

# How Pop Culture Tries to Justify Torture



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**The “ticking bomb” scenario tries to make torture morally defensible by appealing to emotional and political ideas.**

If you’ve ever had a conversation about torture, chances are that you know about the ticking bomb scenario, which many people became familiar with after 9/11 through the TV series *24*, starring Kiefer Sutherland as the ruggedly uncompromising heroic torturer, Jack Bauer.

The scenario poses the following question: If there was a bomb hidden somewhere in a major city, and you had the person responsible for it in your custody, would you torture them to get the information needed to stop the bomb exploding, preventing a devastating terrorist attack and saving thousands of lives?

*24* may no longer be on our screens, but the basic assumptions behind the ticking bomb scenario are still with us. Consider the fourth episode of the latest season of *Stranger Things*, in which Jim Hopper, a troubled small-town police officer, tortures Larry, a corrupt official, in order to find out information about land purchases by a sinister organization. Larry arrogantly deflects Jim’s questions, but when Jim starts landing punches and threatening to remove Larry’s finger with a

cigar-trimmer, Jim gets what he wants: clear and detailed information which allows the plot to proceed.

For those of us who agree that torture is wrong, the ticking bomb scenario is an exasperating argument. This is for a number of reasons. First, it has nothing to do with the real circumstances in which torture is committed today.

The Rendition Project and the Bureau of Investigative Journalism have recently [published \*CIA Torture Unredacted\*](#), a comprehensive report into the post-9/11 CIA torture and rendition regime. This report tells us more about torture as it is actually practiced in the world than any abstract hypothetical scenario can ever tell us. For example, we learn about specifics of individuals who were subjected to gruesome abuses, such as being “held in complete darkness for months on end, chained to bars in the ceiling and forced to soil themselves.” We discover that “men were raped, mutilated, and threatened with guns, drills and being buried alive.” We learn that declassified cables show that CIA Director Gina Haspel directly and personally committed torture; we learn that none of these actions resulted in any meaningful intelligence information, and so they are not only morally horrifying but operationally counterproductive.

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In addition, right-wing political leaders around the world — from [President Trump](#) to [Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro](#) to Philippine President [Rodrigo Duterte](#) — boast about their support for torture; the British government repeatedly [refuses to conduct an inquiry into the role of U.K. forces in torture](#); and the U.S. Supreme Court has [adopted the position](#) that excruciating state executions can be legally sanctioned.

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Further, the ticking bomb scenario has a long history — indeed, a distinguished colonial heritage — and has long provided a source of rhetorical and ideological support for torturing regimes, from the French war in Algeria to the contemporary war-on-terror [black site](#) prison network. It is, however, always presented in a depoliticized, abstract present that allows us to overlook this history and focus on an isolated, imaginary and misleading case.

In addition, the scenario introduces the idea that even though torture is usually wrong, there are circumstances in which our normative and absolute prohibitions on torture simply don't apply. It therefore undermines the [absolute prohibitions against torture](#) that operate in international law and that exist in most forms of mainstream moral and ethical codes.

Finally, although it is philosophically incoherent and ethically indefensible, it has the appearance of “straight-talking,” “common-sense reasonableness” that makes it very difficult to disagree with. It is absurd, but saying so makes one seem lofty, haughty, dismissive of the concerns of ordinary, “reasonable” people.

The notion that something is common sense, however, should make us suspicious. A range of intellectuals on the left, from [Antonio Gramsci](#) through [Roland Barthes](#), have argued that political common sense is never neutral, and that agreements over “the obvious” mask ideological positions. Cultural theorist Mark Fisher, for instance, writes in *Capitalist Realism* that “an ideological position can never be really successful until it is naturalized, and it cannot be naturalized while it is still thought of as a value rather than a fact.”

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Add to this that an enormous range of cultural productions — from *Batman Begins* through *Unthinkable*, *Dirty Harry* and *Death Wish* — lavishly dramatize such ideological values, and it’s not surprising that a great deal of people find it persuasive. By associating torture with philosophical, political and emotional ideas that appeal to a great deal of people, those who frame the ticking bomb scenario seek to claim that it is “obvious” that people should agree that torture is defensible.

How does this happen? Three key intellectual and emotional ideas are at play that make it seem much more clear-cut than is actually the case.

Firstly, torture is widely understood to have utility value, and further, is understood to have a particular relationship to terrorