (1991), a sociologist, columnist, and Roman Catholic priest, says, American exceptionalism has been historically referred to as the perception that the United States differs qualitatively from other developed nations, because of its unique origins, national credo, historical evolution, or distinctive political and religious institutions. Byron E. Shafer (1991), a historian, believes the difference is typically expressed as some categorical superiority, to which is usually attached some rationalization or explanation that varies greatly depending on the historical period and the political context. Alexis de Tocqueville (1862), a French historian, first used the term in respect of the United States in 1831. The colloquial view of American exceptionalism, according to historian Diane Ross (1991), is widely held by opponents of the concept to be little more than ethnocentrism and crude propaganda, in essence a

justification for an America-centered view of the world that is inherently chauvinistic and jingoistic in nature. Similar to many other nations, both ancient and modern, have claimed an exceptional nature or a destiny different from all other countries (Ross, 1991). There is, therefore, a sharp divide between the views of those who believe in American exceptionalism, and those who disagree with it (Wrobel, 1993).

American exceptionalism is closely related to the term manifest destiny, which was used by Jacksonian Democrats in the 1840s to promote the annexation of much of what is now the Western United States, including the Oregon Territory, the Texas Annexation, and the Mexican Cession (Baldwin, 2005). Republicans then used the term in the 1890s as a theoretical justification for U.S. expansion outside of North America (Ross, 1991).

Throughout history, the concept of American exceptionalism has been seen as functioning in polarities, where seemingly America either embraces the notion or attempts to do the apparent opposite (Will, 1990). As a result, the concept often encourages political polarities. For that reason, many of the views discussed will be by political commentators, often journalists, with extreme political stances (Bennett, 1998; Greeley, 1991; Kagan, 2006a; Liddy, Liddy, Selanikio, & Barrett, 2006). These commentators are used to highlight the polarity of the concept of American exceptionalism and give a better indication as to the political climate of post-9/11 America.

The country's forefathers declared the country was founded under God and with that the country was deemed responsible to act as such, yet throughout history questions have arisen as to what that means. According to Kagan (2006b), "Five years after the end of the Vietnam War, which seemed to many to presage the rejection of ... principles of power and ideological triumphalism, Americans elected Ronald Reagan, who took up those principles again with a vengeance." Later, William J. Bennett (1998) sees the Clinton administration, in Clinton's immorality and lies, as the time in which America experienced the "death of outrage," allowing Clinton's private life, lies, and abuse of power to continue (p. 5). In a sense, society's response to Clinton's actions paved the way for future administrations to see the tremendous ability for use of supreme power, even in the face of errors in judgment.

Yet, September 11 undoubtedly has had a tremendous effect on the way Americans and others see the United States. Consequently, the United States will never be the same in the way it approaches its foreign relationships and policies. Therefore, the concept of American ideals is still relevant. In addition, the debate about America's role in the world and foreign relations has found some momentum given the current conflict in Iraq, the recent and pending political elections, and the world implications as such.

America is characterized by several key components. As an open society, America is imperfect, yet constantly striving for improvement (Soros, 2006). As a

result of government's role, it is the federal, state, and local government that has substantial control and power over the actions of the country when striving for such improvement. Consequently, most of the components that make up the current state of America are attributed to the country's administration. Unfortunately, President George W. Bush and his administration have had to deal with the post-9/11 world, a world in which terrorism, war, and fear are substantial determinates of today's national character.

Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay (2004), in their book *America Unbound*, examine the Bush administration's so-called revolution in foreign policy. The book's central argument is simple: the president's unilateralist policies have produced quick "victories" in Afghanistan and Iraq but have also fractured the nation's alliances, and as a result the world system is more chaotic and unfriendly, and the United States could be considered less secure (Daalder & Lindsay, 2004). Daalder and Lindsay (2004) add, "The deeper problem," they write in the book's concluding chapter, is that "the fundamental premise of the Bush revolution—that America's security rested on an America unbound—was profoundly mistaken" (p. 195). The United States, as a result of its foreign policies, is different than any other country and is disliked because of it (Kohut & Stokes, 2006). Andrew Kohut and Bruce Stokes (2006), both historians, find that what pushed the world away is American exceptionalism—America's individualism and its go-it-alone attitude. In addition, it doesn't help that America's

critics often exaggerate Americans' pervasive religiosity and deep patriotism (p. 167). Conversely, George Soros's (2006) *The Age of Fallibility*, focuses on the effects of the war on terror. While he says that the United States should "revert to the policies...prior to 9/11," he believes the U.S. should "recognize that as the dominant power in the world" it has "a special responsibility" to protect "the common interests of humanity" (Soros, 2006, p. xxv). In addition, Soros (2006) says:

Mankind's power over nature has increased cumulatively while its ability to govern itself has not kept pace. There is no other country that can take the place of the United States in the foreseeable future. If the United States fails to provide the right kind of leadership...civilization may destroy itself. That is the unpleasant reality that confronts [the world] (p. xxv).

However, this power could be used differently. Hans Joachim Morgenthau (2006), an international relations theorist, points out that "while at all times the promotion of the national interests of the United States as a power among powers has been the main concern of American foreign policy, in an age that has seen two world wars and has learned how to wage total war with nuclear weapons the preservation of peace has become the prime concern of all nations" (p. 26).

All television spy shows could potentially help to perpetuate this notion of America's "messianic impulse," but for the sake of this study, the focus will be generally on shows that include spies—secret agents working for the government on national and international affairs. Anatol Lieven's (2004) *America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism* contends that U.S. foreign policy since 9/11 has

been shaped by the special character of national identity, which embraces two contradictory impulses. One impulse, “The American Creed,” espouses liberty, democracy, egalitarianism, and represents the United States’ legacy to the world (Lieven, 2004, p. 49). But the creed also underpins what Lieven (2004) calls the dangerously “messianic” element in American nationalism, the desire to extend American values and American democracy to the whole world (p. 63). George Will (1990), a historian, author, and columnist for the *Washington Post*, has been credited with coining the phrase “messianic impulse” when describing America’s tendency to inflict its beliefs and ideals on other countries (p. 133). Will (1990) describes this impulse as “a constant of America’s national character, and a component of American patriotism” (p. 133). A question left to be answered is whether the phrase means that the United States acts as though it *is* a messiah or acts in response to or in the name of the Messiah, or both?

Kagan (2003) has done extensive research on the history of the United States and its foreign policy and has written often about Will’s notion of “messianic impulse.” In addition, Kagan (2006b) suggests that the focus of the United States’ foreign policy seems to tilt back and forth, seemingly being either predominately messianic in nature or the polar opposite as an attempt to counteract the negatives associated with being perceived as messianic. Kagan (2006b) gives accounts of the nature of America during several U.S. presidencies, including the presidencies of

Lincoln, Cleveland, Taft, FDR, Truman, and Reagan. These accounts give an opinion as to the potential messianic impulse of each administration. The risk of such impulses has possible ramifications in other forms. McChesney's (1999) *Rich Media, Poor Democracy* exposes several myths about the media. In particular, he disputes the myth that the market compels media firms to "give the people what they want," which limits the ability of citizens to grasp the real nature and logic of the media system (McChesney, 1999, p. 33). If Americans value democracy, McChesney (1999) warns, they must organize politically to restructure the media in order to affirm society's connection to democracy.

### Chapter 3. Spy Television and *I Spy* in America

The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest... despite the “play” in the colonial system which is crucial to its exercise power, colonial discourse produces the colonised as a fixed reality which is at once an “other” and yet entirely knowable and visible.

–Homi Bhabha (1983), “The Other Question,” (p. 23)

*I Spy*, a television spy drama of the 1960s, was made popular by the show’s relevant and relatable content. In the series, Kelly Robinson appears to be an international tennis player. He and his trainer, Alexander Scott, ostensibly travel around the world playing amateur tennis. Secretly however, they are both top agents for the United States Pentagon and are covertly spending their time chasing villains and counterspies. As such, *I Spy* will function as the focal point in this chapter’s examination, while analyzing the ways this television show’s reflection of American nationalism in the 1960s potentially influenced its viewers. To accomplish this, two main theories will function as cultural lenses: reception theory and the theory of encoding and decoding. The use of these two over-arching theories, along with some secondary concepts, will be expanded upon throughout this chapter.



### *Reception Theory and Encoding & Decoding*

The world is full of cultural artifacts and the widely accepted notion of “all the world’s a text” could seemingly be applied to every one.<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, the medium of television and the artifacts within it rely heavily on text, given their dependence upon dialogue and visuals to convey their messages. For instance, *I Spy*, as a television drama and popular culture artifact, presented its “text” to be read by its audience in a variety of forms: readable words, visuals, audio, plot structure, subject matter, social commentary, etc. A problem, however, is understanding how an audience does its reading, because to fully understand a text, the audience must take into account the varying components at play. Therefore, particular attention should be paid to how the audience is receiving text. On that note, Stuart Hall (1993), a British cultural theorist, is one of the main proponents of reception theory, which is an approach to textual analysis that focuses on the extent of an audience’s negotiation and opposition to a given text. This means that an audience does not simply or passively accept the text of a book, film, or television show, but instead an element of involved activity takes place. In the case of a visual medium, the reader (or viewer) negotiates the meaning of the visuals textually, because the viewer thinks about the visuals’ meanings using

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<sup>3</sup> See Timothy A. Unwin (2005), *Jules Verne: Journeys in writing* (p. 51); Nicholas B. Dirks, Geoff Eley, and Sherry B. Ortner (1994), *Culture/power/history: A reader in contemporary social theory* (p. 25); Chris Jenks (2005), *Culture: Critical concepts in sociology* (p. 197); Meyer Howard Abrams (1989), *Doing things with texts: Essays in criticism and critical theory* (p. 279).

words. Potentially, the viewer would use textual means to explain what is seen and understood.

However, the meaning derived from any text depends on the cultural background of the reader, which explains why and how some readers accept a given reading of a text and others do not. For example, *I Spy* first aired in the fall of 1965, in the midst of historical events like the Cold War, the anti-war movement and the social rebellion in response to Vietnam, and the civil rights movement. As a result, the societal makeup and political climate of America at that time influenced the cultural composition of the show's audience and, in return, affected the ways the audience was reading and understanding the show. Therefore, in order to thoroughly examine this spy drama, and any other television show for that matter, one needs to also analyze the historical turning points and social relevancies of the time that contributed to shaping the culture of the show's audience (Hall, 1993).

While reception theory focuses largely on audiences and their cultural influences, Hall's (1980) later model of encoding and decoding develops the ideas of reception theory further by additionally accounting for an artifact's producer or producers. Relatively speaking, the meaning of a text lies somewhere between a producer's encoding and a reader's decoding. Even though the producer encodes the text in a particular way, the reader will most likely decode it in at least a slightly different manner. While the producers of a show set out to encode certain messages,

the audience's decoded interpretations actually determine the messages they receive, which may or may not exactly align with the producer's intended messages (Hall, 1980). For instance, *I Spy* will function as a paradigm of how producers encode their messages and the audience decodes its own. As such, the models of reception theory, as well as encoding and decoding will be used throughout this chapter to further examine how *I Spy* was an influential popular culture artifact of America's 1960s.

#### *Cultural Analysis of this Cult Object*

*I Spy*, originally the title of a short-lived TV thriller series of 1956, later became the title of the American television secret agent adventure series that centered on Robinson and Scott.<sup>4</sup> The new *I Spy* ran for three seasons on NBC from 1965 to 1968 and teamed actor Robert Culp with standup comedian Bill Cosby. In the show, Culp's character, the tennis player Kelly Robinson, was most commonly known as "Kelly" and Cosby's character, Alexander Scott, was most commonly referred to as "Scotty." While both characters are secret agents for the United States government, they used tennis as their cover (Cooper, n.d.). In a sense, the characters were anti-Bond, because the show followed the two lead roles equally, as opposed to the high-flying, central character of Bond (Britton, 2005). *I Spy*, therefore, had built upon

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<sup>4</sup> In the earlier *I Spy*, Anton, the spymaster, would tell historical stories about spies from ancient Rome to World War II. Actor Raymond Massey played Anton, the lead character. Each episode's story was typically about children who accidentally did espionage work. Unfortunately, the show lasted less than a year (Britton, 2004).

established conventions of spy characters, but made them uniquely relevant to the 1960s.

Early produced television dramas, especially shows about spies, were greatly influenced by the political climate of the times. Wesley Britton (2004), who has written extensively about spy television, highlights the potential for spy shows to convey the current social climate in the country. For instance, “attitudes toward McCarthyism, the Cold War, and changing technologies, as well as American values and tastes have all been mirrored in TV spies” (Britton, 2004, p. 15). Evidently, what took place in America, regardless of the era, played out on spy television. As a result, early spy shows portrayed the nation’s character.

Because many turning points in American history took place in the 1960s, the decade played a profound role for spies on television. In return, the times in the United States and around the world shaped spy fiction shows and their content. Along with that, *I Spy* was a television spy show that was greatly influenced by the 1960s and, in return, had social implications. Pierre Bourdieu (1994), a French sociologist, says, “One may say without contradiction that social realities are simultaneously social fictions with no other basis than social construction, and that they exist in reality, in as much as they are collectively recognized” (p. 137). Fictional television dramas, because they can be “collectively recognized,” talked about, interacted with, and understood by audiences and society, are just as much a part of the reality outside of

the television. This is particularly true with TV shows that establish large viewer followings, such as espionage dramas, which have often found success with American audiences.

As a part of reality, a TV show with a cult follow has the potential to have its messages reach many people. These decoded messages by viewers could possibly reach non-viewers through other means, either through show announcements, commercials, fan conversations, actor interviews, billboards, or other similar means. As a result, the opportunity for message saturation within popular culture is greater with shows that garner large audiences. Accordingly, when a show is highly successful, an audience often forms of strongly devoted fans, thereby forcing many shows to have audiences with emphatic followings. The spy fiction genre has often created such environments. This can be said of *I Spy* and its 1960s audience (Kackman, 2005). As a result, the concept of cult television can be applied to the study of spy fiction and *I Spy* is an example of a cult object. However, the definition of a cult object is complex and often fluid (Gwenllian-Jones & Pearson, 2004). Initially of course, the cult object must be loved, but that is not the only requirement (Eco, 1987).

A cult object, according to the Italian semiotician and philosopher Umberto Eco (1987), “must provide a completely furnished world so that fans can quote characters and episodes as if they were aspects of the fan’s private sectarian world, a world about which one can make quizzes and play trivia games so that the adepts of

the sect recognize through each other a shared expertise” (p. 198). In 1968, *I Spy* was parodied in an episode of the television series *Get Smart* (1965-1970), which was entitled “Die Spy.” While appearing on another show is not a “fan’s private sectarian world,” it does display the possibility that such existed, because the origin of the parody could be recognized by viewers of both shows. In the parody, agent Maxwell Smart pretends to be an international *table* tennis champion. Evidently, the scriptwriters accurately imitate the rhythms of the banter between Kelly and Scotty (Britton, 2004).<sup>5</sup> In addition, each of these elements of a cult object “must have some archetypal appeal,” where everyone is able to converse knowledgably about different aspects of the show (Eco, 1987, p. 198). As such, *I Spy* was also in a *Mad Magazine* parody. In June 1967, the *Mad Magazine* version of *I Spy*, called “Why Spy?” It featured characters called “Killy” and “Scoot,” as opposed to Kelly and Scott (Kurtzman & Feldstein, 1967). The parody received predictably mixed reviews. Furthermore, “in order to transform a work into a cult object one must be able to break, dislocate, unhinge it so that one can remember only parts of it, irrespective of their original relationship with the whole” (Eco, 1987, p. 198). Along those lines, *I Spy* coined unique phrases that briefly became catch phrases, such as “wonderfulness.” Later, Cosby used “Wonderfulness” as the title of one of his standup comedy albums released concurrently with the series (Cosby, 1998). In America in the mid-1960s, *I*

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<sup>5</sup> Culp also makes a cameo appearance in the episode (Britton, 2004).

*Spy* allowed audience members to interact with one another in a cult-like forum. Consequently, the audience became highly susceptible to the show's portrayal of America and, as a result, the country's ideology.

*American Ideology → Nationalism → Exceptionalism*

Ideology, according to Luis Althusser (1969), is the powerful force behind the dominance of hegemonic institutions. Specifically, Althusser (1969), a Marxist philosopher, defines ideology as an imaginary relation to the real relations of existence, whereby the ideas of representations that “make up ideology do not have an ideal or spiritual existence, but a material existence” (p. 296). This material existence has two parts. First, ideologies exist in apparatuses and their practices, which have material existences (Althusser, 1969). Second, the representations that constitute ideology are based in the material world. Such representations exist in those individuals who promote particular ideologies, as well as their collective ideas and belief systems (Althusser, 1969). Accordingly, this relates to Baudrillard's idea of terrorism, because terrorists as religious fanatics from underdeveloped countries are in conflict with the ideals of those in the Western world (Althusser, 1969).

These apparatuses and their accompanying practices, termed “Ideological State Apparatuses” (ISAs), are institutions such as religion, patriarchy, marriage, educational systems, and the like (Althusser, 1998, p. 303). Althusser (1998) states that there are no

practices “except by and in an ideology” (p. 299). Practices of particular powerful social institutions reproduce ideology in an ever changing, but re-circulating, dynamic process. Individuals are inevitably called to participate in practices of particular dominant institutional ideologies, even if the “subjects” are born into some form of ideology (Althusser, 1998, p. 303). Althusser describes this process systematically, as a circular relationship. Through a “conceptual device or *dispositif*,” an individual believes himself a subject endowed with a consciousness in which he freely forms or freely recognizes ideas in which he believes (Althusser, 1998, p. 297). The individual believes his ideas must be inserted into actions, or ought to exist in his actions, and these are inserted into practices governed by the rituals of particular ISAs. Consequently, the rituals stem from the ideology of the ISAs, which are the origin of the recognized or formed beliefs of the individual (Althusser, 1969).

However, individuals do not realize their subjection, believing that they freely form or recognize ideas and participate in ritual practices in order to “act according to their ideas” (Althusser, 1998, p. 297). Ideology is perpetuated by subjects and by ISAs in a dynamic, highly irresistible process. As John Fiske (1998), a communications scholar, states, “for Althusser, ideology is not a static set of ideas imposed upon the subordinate by the dominant classes, but rather a dynamic process constantly reproduced and reconstituted in practice” (p. 306). This process or mechanism is



termed “interpellation” (Althusser, 1998, p. 299). Television helps to make interpellation possible.

Television, as a medium, “was the best, most visible symbol of modernity for newly independent states, and also for Communist countries, where industrialization and technological progress (in competition with the West) were an integral part of state ideology” (Althusser, 1998, p. 97). During the fifties and sixties, which was during the time of *I Spy*, “television nicely fit into the global ideology of development through modernization supported by international organizations,” even though America was, at the time, leery of participation in these international organizations (Bourdon, 2004, p. 97). The modernization, in turn, could be seen in and through television.

The concept of American nationalism is the view U.S. citizens hold about their country. This view, however, has ramifications if the view negatively affects the way other countries and their people perceive America and Americans. American exceptionalism is one component of American nationalism that has created a debate for centuries over its effects on the United States. During the Cold War, American exceptionalism was often cast by the mass media as the “American way of life” (Greeley, 1991, p. 105). It personified liberty engaged in a battle with tyranny, which was represented by communism. These attributions were originally formed to differentiate the United States from the 19<sup>th</sup> century European powers and had been applied multiple times in multiple contexts before it was used to differentiate capitalist

democracies from communist nations, with the United States as a democratic leader (Lipset, 1991; Voss, 1993). Consequently, American exceptionalism during this period also manifested itself in a virulently anti-internationalist streak as part of which the United States rejected participation in international institutions that it could not control (Ross, 1991). American exceptionalism again found itself as a part of cultural fiction.

### *American Exceptionalism in I Spy*

American exceptionalism is displayed in *I Spy* in numerous forms. At the outset, the titles to the show involve the names of different international cities and countries.<sup>6</sup> The names are colorful and appear to float across the screen from left to right. The last name to appear is the U.S.A., shown, understandably, in red, white, and blue. The letters of U.S.A. are the biggest and most prominent compared to all the other countries listed. While the United States is the focal point of the show's plot, the show's titles visually encapsulate the notion of American exceptionalism, as if the United States is the most dominant, and in this case the most predominant, institution in the world. Furthermore, *I Spy*, by using content involving current events, engaged and related to its audience, making it more likely that this audience would be able to decode messages from the show because the content was relevant to the lives of the

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<sup>6</sup> The names of cities and countries included are the following: Delhi, Hong Kong, Venice, Bangkok, Lisbon, Mozambique, Macao, Dublin, London, Amsterdam, Zurich, Moscow, Rome, Acapulco, Paris, New York, Cairo, Haifa, India, Sweden, Madrid, Berlin, and Tokyo. In addition to the U.S.A., there is one other name. However, the name appears too small to read.

viewers. Accordingly, the show's plot lines included many turning points in American history that took place in the 1960s. Among these turning points were the Cold War, desire to remain economically dominant, and the civil rights movement, all of which encompassed the perceived notion of American exceptionalism.

The basis most commonly cited for American exceptionalism is the idea that the United States and the American people hold a special place in the world, by offering opportunity and hope for humanity. Arguably, it is derived from a unique balance of public and private interests governed by constitutional ideals that are focused on personal and economic freedom. United States citizens indicate a moral superiority of America or Americans by using the concept (Ross, 1991). Others use it to refer to the American concept as itself an exceptional ideal which gives the country a privileged position, and which may or may not always be upheld by the actual people and government of the nation (Ross, 1991).

Researchers and academics, however, generally use the term to strictly mean sharp and measurable differences in public opinion and political behavior between Americans and their counterparts in other developed democracies (Ross, 1991). Byron E. Shafer (1991), a historian, presents three generic varieties of American exceptionalism in his book, *Is America Different?*. The first is a "supernaturalist explanation emphasizing the causal potency of God in selecting America as a 'city on a hill' for the rest of the world to admire and emulate" (Tilman, 2005, p. 177). The

second are “environmental explanations, such as geography, climate, and availability of natural resources, social structure, and type of political economy” (Tilman, 2005, p. 177). And third, is a “genetic interpretation emphasizing racial traits, ethnicity, or gender” (Tilman, 2005, p. 177). Each of these variations are portrayed in *I Spy*.

### Cold War America

First, the U.S. acts as a “city on a hill,” as it attempts to take on the self-declared role of overseeing the other countries of the world (Shafer, 1991, p. vi). In the 1960s, America was continuing to confront the conflicts associated with the Cold War, which included a fight against communism. Several *I Spy* episodes approach the issue of communism head-on. Britton (2004) points out that “the human side of the secret agent is what distinguished *I Spy*’s eighty-two filmed episodes. It was a show closer to the realities of Cold War espionage than its other American counterparts, with more complex character flaws” (p. 84). During this time in America, concerns about traitors to the United States were at a forefront in American culture (Kackman, 2005). *I Spy* used the subject matter often in its story plots. For example, a Soviet scientist kidnaps Kelly and uses drugs and mirrors to hypnotize him into believing that Scotty is a traitor and has to be killed. The episode was fittingly titled “It’s All Done with Mirrors” and aired on April 13, 1966. Additionally, in the March 4, 1968 episode entitled, “Shana,” a woman (Shana) tries to exchange a top-secret rocket fuel with the communists for her

captive brother. Throughout most of the episode, Kelly and Scotty work with Shana to try and get her brother from the communists. In the end, however, she turns out to be a traitor and secretly working for the communists instead. Consequently, nothing good happens to traitors in the show. They are always caught and never prosper. A clear message is sent: A traitor to the United States will be caught and punished, a particularly important message in light of the on-going Cold War.

The Cold War had a tremendous effect on the country, including in some indirect ways. Mary Ann Watson, a TV historian, (1990) points out in *Expanding Vistas*, “President-elect... [John F. Kennedy] was made more fully aware of the genuine superiority the Russians enjoyed in space and the direct blame he might be forced to bear for possible failures of the American program” (p. 113). As a result, Kennedy, as president of the United States at the beginning of the decade, initiated the Apollo Program to challenge the Soviet Union’s own space program. Although Kennedy later “softened his stance on the space race,” Americans knew that the initial draw to improved space exploration was to challenge the Russians (Watson, 1990, p. 113). The space program continued even after Kennedy’s assassination in 1963, two years before the start of *I Spy*.

Years later, on November 20, 1967, *I Spy*’s “Apollo” would consist of Scotty taking an undercover job as a tour guide at a NASA aerospace center in order to find a saboteur. At the episode’s beginning, Scotty gives a group of congressmen a detailed

tour of the center and spacecrafts. The tour seems to last a while, making it evident that Scotty really knows his stuff. Yet, the plethora of information Scotty gives potentially does more. It casts a positive light on the real life space program, a light all of the viewers become exposed to. *I Spy*, showing this episode in late 1967, utilizes great timing for instilling in its audience the apparent growing success of a program working towards a landing on the moon the following year. Challenging the Soviets would help space exploration in general. After all, competition is good for results, but the reason for such a program in the United States was in response to seemingly lost supremacy. America could not stand being out performed, least of which by the Soviets. *I Spy*, with this episode, potentially contributed to the appearance of the U.S.'s stride towards returned prominence, as well as a country for others to emulate.

#### World Economy → Capitalistic Challenges

Second, the U.S. uses its “type of political economy” to separate itself among other countries (Shafer, 1991, p. vii). Unfortunately, the 1960s brought a sense of uneasiness about the future of American economic dominance (Kackman, 2005). This uneasiness appeared on *I Spy*. On December 1, 1965 in “Weight of the World,” Kelly and Scotty work with an eager new female American spy and an American doctor to secure a sample of a new, deadlier form of the bubonic plague being tested by the Chinese in Japan. Concurrently, in the real world, the Soviet Union had suddenly

withdrawn Soviet experts from China, resulting in a major economic crisis for China (Kackman, 2005). China was left with few options, one of which was to have a more official relationship with Japan. On December 15, 1965 in “Tigers of Heaven,” Scotty and Kelly must protect the last two men of an old honorable Japanese family who have become the targets of a Neo-Fascist and anti-American group. After the Great Depression, the capitalistic society in America had been viewed as a powerful economic environment (Kackman, 2005). Now, the market value of Japan and China was seen as a tremendous opportunity for further growth. Showing the opportunity to work with these countries in *I Spy* could do wonders for the countries’ relationships in real life.

Another way in which *I Spy* was a trailblazer was in its use of exotic international locations. This was in an attempt to emulate the James Bond film series (Britton, 2005). This was unique for a television show, especially since the series actually filmed its lead actors at locations ranging from Japan to Italy, rather than relying on photography and stock footage. Sheldon Leonard (1995), *I Spy*’s director, believed the show was more than a television series. He says, “It was an adventure” (Leonard, 1995, p. 143). Virtually the entire first season was filmed on location in Hong Kong and other Asian locales (Leonard, 1995). The second season was filmed almost exclusively in Greece, Spain, and other Mediterranean locations, using similar techniques (Leonard, 1995). The show’s international backdrop could have helped to

portray an America involved in healthy global relationships with other countries, whether those relationships were really good or bad.

### Civil Rights

Third, the U.S. emphasizes its “racial traits” (Shafer, 1991, p. vii). After all, the United States is often referred to as the “melting pot” (Lipset, 1996, p. 250). However, while the metaphor of the United States being a “melting pot” may have been accepted as a concept, it was not always embraced in reality.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the civil rights movement of the 1960s advocated for equal rights for people of color. The movement, led by Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK) and other civil rights leaders, began as a non-violent movement. Later in the decade, the Black Power movement and the Black Panther Party emerged as radical offshoots, which often brought about violence and strife (MacDonald, 1992). At the same time, President Lyndon Johnson’s projects of the Great Society were taking place (MacDonald, 1992). On September 15, 1965, the viewers of *I Spy*’s first episode, entitled “So Long, Patrick Henry,” could see that the story established a visual icon for the other stories in that space, particularly those stories relevant to the civil right movement taking place during the time. Three years later, during the two weeks before the show’s end on April 15, 1968, viewers

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<sup>7</sup> The metaphor is meant to describe America as a place where the members of society combine their identities to become one (Lipset, 1996).



experienced the significant passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1968 and, sadly, the assassination of MLK (MacDonald, 1992).

The civil rights movement stretched through the entire decade of the 1960s. As a result, the movement had a unique and direct effect on the writing of *I Spy*. In line with Hall's theory of encoding and decoding, the audience did not always decode the messages the producers encoded in exactly the same way. Along those lines, Thomas Roberts (1990), an English professor, proposes that "every episode in every television show creates a story space, in which the stories it presents and the stories it activates in viewers' minds intersect" (p. 245). It may not be visible, forty years after *I Spy* first aired, but the original viewers knew that the actors and the show itself were taking as many risks as those fictional counterspies the episode was about. Those viewers in 1965 were less confident of the endings of those nonfictional stories than they were of the ending of each episode's story (Roberts, 1990). These factors play influential roles in the overall story space, because they potentially affect the overall show's story, the actors' stories, and each episode's story. Each of these separate stories help to conceptualize how the civil rights movement influenced *I Spy*'s content, as well as the show's portrayal of America.

### The Show's Story

First, the show's story is significant. *I Spy* and its writers attempted to portray the characters in a world removed from the civil rights movement, as if the world within *I Spy* was without racial prejudice. The two main characters were in equal roles. Culp was white. Cosby was black. This perspective of America would shed a much brighter light on a country that was, at the time, struggling to find common ground amongst its diverse citizens. J. Fred MacDonald, a history professor at Northeastern Illinois University, examines the breadth at which television struggled to represent an all-inclusive array of races in the second edition of his book, *Blacks and White TV*. MacDonald points out that several network action programs included black stars or costars after the breakthrough appearance of Cosby in *I Spy*. The show portrayed the two central actors, as well as their characters, as equals. However, the plot lines stayed away from directly confronting America's racial issues. While the show attempted to be without blatant social commentary, the show depicted whites and blacks as equal. That alone could be considered commentary.

### The Actors' Stories

Second, in addition to a show's story, the actors bring their own stories to the overall story space. Often, the characters or actors in television shows become symbols or icons for things outside of the television world, whereby the character or actor

becomes a symbol for what he or she means to the overall world. According to William Kurtz Wimsatt (1954) in his book *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*, this icon is “a sign which somehow shares the properties of, or resembles, the objects which it denotes” (p. x). *I Spy* broke new ground in the fight for racial equality and Cosby became an icon. Because Cosby was African-American, it was the first American television drama to feature a male African-American actor in such a prominent TV role. In shows before *I Spy*, “black leads in television action-adventure series were limited to local programs, notably 1954’s *Harlem Detective* seen only in New York City, or in stereotyped guest roles or one-shot episodes for then-popular anthology series” (Britton, 2004, p. 83). It was also notable that Cosby’s race was never an issue in any of the stories, nor was his character in any way subservient to Culp’s character, even though Culp’s character was a more experienced agent. Visually seeing a black man in a lead role was all the text needed to convey its message. Critics praised such efforts by the show, but these critics also believed that “American television was geared for entertainment, which made money, not social commentary, which did not” (Britton, 2004, p. 83). Even though the show’s sole purpose may not have been social commentary, Cosby, as well as others, understood the social implications of the show.

Originally, the role of Alexander Scott was to have been that of a bodyguard for Kelly Robinson (MacDonald, 1992). Both Cosby and Culp conferred with the show's producers and the decision was made to have Kelly and Scotty as equals (MacDonald, 1992). Cosby also insisted that racial issues would not be dealt with on *I Spy* (MacDonald, 1992). This "color blind" approach freed the show from having to impart a message each week and instead allowed it to succeed by emulating the conventions of the genre of espionage adventure (Kackman, 2005). *I Spy* also showcased the talents of other African-American actors of the time including Godfrey Cambridge, Ivan Dixon, Cisely Tyson, and Eartha Kitt (MacDonald, 1992). As a result of its purposeful neutrality on race relations, African-Americans could be heroes or villains with a minimum of political overtones. In the beginning, the show's producers were certain of Cosby's talents, but the network had serious doubts about casting an untested standup comedian in a dramatic lead (MacDonald, 1992). However, Cosby's multifaceted talent would later garner him three consecutive Emmys as "Best Male Actor in a Dramatic Television Series" between 1965 and 1968 and quickly dispelled the network's concerns (MacDonald, 1992).

#### Each Episode's Story

Finally, the story space includes each episode's story. For example, Cosby in one episode kisses a Japanese woman. Then, in "Laya," which aired September 25,

1967, Alexander falls in love with a rival agent, who is white (MacDonald, 1992). According to MacDonald (1992), “boundaries in film and radio traditionally ruled out physical expressions of interracial romance, even between blacks kissing and other demonstrations were proscribed” (MacDonald, 1992, p. 121). Therefore, “when Scotty romanced Laya, touching, caressing, and kissing her, another barrier to black artistic expression was shattered” (MacDonald, 1992, p. 121). This episode was profound because it allowed Scotty to have a romantic interest with a white women, something many viewers found to be uncharacteristic of what was expected on TV during that time. In a way, the America inside of *I Spy* was a better America than the world viewers were experiencing outside of the show. Potentially, the show could portray to its viewers the possible America of the future.

### *Conclusion*

*I Spy* enjoyed three successful years on NBC.<sup>8</sup> After the series finale of *I Spy* in 1968, espionage shows became more and more sophisticated. In the 1970s and 1980s, a former CIA employee, Charles McCarry, wrote a half-dozen highly regarded novels such as *The Tears of Autumn* (1975) and *The Secret Lovers* (1978) that were notable for mastery of espionage tradecraft, as well as their literary quality (Britton, 2004). On

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<sup>8</sup> Cosby, in particular, enjoyed very high audience appreciation ratings for the run of the show (MacDonald, 1992). He would continue to grow into a prominent icon for blacks in entertainment.

television, a popular British television drama, *The Sandbaggers* (1978, 1980), presented a gritty bureaucratic view of espionage operations (Britton, 2004).

In 1994, Cosby and Culp reunited once more for a nostalgic television movie *I Spy Returns*, in which the aging spies leaped into action once again to rescue their children, who were then also spies (Britton, 2004). Seven years later, the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States would reignite interest and reverse a decline in espionage audiences in respects to film and television (Britton, 2004). Scholars point to the renaissance in spy novels, spy films, and spy television shows as indicators of reinvigorated interest in the spy fiction genre (Britton, 2004).

In conclusion, in the four decades that followed the airing of *I Spy*, spy TV shows continued to be a reflection of America. In particular, historical turning points within that time would influence what viewers of spy shows saw. None of the turning points would be more influential than the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. That day changed America. In return, it also changed the content Americans would see on TV and in spy dramas in particular.

## Chapter 4. Showtime's *Sleeper Cell*

The underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power. The problem for Islam is not the CIA or the U.S. Department of Defense. It is the West, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the universality of their culture and believe that their superior, if declining, power imposes on them the obligation to extend that culture throughout the world.

–Samuel Huntington (1997), *The Clash of Civilizations*, (pp. 217-218)

After September 11, 2001, America found itself having to confront the rest of the world differently and, for that reason, was forced to reevaluate its place within the new global environment. The terrorist attacks of that day, a monumental turning point in American history, uncharacteristically happened on home soil. Through the aid of the media, the day provoked dramatic images of death and destruction that instilled fear and anxiety into the lives of Americans and its allies around the world. Over five years later, the threat of terrorism still looms in the minds of many Americans. As terrorists point to America's exceptionalism as fuel for such hate, ever-present reminders reinforce the idea that another terrorist attack could happen at any moment. So much so, preparation for the next potential act of terrorism has become a part of the American character and a component of American ideology (Martin & Petro, 2006). However, many of these reminders of terrorism are not only initiated by the terrorists, but are also perpetuated by Americans and American institutions, including, but not

limited to, the U.S. government, the U.S. military, and the seemingly ubiquitous U.S. media.

Immediately following the attacks of 9/11, the events of that day were pinned on the terrorist group, al-Qaeda, which is believed to have cells all over the Middle East and is often characterized as composed of Islamic extremists or radicals (Croft, 2006). In response to terrorist attacks and threats by this group and others, the U.S. has embarked on what it has coined the “War on Terror,” which, according to the current Bush administration, includes the military conflicts in Afghanistan and against Saddam Hussein’s former regime in Iraq, as well as the overseeing of Iraq’s governmental reconstruction (Croft, 2006).<sup>9</sup> In response to this relevant topic of terror, it is not uncommon to find the American media delving into topics about terrorism and America’s subsequent readiness and preparedness for future such acts (Liddy et al., 2006). Consequently, this frequent media coverage holds the potential to further contribute to the fear associated with projected attacks against America.

One example of media perpetuation includes Showtime’s television spy drama, *Sleeper Cell*, which follows the life of character, Darwyn Al-Sayeed. According to Showtime’s synopsis of the show, Darwyn is a 30-year old African-American and a Muslim ex-con. He has just been released from a U.S. prison and finds his way to an

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<sup>9</sup> Other countries were and continue to be viewed as in conflict with the United States. Soon after 9/11, Iraq, Iran, and North Korea were seen as potential threats to America. The Bush administration began referring to these three countries as the “axis of evil”. However, several years later, the administration backed off this rhetoric (Laurent, 2004, pp. 10-11).



Islamic extremist named Faris al-Farik (known simply as Farik), who recruits Darwyn to join a terrorist cell planning an attack in Los Angeles. However, Darwyn is also an FBI agent. His job is to acquire information and report to his boss, Ray Fuller, a senior agent and close friend.<sup>10</sup> On Sunday, December 4, 2005, Darwyn, Farik, Fuller, and other characters began appearing in *Sleeper Cell*, a one-hour television drama that has aired two seasons. Uniquely, each season comprises eight episodes and a two-hour finale. A season typically runs in one week, airing all its episodes Sunday to Sunday, making it easier to follow the story and lives of the show's characters ("Sleeper Cell: American Terror," 2007).

### *Simulation and Terrorism*

First and foremost, much of what takes place in television shows mirror what is going on in the real world (Baudrillard, 1994). This sense of "realism" is portrayed in order for a show to engage and relate to its audience. Yet, this concept of realism challenges a show's attempt to do more than just *represent* the real world. At some level, the goal is to actually appear real by *simulating* what is going on in reality. Baudrillard (1994) differentiates between representation and simulation. Simulation, in a sense, is in opposition to representation. Baudrillard proposes that "representation starts from the principle that the sign and the real are equivalent" (p. 6). Initially,

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<sup>10</sup> Darwyn is played by actor, Michael Ealy. Farik is played by actor, Oded Fehr and Ray Fuller is played by James LeGros ("Sleeper Cell: American Terror," 2007).

therefore, the sign is meant to represent the real. Yet, “simulation starts from the Utopia of this principle of equivalence, from the radical negation of the sign as value, from the sign as reversion and death sentence of every reference” (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 6). Television shows, whether professed “reality shows” or not, want to be more than mere representation, because “representation tries to absorb simulation by interpreting it as false representation,” while “simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation as itself a simulacrum” (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 6). Basically, TV shows become a part of reality, as well as reality a part of the shows. Hence, a show like *Sleeper Cell* attempts to do more than just represent. It attempts to simulate the whole world, attracting viewers by merging the world within the show with the world outside of it, making every entity, including the show itself, a part of an all-inclusive reality. Terrorism, since 9/11, is a part of this all-inclusive reality, as well as American society’s fear and anxiety that accompany it.

TV shows similar to *Sleeper Cell* rely heavily on their reflection of America. As such, Jean Baudrillard’s (1994) theory of simulation allows for a close look at how television shows portray the United States. Additionally, an analysis of the relationship between Althusser’s (1986) concept of ideology and Baudrillard’s (2003) notion of terrorism, particularly in response to 9/11, will help to conceptualize terrorism in the world. These theories will then be applied to an examination of *Sleeper Cell* in order to better understand how this espionage drama’s focus on terrorism could influence its

viewers to cast terrorism and terrorists in particular lights. Collectively, these concepts and viewer exposure could aid in the development and perception of American nationalism, American ideology, and, more specifically, American exceptionalism.

Baudrillard (2003), building upon his own culture theories, applies Althusser's concept of ideology to the conceptualization of terrorism. While Baudrillard (2003) admits, "There is no boundary to define [terrorism]," he describes it in his essay, "The Spirit of Terrorism," as a reaction to a dominant system—the underdeveloped against the Western world (p. 10). This fluidity in its definition may imply it could morph and change. Yet since 9/11, it would make sense that "the visible schism (and hatred) that opposes, on a global level... the underdeveloped against the Western world, is secretly linked to the internal fracture of the dominant system" (Baudrillard, 2003, p. 10). At the root, America's current global conflict involves a battle of ideologies—the ideologies of America and its allies against the ideologies of, as America would describe them, Islamic extremists or radicals and those opposed to American ideologies.

Because ideology, as Althusser (1978) asserts, is the powerful force behind the dominance of hegemonic institutions, another component of terrorism is the responses it provokes, either from the terrorists themselves or the dominant hegemonic institutions. According to Baudrillard (2003):

Terror against terror—there is no more ideology behind all that. [People involved with terror] are now far from ideology and politics. No ideology, no cause, not even an Islamic cause, can account for the energy which feeds terror. It (energy) does not aim anymore to change the world, it aims (as any heresy in its time) to radicalize it through sacrifice, while the system aims to realize (the world) through force (p. 15).

The so-called Islamic extremists, through suicide bombings for example, aim to make their actions based on sacrifice and radicalization, while the United States, through military action, use force to realize the world.

While perhaps unintentional, American spy shows, through their makeup and established conventions, perpetuate this “through force” ideology (Baudrillard, 2003, p. 15). They often depict the United States, for entertainment purposes, as having the upper hand and a consistent “winner” in international conflicts (Baudrillard, 2003). Accordingly, Jérôme Bourdon (2004), in his essay, *Is Television a Global Medium?*, asserts that “television [is] perceived as a symbol of true national sovereignty,” which explains “the sense of urgency both rulers and historians have had about the development of television” (p. 29). Television, in a sense, contributes to Althusser’s process of “interpellation” by being a part of the dynamic process that encourages viewers of TV shows to “act according to their ideas”—the ideas they are receiving from the television (Althusser, 1998, pp. 297, 299). Not surprisingly, shows such as these symbolically render the United States, as the world’s dominant country, as in a

battle of force against any ideology that goes against its own, whereby most of the time, if not all the time, the United States is portrayed as the foremost victor.

### *Simulation of Terrorism and Terrorists in Sleeper Cell*

*Sleeper Cell*, much like *I Spy* did in the 1960s, reflects the ideology associated with American nationalism by exemplifying the notion of American exceptionalism, a component that only feeds the existence of terrorism. The concept of American exceptionalism describes the belief that the United States has an exceptional position among other countries. Terrorism and terrorists are portrayed in *Sleeper Cell* as in opposition to American exceptionalism. These implicit and explicit messages about the terrorists' disdain for United States' dominance in the world are evident from the beginning with this show.<sup>11</sup> The title of the first season, *Sleeper Cell: The Enemy is Here*, sets the tone. The subtitle, "the enemy is here," makes it apparent that terrorism is already undesirably embedded into American neighborhoods and, consequently, part and parcel of American society. As in the real world, terrorism in *Sleeper Cell* is seen as retaliation to the dominant Western world. While the terrorists are not portrayed as members of the underdeveloped world, they are portrayed as extremists—as radicals. They are opposed to the developed world of the West and all it stands for. More specifically, terrorism in the show is depicted through graphic images and intense

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<sup>11</sup> Each episode of the show is almost a full hour in length, because the show airs on a subscription channel. As a result, it can be shown with limited commercials.

situations, while the terrorists are portrayed as Islamic extremists, utilizing the American stereotype of terrorists as religious radicals.

In the real world, the news is full of stories that pertain to terrorists as Islamic extremists and with Arab features. Particularly, stories about airport security, racial profiling, and other similar new pieces pertaining to security are bountiful. *Sleeper Cell*, through its narrative, potentially contributes to the generalization of terrorists as Islamic extremists. Consequently, the simulation of terrorists is evident through the show's depiction of current events in America.

Since terrorism is the central focus of the show's plot, much of what happens in the show contributes to the characterization of terrorism, as well as America's response.<sup>12</sup> Baudrillard (2003) presents the idea that people often view terrorism as a rise in evil against all that is good. While Baudrillard (2003) believes terrorism goes beyond Good versus Evil, *Sleeper Cell* largely sets up this dichotomy. The show is full of intense situations. Halfway through the first season, viewers see the terrorists do a test run of unleashing weapons grade anthrax through the air ducts of a busy L.A. shopping mall. In addition, they stone one of their own that opened his mouth about their future plans and they take on mobster moneymen in Tijuana. Moreover, because Darwyn is constantly trying to qualify his allegiance to the cause to the untrusting

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<sup>12</sup> The opening shot of the first season shows Darwyn praying in a prison cell toward a photo of Mecca, while the final shot of the first season shows Darwyn praying in a mosque. These two scenes, used as "book ends" for the series make it clear the use of religion plays a substantial role in the characterization of the terrorists.

Farik, he has to find creative ways, often-dangerous ones, to break away for long enough to report in to his field officer. Darwyn is often tasked with performing terrorist responsibilities that could break his cover and put his life in jeopardy. His life and the FBI's case constantly hang in the balance, awaiting Darwyn's next reaction. Jonathan Markovitz (2004), in his essay "Reel Terror Post 9/11," discusses the portrayal of fear that was evident in films soon after September 11. The same could be said for television as well. Markovitz (2004) asserts, "For audience members comparing these images to those that flickered across their television screens on September 11, suspension of disbelief has become impossible, as the artifice of cinematic terror is now apparent in dramatically new ways" (p. 201). These components of *Sleeper Cell* aid in the American conceptualization of terrorism, deeming it dangerous, "immoral," and radical (Baudrillard, 2003, p. 12).

The show uses intense scenes that intend to portray the so-called "true," anti-American, and malevolent nature of terrorist groups. Graphic images, nudity, and profanity are a common occurrence on this subscription-based television channel's show. One has to wonder whether the true nature of terrorists is what drives the content or whether the channel's limited restrictions entices the mature content that is more likely to engage an audience. No doubt these racy images sell and are an established norm with spy dramas. After all, American society has evolved dramatically with what it accepts on TV in its depiction of reality, especially regarding sexuality. For instance,

*I Spy*, even during the “free-loving” 60s, simply relied on beautiful women and flirtation, while *Sleeper Cell* relies on the same, only then some. The terrorists in *Sleeper Cell* often meet at strip clubs with naked women, which are also fully revealed to the show’s viewers. In addition, the terrorists, except for Darwyn, often have gratuitous sex.<sup>13</sup> It is as though this lifestyle is the way of terrorists in America—under the apparent guise that they are just blending into American culture.<sup>14</sup> Instead, the portrayal adds to the assertion that terrorists are evil and, therefore, associated with the “immoral” or the bad of society.

At first glance, *Sleeper Cell*’s first season gives the appearance of a diverse representation of characters’ nationalities and ethnicities, although all of the terrorists are men and practicing Muslims.<sup>15</sup> Several are from Middle Eastern countries, but a few are natural born citizens of the United States. Darwyn is recognizably African-American, yet in the cell, his fellow plotters come from all walks of life, such as Benny, a French ex-skinhead and Tommy, a blonde haired, blue-eyed, Southern American boy.<sup>16</sup> Yet from the very beginning of the show, it is evident that all of the

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<sup>13</sup> Darwyn’s unpredictable terrorist duties and his religion’s frowning upon premarital sex make it hard for him to carry out a normal relationship with his girlfriend, Gayle. Melissa Sagemiller is the actress that plays Gayle in the show (“*Sleeper Cell: American Terror*,” 2007).

<sup>14</sup> Not surprisingly, the graphic depictions and intense action contributed to the series’ nomination for an Emmy award for “Outstanding Miniseries” in 2006 (“*Sleeper Cell: American Terror*,” 2007).

<sup>15</sup> Titles of the show’s episodes are one word and relate to the episode’s topic. All relate to the nature of terrorism. For instance, the eight titles for the first season include: “Al-Fatiha,” “Target,” “Money,” “Scholar,” “Soldier,” “Family,” “Immigrant,” and “Intramural.”

<sup>16</sup> Tommy is played by actor Blake Shields and Benny is portrayed by Kevin Alejandro (“*Sleeper Cell: American Terror*,” 2007).



terrorists are labeled Islamic extremists, as if these extremists are the only types of terrorists. G. Gordon Liddy (2006), the chief operative for U.S. President Richard Nixon's White House Plumbers unit, is notably known for his involvement in the break-in of the Democratic National Committee headquarters in the Watergate building in 1972 and the subsequent cover-up of the Watergate scandal. Liddy (2006), now an American radio talk show host, actor and political strategist, dissects the origins of those against American ideals in his book *Fight Back: Tackling Terrorism, Liddy Style*. According to Liddy (2006), "it is clear that al Qaida is not the only threat to American interests" (p. 8). However, *Sleeper Cell* shows other "bad" characters, i.e. drug dealers, hustlers, mobsters, and the like, but only characterizes terrorists as Islamic extremists. Therefore, the show's portrayal of terrorists is in line with the way Americans stereotypically view terrorists.

As a result, the perpetuation of these stereotypes could potentially influence viewers to continue these unfair biases. Zbigniew Brzezinski (2007), national security advisor to U.S. President Jimmy Carter from 1977 to 1981, wrote an opinion for the *Washington Post* entitled, "Terrorized by 'War on Terror': How a three-word mantra has undermined America" In it he says, "TV serials and films in which the evil characters have recognizable Arab features, sometimes highlighted by religious gestures, that exploit public anxiety and stimulate Islamophobia." *Sleeper Cell*, particularly in its first season, contributes to "Islamicphobia." Characters with Arab

features on the show are not the only evil characters represented. However, all of the terrorists are depicted as Islamic, and, except for Darwyn, are portrayed as radicals. To Brzezinski (2007), “The atmosphere generated by the “war on terror” has encouraged legal and political harassment of Arab Americans (generally loyal Americans) for conduct that has not been unique to them.” American institutions give sustainability to this fear. The government “at every level has stimulated the paranoia” and, consequently:

The culture of fear is like a genie that has been let out of its bottle. It acquires a life of its own -- and can become demoralizing. America today is not the self-confident and determined nation that responded to Pearl Harbor; nor is it the America that heard from its leader, at another moment of crisis, the powerful words “the only thing we have to fear is fear itself”; nor is it the calm America that waged the Cold War with quiet persistence despite the knowledge that a real war could be initiated abruptly within minutes and prompt the death of 100 million Americans within just a few hours. [Americans] are now divided, uncertain and potentially very susceptible to panic in the event of another terrorist act in the United States itself (Brzezinski, 2007).

The use of fear, though, is not new. *I Spy* took advantage of the fear associated with communism and the Cold War. *Sleeper Cell* is doing the same, specifically drawing attention to Arabs and practicing Muslims as instigators of hate and people to fear, which affects the country’s ideology.

## *American Exceptionalism and the Feeding of Terrorism*

America's ideology of exceptionalism is often encoded into *Sleeper Cell's* messages and is frequently given as the reason for the terrorists' plotting. Three examples within *Sleeper Cell* give a glimpse into the ways this show portrays America and could induce a discourse about America's exceptionalism as fuel for terrorism. In the show, Farik alludes to these three examples in a short monologue during the first season's finale by summing up the cell's reasons for attack just before it strikes.

He announces the plan of the attack on Los Angeles, telling the other members of the terrorist cell:

For too many years, Americans have deluded themselves into thinking that they are exceptional—that [1] the laws of history do not apply to them. Like the pharaoh who persecuted Moses, [2] they have become secure in their materialism and their hedonism. [3] They have defied God and proclaimed themselves masters of destiny. That every good Muslim knows, only God is the lord of destiny and now it is time to remind Americans this truth.

Farik's rant highlights several components of America's exceptionalism, which include the laws of history not applying to the U.S., the country's materialism and hedonism, and the desire for terrorists to instill their version of God's truth in Americans.

Examples from the show will exemplify the depiction of American exceptionalism and its resulting parallels with terrorism.

U.S. as a Dominant Power:

First, the United States is understood to be “the dominant power in the world” (Soros, 2006, p. 128). Yet, the country is also portrayed as one that does not follow international law. However, as a dominant country, this perceived injustice potentially ignites hate. September 11’s attacks occurred where they did because of what they represented, which included, beyond just the hatred for the United States, but for the global order the U.S. belongs to. Since the establishment of its intelligence agencies, the United States has been known for advanced intelligence gathering capabilities. U.S. capabilities are still admired. George Soros (2006), a political activist, says in his book *The Age of Fallibility: Consequences of the War on Terror*, “The ideology of American supremacy found expression in the Bush doctrine incorporated in the National Security Report of 2002. Its two main tenets held that the United States must maintain absolute military superiority in every part of the world and that the United States has the right to preemptive military action” (p. 129). This is often a trait the U.S. gloats, setting itself apart from other countries’ practices, but the “above the rules” attitude often conveys arrogance and feeds the fire of hate.

The following dialogue from *Sleeper Cell* is an example of such U.S. pride. It takes place in the fourth episode, “Scholar,” in which Darwyn is trying to have Ray, his boss at the FBI, set up surveillance on a young terrorist recruit who is carrying

Anthrax into Canada. Secretly, Darwyn slips his cell phone into the recruit's pocket so he can be traced. Darwyn calls Ray from an airport pay phone:

RAY: Darwyn, [you have] got to get back to the terminal. Farik is on his way out. I'll put a CIA surveillance team on that kid as soon as he touches down on Canada.

DARWYN: Isn't Canada an eyes-only country, Ray? We can't spy up there.

RAY: Darwyn, we are America. We can spy on whoever we want. Now, just get out of there.

This exchange, while perhaps influenced largely by the characters' intense situation, exemplifies the stereotype that America can do whatever it wants in regards to international law, as long as its actions help the United States. Ray, as a representative of a U.S. intelligence agency, says America can spy on whomever it wants, which may or may not be true. However, there are international laws America would seemingly have to follow. Yet, as a characteristic of American exceptionalism, the United States government often acts as it wills, because it initiated the establishment of such laws. American exceptionalism says America should not be bound by international law except where it serves American interests. According to Tom Barry and Jim Lobe (2002) in their article "U.S. Foreign Policy – Attention, right face, forward march," the United States should "accept responsibility for America's unique role in preserving and extending order friendly to [Americans'] security, [Americans'] prosperity, and [Americans'] principles" (Barry & Lobe, 2002). This position is driven by a usually

implicit premise that the United States cannot violate international law and in particular international human rights norms, because of the view that America itself was largely responsible for instigating those norms in the first place.

This view has come under stress due to perceived international condemnation of United States human rights practices under the doctrine of the “War on Terror” (Laurent, 2004). It is often argued that in order for the United States to protect national security, some laws may have to be ignored for the good of the country. Usually, the reason for action is that the United States has an obligation to protect its citizens and can, therefore, with executive privilege do what is deemed in the best interest of the country. This view is often expressed in the action of *Sleeper Cell*.

U.S. Materialism and Hedonism:

Second, *Sleeper Cell* portrays America as materialistic and hedonistic. The materialism and hedonism of the United States may stem from the country’s founding principle of the “American dream,” a phrase credited to James Truslow Adams with his book, *The Epic of America*. Adams (1931) describes the American dream as “a better, richer, and happier life for all [American] citizens of every rank, which is the greatest contribution [Americans] have made to the thought and welfare of the world” (p. 130). The existence of such a dream has been exposed to all Americans, because “that dream or hope has been present from the start. Ever since [America] became an

independent nation, each generation has seen an uprising of ordinary Americans to save that dream from the forces which appear to be overwhelming it” (Adams, 1931, p. 130). This goal of achieving the American dream potentially instigates more hatred from terrorists, because it contributes to the perception of materialism and hedonism in the United States. Americans striving to achieve the “American dream” are examples to the terrorists as to what they hate about America.

In particular, each season’s plot slowly sheds light on the terrorists’ pasts and where and how they acquired their beliefs about their movement and the United States. For example, the following dialogue takes place in the first episode, entitled “Al-Fatiha,” which literally means “the opening” and is also the name of the first book in the Qu’ran, the Muslim holy book. At the time, Farik is talking to the members of the new cell, giving them an overview of the cell’s goals. As he explains the cell’s future, many of the members are wondering how Farik knows so much about the U.S. military. They question where he learned such information:

FARIK: I have many friends in uniform. I received, um, my advanced training in Georgia.

DARWYN: On the boarder with Chesnia?

FAIRK: On the boarder with South Carolina. That’s where I learned all about America—that, and MTV.

Often, the perception of how non-Americans see Americans is based on how the United States are represented in the media, including such media outlets as MTV.

While MTV is very American in some ways, it does not represent America as a whole nor completely represent every American. If America were exactly like MTV portrays, it would only help to perpetuate a stereotype that Americans are hedonistic and all about image, wealth, and fame. Moreover, this scene of *Sleeper Cell* gives the sense that terrorists could seemingly be Americans' neighbors by appearing to be assimilated into American society. Baudrillard (2003) says:

Already, the idea of freedom, a new and recent idea, is being erased from everyday lives and consciousness, and liberal globalization is being realized as its exact reverse: a "Law and Order" globalization, a total control, a policing terror. Deregulation ends in maximal constraints and restrictions, equal to those in a fundamentalist society. Production, consumption, speculation and growth slowdowns (but not of course corruption!): everything indicates a strategic retreat of the global system, a heart-rending revision of its values, a regulation forced by absolute disorder, but one the system imposes on itself, internalizing its own defeat. It seems a defensive reaction to terrorism impact, but it might in fact respond to secret injunctions.

The materialism and hedonism that many perceive about America contributes to the seeming expression of exceptionalism. This desire for more only exacerbates the idea that Americans are concerned only for their well being, yet do so with the appearance of being in control—as if, as a country, America is the master of destiny.

U.S. Acts like God – Master of Destiny:

Third, in another example, the concept of terrorism is broken down into good versus evil. For instance, Farik and Darwyn want to learn more about some of the financial supporters for the terrorist ring and decide to follow one of the support's cars.



Soon after, Farik grows suspect when Darwyn seems to have experience tailing automobiles:

DARWYN: Rangers train for urban warfare. Counter insurgency is pretty fuckin' thorough.

FARIK: How does it make you feel? Knowing that your buddies are killing Muslims in a state of war.

DARWYN: Most of the guys I served with, they enlisted to escape poverty, get an education, following a tradition. They didn't sign up to follow a crusade.

FARIK: By participating in a war, they are as guilty as the men who ordered it.

DARWYN: Do you really think that things are as black and white, good versus evil?

FARIK: Yes. I do.

This dialogue gives a glimpse into the ideology of this terrorist cell's leader, yet it is a stereotypical one at that. Farik insinuates that this is a battle between his side, the good side, and the United States, evil side. However, the United States believes the opposite. Baudrillard (2003) says, "It is very logically, and inexorably, that the (literally: 'rise to power of power') exacerbates a will to destroy it. And power is complicit with its own destruction. When the two towers collapsed, one could feel that they answered the suicide of the kamikazes by their own suicide." This battle of good and evil often evokes the notion of a god, a notion that has sometimes been attached to the West. For instance, "It has been said: 'God cannot declare war on Itself.' Well, It can. The West,

in its God-like position (of divine power, and absolute moral legitimacy) becomes suicidal, and declares war on itself” (Baudrillard, 2004). John B. Parrott (2003), in his book *Being Like God: How American Elites Abuse Politics and Power*, says, “The single unit—the central government—is an agent of consensus, and its power is used for the furtherance of a policy agenda and, often, a self-described moral struggle of Good versus Evil” (p. 52). A government being “God” or the master of destiny could lead the institution or apparatus to simplify the world’s issues as black and white, where seemingly it acts for good and all opposed for bad. While seemingly contradictory, this could lead to complex global relationships.

Furthermore, Darwyn comprehends the complexity of the situation, even though this may be due to his dual perspective. He is a Muslim and embedded in a terrorist cell, but also works for the United States government. He sees that the conflicts are much more than “black and white.” This simplification of “black and white” is explained further in this next example. In the fifth episode, “Soldier,” the cell members pose as Iraqi insurgents-in-training in order to infiltrate and take over Kenneth’s secure warehouse as a new base of operations for Youmud Din, “Judgment Day”:

FARIK: I need your facility in order to prepare for a holy reckoning.

KENNETH: It’s a military target?

FARIK: We’re not at war with the American military. We are at war with

America, period. And we are going to win that war by convincing enough Americans through fear, insecurity, and terror to change their ways. The best way to teach that lesson is by attacking them where they live, work, and play.

There is no doubt that attacking Americans where they “live, work, and play” would invoke “fear, insecurity, and terror.” Though somewhat contradictory, Doug Elfman (2006), with the *Chicago Sun-Times*, says, “*Sleeper Cell* [is not] fearmongering fiction, but it does make me a little more suspicious of everything, everywhere.” Consequently, viewers of *Sleeper Cell* have the opportunity to see the preparations by these depicted terrorists working to accomplish that fearful mission of the next attack against America.

In the show’s second season, Darwyn infiltrates a new cell that has formed to avenge the defeat of the original cell.<sup>17</sup> The second season of the series, titled *Sleeper Cell: American Terror*, premiered on December 10, 2006. The writers gave up the classic stereotype of a terrorist as a Middle Eastern looking dark man and have presented an even more international mix in the cell: Americans, including African Americans, Arabs, and Frenchmen among others. The writers offered a non-stereotypical mix of cell members, including a white European woman, a Latino-

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<sup>17</sup> Synopsis of second season: When his second boss, Patrice Serxner, is killed in Sudan, Darwyn must try to work with yet another, Special Agent Russell. Meanwhile, Gayle, Darwyn’s girlfriend, is drawn deeper into intrigue when she is caught between Russell, Darwyn, and a member of the cell (“24,” 2007).

American man and, in a first for American television, a gay Muslim man (“*Sleeper Cell: American Terror*,” 2007).

Furthermore, in an article by Scott Pierce (2005, December 1) of Salt Lake City’s *Deseret News*, Cyrus Voris, the show’s executive producer, is quoted as saying, “The idea of having a Muslim hero in the show was very important... It was sort of a metaphor for the entire series, which is (that) there are Muslims in the United States that are patriotic Americans, and yet the real face of Islam in the United States right now is terrorism. We wanted to deal with both those characters.” Voris adds, “I think this show is a pretty balanced portrayal of what’s really out there... I mean, the lead character in our show is a practicing Muslim. And I think that helps sort of balance out the issue of – are we just portraying Islamic terrorist? Because, obviously, we’re not” (Pierce, 2005, December 1). Michael Ealy, the actor who plays Darwyn, is quoted as saying, “I think one of the best things about this show is that it creates an awareness that not only people of Arab descent should be stopped at airports... There are people who are blond and blue-eyes who are walking through airports that are terrorists. There are people who look exactly like me who are terrorists... That kind of awareness, I think, is extraordinarily important right now” (Pierce, 2005, December 1). The writers and actors of *Sleeper Cell* saw the significance in their artistic portrayal of terrorism. While Ealy finds their renditions of terrorists to be diverse, little has been done to curb the perception of Islamic extremists as terrorists. America is captivated by the post-

9/11 world it finds itself in, which is evident in the material television uses to capture the attention of American TV viewers.

### *Conclusion*

While it would be naïve to think there is no threat of a future terrorist attack, it would make sense that continuously being reminded of such threats could do exactly as the terrorists hope—instill in Americans lives of fear, insecurity, and terror. On the other hand, this type of intense, “real-to-life” drama engages audiences and creates such a devoted following of fans. The risk is that viewers are constantly exposed to ideologies that only fuel the fire of why terrorists hate America. This show, *Sleeper Cell*, gives an inside perspective into the lives of terrorists, but because it is aired on an elite cable channel, its exposure to a large audience is not as widespread as some other television spy shows that air on broadcast TV. Consequently, these broadcast TV shows have the potential to reach and influence even more people with their messages.

## Chapter 5. Fox's 24

Shall we therefore readily allow our children to listen to any stories made up by anyone, and to form opinions that are for the most part the opposite of those we think they should have when they grow up?

–Socrates in Plato's (2003) *Republic*, (p. 69)

Post-9/11 TV spy thrillers are full of intense scenes with graphic depictions of terrorism. Consequently, the proliferation of spy-related shows on television contributes to the bombardment of images that must have some effect on the viewers of these shows. Fox's *24* is among the current TV spy dramas, which began airing about two months after September 11, 2001 (Croft, 2006). Jack Bauer, the show's central character, works as an agent for the Los Angeles Counter Terrorist Unit (CTU), a fictitious agency that functions in ways that borrow from the real Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), U.S. Secret Service, and the National Security Agency (NSA). As their jobs entail, Jack and members of CTU dangerously fight to stop ensuing terrorist attacks against America.

While the show centers largely on stopping these attacks, it is the way the show depicts "real life" that sets it apart from other shows. Uniquely, *24* takes place in "real time," meaning that it attempts to portray each second of the day as if the day's events were being shown as they happen. Each season's twenty-four episodes represent a separate hour of a full day and encourage viewers to conceptualize the show's action as complete. However, most of the characters are never shown eating, drinking, or

sleeping and TV viewers seemingly miss some action for commercials, while the plot apparently continues during these breaks. Six seasons of *24*, or “days” as they are also referred, have been produced.<sup>18</sup>

This chapter focuses on *24* and will illustrate the ways this spy show potentially functions as propaganda by using its plot lines to perpetuate a particular view of American nationalism. As *I Spy* was relevant to the 1960s, *24* is relevant to its time. Similar to *Sleeper Cell*, this show reflects the notion that since September 11, 2001 the United States is constantly under the threat of another terrorist attack. Consequently, the show exhibits particular attitudes towards American nationalism and American ideals.

In order to make these claims, four points will be highlighted. First, this chapter will analyze the show as a popular cultural artifact using three concepts: “the medium is the message,” the three registers, and “real time.” Second, while applying these concepts, an examination of the ways “real time” helps the show mirror 9/11 will provide the framework for pinpointing how *24* potentially influences its viewers. Third, *24* will be placed in the context of post-9/11 America, particularly in its reflection of American nationalism, as well as the country’s perceived conceptions of

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<sup>18</sup> Fox, on *24*’s website, refers to the seasons in the recap section as “days,” which makes sense considering each season is actually 24 episodes representing an entire day (“24,” 2007).

America's political climate. Last, this chapter will explore the ways *24* reflects America's exceptionalism by specifically examining America's "messianic impulse."

*"The Medium is the Message" and the Three Registers*

Marshall McLuhan (1994), in his book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, presents the phrase and concept, "the medium is the message" (p. 7). According to McLuhan (1994), people can recognize the changes or growth in a medium, even if those changes are not obvious, because any change affects the message. In addition, McLuhan (1994) warns that people are often distracted by the content of a medium, whereby "it is only too typical that the 'content' of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium" (p. 9). It is the character of the medium that is its potency or effect—its message. In other words, "to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium – that is, of any extension of ourselves – result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology" (McLuhan, 1994, p. 7). Similarly, one medium often makes way for another. As the telegraph made way for the telephone, the radio made way for the television.

Television, from its beginning, became an extension of the people. Paul Bourdon (2004), as French sociologist, says, "At a global level, 'the medium was the message,' that is, starting television was a way of sending a message of national



‘completeness’ to other nations” (p. 97). On that note, the infiltration of new television shows like *24*, with availability in a variety of formats, has a direct effect on the messages that are sent to the viewers. As a result, the *transmission* of *24*’s messages is just as influential as the messages themselves and permeates through American culture. Even those that have never watched the show are potentially influenced by the show’s messages.

French psychiatrist Jacques Lucan’s (1977) concept of three registers pertains to people’s perception of reality. Accordingly, the repeated scenarios of American dominance on spy shows must have some effect, if only potential, for influencing the way American society perceives reality and sees itself reflected on TV. To Lacan (1977), the “real” is a world that people never actually perceive (p. 4). The “real” is the world outside of the senses that people can only attempt to perceive through those senses and through the three registers: Real, Imaginary, and Symbolic (Lacan, 1977). Combining this idea with Hall’s (1993) reception theory could imply that a person’s culture influences, not only how the person interprets an artifact, but also the extent to which a person perceives reality.

Lacan (1977) proposes that people get as close to the “real” as possible during the neonatal phase, because people in this phase are pre-mirror and pre-symbolic (p. 2). However, no one ever knows reality fully (Lacan, 1977). Although people in this phase know reality is there, they can only see a filtered version of it. And because people

cannot fully know the real, they always have a sense of lack, as if something is missing or wrong. This is a fundamental motivational force. It constantly moves people to seek completion. In other words, people are constantly gathering information through their senses so they can strive towards knowing reality. While spy shows seemingly have little to do with an unborn's neonatal phase, these shows, using Lacan's concepts, could have an effect on the way viewers perceive reality.

The imaginary, the second of Lacan's (1977) registers, is not so much about "imagination," but about "images" (p. 3). Images are coherent objects. They have outlines and are distinguished from one another. The imagination helps fill in the void that is created by making images of completeness. TV spy shows, by their dependence on visual mediums, rely on images to help tell their stories. In return, the images function as symbols.

Symbolic understanding, the third of Lacan's (1977) registers, uses metaphor and other symbols and signs to represent our perceptions and ideas, in particular language. Nick Mansfield (2000), in his book chapter "Lacan: The subject is language," says, "Lacan's ultimate and most influential conclusion is that the unconscious is structured like a language" (p. 38). With symbols, people can communicate with others, through language, and partake of the wider social sphere, but in doing so they leave behind the "real." Although people seek to understand and communicate about the real, they can only get to "reality" in terms of images and

symbols, whereas a written image is a symbol. Although people can never know the real, the TV is just another way viewers gather information. It helps them perceive reality, which includes those symbolic images that reflect the good and the bad of the world.

Baudrillard (2003) proposes that the 9/11 attacks were so horrific to the West, because the terrorists targeted prominent symbols of the dominant world, such as the World Trade Center towers, the U.S. Pentagon, the United States Capitol, and the White House.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, the images people see on television have a direct effect on the way people perceive reality. According to Mansfield (2000), “The relationship of each signifier is thus not with the object in the outside world with which it is supposed to connect, but with other signifiers, as they form a systemic world-view” (p. 39). Shows with particular messages, such as *I Spy*, *Sleeper Cell* and *24*, have the potential for influencing viewers, because their images carrying particular symbolic messages.

*24* parallels the function of early spy shows. In the 1950s and 60s, television spies were essentially used as anti-communist propaganda (Britton, 2004; Kackman, 2005; T. Miller, 2003). These spy dramas were written with particular messages about how Americans should understand communism and how viewers should respond in the

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<sup>19</sup> The plane that crashed in Shanksville, Pennsylvania is believed to have been targeting the U.S. Capitol or the White House (Buell, 2003).

“American way.” Spy shows of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are not specifically written as governmental propaganda, but the format, plot lines, and established norms of spy fiction make for considerable opportunities for expressing particular “American” messages or “Fox’s” messages for that matter. Subsequently, spy television has served and, as will be shown later, could continue to serve as much more than simply escapism or entertainment.

#### *Cultural Analysis of 24 and the Use of “Real Time”*

24’s narrative structure sets it apart from other television shows. The show’s use of “real time” is presented to its audience from the very beginning.<sup>20</sup> The pilot begins with corresponding text and Jack saying, “The following takes place between midnight and 1 a.m. on the day of the California presidential primary. The events occur in real time.” The admission of “real time” from the show’s outset attempts to make it clear to the viewers that 24’s structure is unique, while simultaneously conveying a correlation between “real time” and the show’s attempted portrayal of real life.

Structurally speaking, 24 has instigated cultural changes by affecting the ways people interact with this show and others. Uniquely, the show’s “real time” structure makes tuning in each week that much more important. Because much of the plot is developed each week, missing a week could leave viewers behind, or at least give the

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<sup>20</sup> Depending on which of the show’s six seasons, Fox has used Monday and Tuesday nights as time slots to air the show, with start times between 8 p.m. and 9 p.m. (“24,” 2007).

feeling of missed information. While the plot is not so complex that viewers would be completely lost if they missed an episode, the sequencing is best understood when seeing each episode consecutively.

Fortunately, fans of *24* have at their disposal a variety of formats and mediums to view the show. For example, News Corporation's MySpace, Apple's iTunes, and Fox's website can all be used to view episodes of *24*, which also makes it possible for portable devices, like Apple's iPods or Microsoft's Zunes to allow for easy viewing. In addition, DVDs, especially with the use of popular by-mail movie clubs like Netflix and Blockbuster Online, have influenced the availability of the show's messages. Furthermore, there are new technologies with television. Devices like TiVo, a digital video recorder, make it possible for people to easily record TV content. Therefore, the diverse formats and mediums available to view *24* allow for substantial pop-culture saturation. Consequently, the show's use of TV as a medium and the plethora of other available mediums only add to the show's messages.

*24*, as a TV show, obviously relies on television for viewing. However, the media world and its technological capabilities make it possible for the show to be seen in multiple formats, as well as alternate mediums. Because this is true, McLuhan's (1994) notion of "the medium is the message" becomes an ever more applicable one. Like *Sleeper Cell*, *24* seemingly takes on the role of depicting an America that has to deal with terrorism every hour of every day. This is especially true if one watches an

entire season of DVDs in one day. The opportunity to mix and match mediums to view *24* only adds to the perception that terrorism is a threat everyday, all the time.

The deep saturation attributed to *24* has been compared to the saturation of terrorist images and the destruction that was evident on September 11, 2001. Immediately following the terrorist attacks of 9/11, questions about America's foreign relations and safety arose. In addition, many Americans developed strong opinions about the resulting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and, from an American perspective, the broader "War on Terror" seems to become more complicated by the day. Thus, a popular television show that deals with these global issues, either directly or indirectly, has the potential to affect the way people perceive and understand the events of 9/11 and the resulting conflicts.

#### *Mirroring of 9/11 in 24*

*24*'s first season mirrors the way 9/11 played out on television the day of the attacks. In that season of *24*, Jack is called upon to stop a Middle Eastern terrorist group from attacking Los Angeles. At the same time, he has to deal with the group's apparent kidnapping of his daughter. As Ira Rae Hark (2004) discusses in her essay,

“‘Today is the longest day of my life’: 24 as mirror narrative of 9/11,” three ways of particular significance highlight the similarities between 9/11 and 24.<sup>21</sup>

First, the day of the September 11, 2001 attacks is known according to the date (9/11), largely because the tragic events of the day took place in multiple locations, including New York, Washington, DC, and Pennsylvania.<sup>22</sup> This is different than other noteworthy tragedies. For example, Oklahoma City, Waco, and Pearl Harbor are all names of U.S. tragedies known by their locations (Hark, 2004).<sup>23</sup> While some days are known by their date (July 4<sup>th</sup>, D-day), they take on a patriotic meaning. 24 takes on the numerical and patriotic representation by depicting the multiple terrorist attacks or attempts that would take place in each season’s 24-hour plot span (Hark, 2004).<sup>24</sup>

Applying Baudrillard’s (1994) theory of simulation makes sense. The numerical representation simulates the way people discuss the show, as well as the way people refer to the attacks on 9/11. Similarly, Lacan’s use of language for symbolic

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<sup>21</sup> “‘Today is the longest day of my life’ is in reference to Jack’s narration at the outset of most of season one’s episodes. These episodes begin with a recap of previous action followed by Jack saying, “Right now, terrorists are plotting to assassinate a presidential candidate. My teenage daughter is missing. And people that I work with may be involved in both. I’m Federal Agent Jack Bauer. Today is going to be the longest day of my life.”

<sup>22</sup> A separate plane hit each of the two World Trade Center buildings in New York City. A plane hit the Pentagon in Washington, DC and another plane crashed onto a field in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. (Hark, 2004).

<sup>23</sup> Oklahoma City experienced the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building by Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols on April 19, 1995 (Foote, 1997, p. 161). On February 28, 1993, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives raided the Branch Davidian ranch, led by David Koresh, located near Waco, Texas (Foote, 1997, p. 210). Pearl Harbor, Hawaii experienced the air attacks by the Japanese on December 7, 1941, which catapulted the United States into World War II (Foote, 1997, p. 282).

<sup>24</sup> “July 4<sup>th</sup>” refers to Independence Day in the United States, which is in commemoration of the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. “D-Day” refers to the Battle of Normandy that took place on June 6, 1944 (Hark, 2004).

understanding can be applied to the language people use in referring to the date of 9/11 and the numerical reference to the show *24*. The language used is symbolic of the show's and the day's relationship.

Second, much of the day's events, both on *24* and 9/11, are and were captured on television. On September 11, 2001, soon after the first plane hit one of the World Trade Center buildings, the news media began covering the day's story live on the air. This launched the news into 24-hour coverage of the attacks and America's response. Much like *24*, the response and action of the day is seen in "real time." Broadly speaking, because good narrative techniques are powerful tools for drawing and keeping an audience's attention, it is the show's "real time" narrative structure that largely influences the messages of this series. According to Anne Dunn (2005), in her chapter "Narrative in Television News," the use of good techniques helps to tell a good story. Specifically, *24* uses this unique approach to its narrative.

Not only is the story captivating, the way the story is told is original. However, audiences do have to allow for suspension of disbelief. For the most part, key components of a person's normal day are missing in the show. The main characters are rarely, if ever, shown eating, sleeping, or doing other daily tasks people in reality have to undertake: general hygiene, going to the rest room, etc. Yet, the narrative structure of the series is similar to the structure seen with TV news, especially when covering monumental events like September 11.



In both cases, the conceptualization of the events could be experienced in a culturally unifying way on television. As Dunn (2005) notes, the day of 9/11 played out on TV as a complete narrative. Just as *24* functions with a sense of “completeness,” so too did September 11, 2001 function that way on TV news. However, this seemingly collective way is at the same time segregating. Due to the world’s variety of mediums for obtaining news, “conflicting ideologies can produce—or offer the possibility of—multiple perspectives on a given story,” which includes mediums utilized by the terrorists (Dunn, 2005, p. 141). Dunn (2005) adds:

This has emerged very clearly in the “war on terrorism” waged by the USA and its allies since September 11, 2001. Western television news audiences—and journalists—could not help but see stark differences between the ways in which the offensives in Afghanistan and then Iraq were reported by their national media and by the Arab-language channel Al Jazeera (p. 141).

The news coverage of 9/11, particularly in the United States, is mirrored on *24*. However, both are shown from American perspectives. The events in the show and on 9/11 are different, but the way people experience the events in the U.S. is similar in both instances.

Third, the need for a hero is reflected in 9/11 and *24*. From the beginning, television spies introduced new kinds of heroes. Rosemary Huisman (2005), in her essay “Aspects of narrative in series and serials,” points out that the storylines of *24* are “shockingly unpredictable events,” yet “the conventional ideology of the political thriller remains undisturbed, realized in a narrative in which the ultimate success of the

hero brings closure” (p. 168). Just as 9/11 brought about heroes in the passengers of Flight 93, in the New York and DC firefighters and police officers, and the ordinary people that risked their lives to offer aid to victims, *24* celebrates the hero in Jack and the collective heroism of those working in and with CTU.<sup>25</sup> As a result, Jack’s heroism has become a staple of the show and is a trademark of this spy show’s cultural prominence. In every season, Jack must overcome obstacle after obstacle in order to save America. Often times, Jack appears to have no remaining option but admit defeat. Yet, of completed seasons (seasons one through five), Jack, through seemingly impossible means, brings safety and closure to threatening doom.

Not surprisingly, Jack is much like Bond. Both are central characters, womanizers, and into high-tech espionage gadgets. First, Jack, like Bond, is the lead character. While there are many supporting roles, Jack is shown as the pivotal focus of the show’s plot. Second, Jack has a new or recurring love interest in every season, just as every story with Bond has a “Bond girl,” his own love interest. Jack’s job, similar to Bond’s, makes it difficult for romance, but the seasons of *24* often have Jack’s love life as a central conflict (Cawelti & Rosenberg, 1987). Third, Jack, like Bond, relies heavily on the use of technology and espionage gadgets. Most of the technology Jack

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<sup>25</sup> United Airlines Flight 93 was a regular flight from Newark International Airport in Newark, New Jersey, to San Francisco International Airport. On September 11, 2001, the United Airlines Boeing 757-222 was one of four planes hijacked as part of the terrorist attacks of that day. It was the only one that did not reach its intended target. It instead crashed onto an empty field just outside Shanksville, Pennsylvania (Buell, 2003).

uses is government owned equipment or capabilities, like satellites, wire-tapings, or military equipment. Bond often used specialized, unique espionage gadgets and high-speed sports cars (Britton, 2005). Both characters, however, use these characteristics to better cast themselves as heroes within their world of intense spy-related work.

Because *24* started airing a couple months after 9/11, the similarities between the show and the day of the September 11 attacks were apparent. Each was referred to by a numerical representation, each functioned on television by conveying a complete narrative, and each one incorporates into its stories the role of the hero. Early spy shows, including those involving Bond, have used the notion of the hero, but the numerical representation and unique narrative structure sets *24* apart from other espionage TV dramas. Not surprisingly, five seasons later, the cultural relevance to previous events can still be seen on *24*.

#### *American Nationalism and American Ideology*

*24* reflects post-9/11 America, as well as American nationalism and American ideology. Specifically, the show reveals nationalism through its depictions of the U.S. stereotype of terrorists, the “War on Terror,” and the United States’ “messianic impulse,” which is a controversial component of American exceptionalism. First, similar to *Sleeper Cell*, the ways the show depicts terrorists has raised some controversy, because some people in society have abused the stereotypical descriptions

of Arabs as terrorists and religious fanatics. While each season of *24* involves different kinds of terrorists, the first and sixth season set off firestorms of criticism.<sup>26</sup> For instance, season six of *24* is an example of post-9/11 American politics.<sup>27</sup> In the first scene of the season, a TV reporter is shown saying:

America has been victimized again. Last night's terrorist attack in San Antonio is now the latest in this series of bombings that began eleven weeks ago in ten different cities. Over nine hundred people have been killed thus far, and though no one has claimed responsibility for this wave of death, evidence points to Islamic militants. Here in Los Angeles the mood can only be described as tense and fearful, as the Department of Homeland Security is urging all citizens to report, without delay, any suspicious persons or activities. We spoke with a Department spokesperson, who says, quote, "We don't want to start a witch hunt, but we would rather err on the side of caution, than become the next target." He then went on to say that the vigilance of the public is the best line of defense against attack.

This dialogue, again, mentions that U.S. citizens should be, in response, cautious and vigilant and points to Islamic militants or extremists as terrorists, which only adds to the Americans' stereotypes of terrorism.

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<sup>26</sup> Synopsis of season one: Day one (season one) starts and ends at midnight on the day of the California presidential primary. A terrorist group, apparently from the Middle East, is plotting to kill presidential candidate, Senator David Palmer, and kidnaps Jack's wife and daughter. When it is revealed Jack previously knew the man behind the kidnappings, Jack realizes that the events of the day have to do with both him and Senator Palmer personally. Consequently, after it is discovered that Jack's extramarital love interest is also a mole in CTU, Jack has to choose between his role as a federal agent and his role as a family man ("24," 2007).

<sup>27</sup> Synopsis of season six: Twenty months after day five, Chinese officials release Jack to CTU agents in Los Angeles under a deal brokered by the new President Wayne Palmer (the brother of former-President David Palmer). Consequently, Jack is delivered to Abu Fayed, a man with known connections to terrorists, to be sacrificed in exchange for stopping potential terrorist attacks. However, Jack discovers that CTU has bargained with Fayed to hand over the wrong man, leaving the real terrorist, Fayed himself, free to continue his reign of terror upon various locations in the United States. After a nuclear attack in Los Angeles, Americans are in a state of panic. With the help of CTU and the White House, Jack must stop these terrorists from using four other Soviet-designed nuclear weapons ("24," 2007).

Second, the show portrays U.S. domestic issues, particularly the “War on Terror” and America’s actions as a result. Seemingly under umbrella of the “Global War on Terror,” the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were waged, which have had significant impact on American foreign policies. Ivo Daalder and James Lindsay (2004), of the Brookings Institution, examine the Bush administration’s so-called revolution in foreign policy in their book *America Unbound*. Ultimately, the president’s unilateralist policies, according to Daalder and Lindsay (2004), quickly produced declared “victories” in Afghanistan and Iraq (p. 197). However, the wars have also fractured the U.S.’s alliances, and as a result “the world system is more chaotic and unfriendly,” and America could be considered less secure (Daalder & Lindsay, 2004, p. 197). Daadler and Lindsay (2004) add, “The deeper problem of the fundamental premise of the Bush revolution – that America’s security rested on an America unbound – was profoundly mistaken” (p. 195). Consequently, problems build in all areas of security. For example, *24*’s fourth season depicts Mexican drug lords as terrorists, which replicates the United States’ current political debate over the means and effectiveness of boarder and immigration control and its relevancy to national security.<sup>28</sup> Seasons five and six involve U.S. international relationships with several

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<sup>28</sup> Synopsis of season four: Day four begins 18 months after Jack averted the most recent terrorist crisis in Los Angeles. Subsequently, he was fired from CTU, and has a new job: Senior Advisor to Secretary of Defense James Heller. Jack has also found a new love interest in Heller’s daughter, Audrey Raines. However, an impending hostage crisis concerning Jack’s new boss leaves his new life in disarray. Jack finds himself back as a CTU agent in order to save the new life he has made for himself. As the day

countries, including most notably with Russia and China. However, those relationships are always tense and depict the other countries as hostile to America. Often in the show, the United States uses its power to mislead the other countries into doing something that only has the best interest of America in mind.

Accordingly, historians Andrew Kohut and Bruce Stokes (2006), in *America Against the World: How We Are Different and Why We Are Disliked*, discern that what has pushed the world away is not simply the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, but also the American public's exceptional individualism that often results in go-it-alone attitudes. It does not help that Americans' pervasive religiosity and deep patriotism are sometimes exaggerated and misunderstood by America's critics (Kagan, 2006b; Will, 1990). These characteristics could point towards America's "messianic impulse" as another sign of its exceptionalism.

#### *"Messianic Impulse" – Component of American Exceptionalism*

24 reflects the "messianic impulse" component of American exceptionalism and, as a result, its foreign relations. French historian Alexis de Tocqueville's (1862) phrase of "American exceptionalism" captures a perceived notion of American

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unfolds, several terrorist plots are revealed, all devised by Turkish terrorist Habib Marwan. Each of Marwan's attacks proves even more devastating than the previous and CTU races to find him before he can unleash unprecedented terror upon the United States. To complicate matters, a secret Chinese Consulate mission goes wrong, setting up serious future consequences for Jack. Jack begins to realize that a life of his own is impossible while working for CTU ("24," 2007).

nationalism that is depicted in 24. The United States is shown to be a country that acts for its own interests and is interested only in its prosperity, as well as interested in enacting its beliefs and goals on other countries. George Will (1990), a journalist, columnist, and historian, describes America's tendency to inflict its beliefs and ideals on other countries as America's "messianic impulse," as if America takes on the role of a god or messiah in deciding what is best for others around the world. Will (1990) describes this impulse as "a constant of America's national character, and a component of American patriotism" (p. 133). Similarly, as Erik Erikson (1964), a German developmental psychologist, pointed out, "Every national character is constructed out of polarities" (p. 85). As such, America's "messianic impulse," throughout history, has been an extreme that has teetered back and forth between the polarities of "sometimes mild and sometimes not" (Will, 1990, p. 133). However, on 24 the power of the United States is never shown as mild, but instead as victor. Even successful attacks on the show are seen as just some occurrences and have little effect on the state of the country.

In the real world, the political climate soon after 9/11 found itself composed of other polarities, in which Liberalism was against Conservatism and vice versa. What became known as the Christian right found a niche in American politics. Because America acted without much international support, U.S. foreign relations have been extremely tense. Eric Laurent (2004), a journalist and author says in his book *Bush's*

*Secret World: Religion, Big Business, and Hidden Networks*, “The Bush administration has changed many things, abroad, but also in Washington, in the way it conducts the country’s political affairs... where loyalty to a leader takes on greater importance, and ethics and morality are relegated to the background” (p. 135). This could be seen on *24* as well.

For instance, *24*’s season five is an example.<sup>29</sup> In that season, President Logan participates in the sell of biochemical weapons in order to seemingly make America even more powerful, but unfortunately the plan backfires. He discloses late in the day that the day’s events had gone horribly wrong, as he had never meant for the terrorists to activate the canisters or for innocent American lives to be lost. All men involved in the conspiracy in which President Logan was one of the masterminds, intended to eliminate Russian separatists and provide an excuse to increase America’s oil interests in Central Asia. Consequently, as season five epitomizes, America’s exceptionalism often characterizes the United States’ interactions with the rest of the world. President Logan decides that he personally knows what is best for the country and, therefore,

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<sup>29</sup> Synopsis of season five: Day five begins eighteen months after day four. Jack now lives under the alias Frank Flynn and is currently living with Diane and Derek Huxley, a family near the Mojave Desert, in California. Meanwhile, an unknown figure orders the assassination of the four people that know Jack is still alive, Tony Almeida, Michelle Dessler, Chloe O’Brian and former-President Palmer, and attempt to frame Jack for the murders. Jack returns to Los Angeles to clear his name when an airport hostage situation erupts. However, the situation is only a diversion by conspirators and Russian separatists to obtain twenty canisters of Sentox VX nerve gas. The gas was originally to be used in an attack on Moscow, but the separatists begin to release it in Los Angeles in retaliation after they discover that a U.S. agent has infiltrated their organization. Jack attempts to search for the remaining canisters and expose treachery that goes deep within the White House, perhaps even to President Charles Logan (“24,” 2007).



instigates an illegal plot so as to secure, what he sees, as an ultimate good. However, the plot is foiled, when it is discovered that the plan requires the killing of innocent people. The “go-it-alone” attitude that President Logan uses has similarities to the way some people view America’s real life involvement with the war in Iraq. Both of these instances could be seen as a result of what some scholar refer to as America’s “messianic impulse.”

### *Conclusion*

Some national leaders throughout history, though within polarities, have associated America’s identity with the responsibility to further democracy, while others have not. The risk of such impulses has possible ramifications in other forms, including the media. Robert W. McChesney (1999), an associate professor at the Institute of Communications Research at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, exposes several myths about the media in *Rich Media, Poor Democracy: Communication Politics in Dubious Times*. In particular, he disputes the claim that the market compels media firms to “give the people what they want,” which limits the ability of citizens to grasp the real nature and logic of the media system (McChesney, 1999, p. 33). If Americans value democracy, McChesney (1999), warns, they must organize politically to restructure the media in order to affirm society’s connection to democracy.

As a result of these components, America's national character has been affected. For instance, preparedness and awareness of global threats are seen as the best defenses for the future (Selanikio, Barrett, & Liddy, 2006). 24, with all of its actions revolving around attacks and the threat of attacks, continues to perpetuate this idea. In the 2006 mid-term elections, America chose to take a different political path by shifting control in Congress from the Republicans to the Democrats. Perhaps this reflects the potential shift from one polarity towards another. However, American spy shows, because they rely on conveying an actively fighting America, do not function in polarities. They, therefore, make viewers susceptible to receiving messages from one single polarity.

## Chapter 6. Conclusion

Television is simultaneously blamed, often by the same people, for worsening the world and for being powerless to change it.

–Clive James (1983), Introduction to *Glued to the Box*, (p. 21)

These three shows, *I Spy*, *Sleeper Cell*, and *24*, will forever reflect the eras in which they originally aired. Each of them relied heavily upon the events of their time to determine their content. This makes sense. The art of a time period often reflects what the producers, performers, and viewers are experiencing, as well as the issues they are confronting. However, this does not excuse an abuse of the messages they express. All who interact with the media must be aware of the media's potential to influence society.

While wanting to be a country that is “exceptional” is an understandable goal, it unfortunately leads to, as well as feeds, the hatred that is felt by those in underdeveloped countries. However, while TV dramas portraying a diverse, peaceful world where everyone lives in harmony would certainly make for unique content, television shows, as well as good stories, need conflict. Spy shows allow for engaging content that ignites a desire from viewers to see “their side” win against those that fight against it.

The media world, as it should, reflects the reality that inhabits it. However, society should be aware that the process of making media artifacts and receiving these

artifacts comes with consequences. The messages these artifacts convey “speak,” whether purposefully or not, for the people and institutions they represent. People should, therefore, be conscientious of the messages they invoke, because those messages may very well be fueling the problems people are facing.

Undoubtedly, America was founded with the purpose of being exceptional. Because of the freedom associated with that dream, there are people that want to do harm to the West and the United States. American TV spy dramas in the early 1950s were used by the U.S. government to instill particular messages into the minds of American viewers about the Cold War. While post-9/11 spy dramas are not used with the specific intention of being propaganda, they often contain components that act as such. Americans should heed warning that these entertaining artifacts have the potential to do more than just entertain. They could continue to mainstream Americans and feed the hatred terrorists feel towards America, which only makes fighting terrorism an even more difficult task.

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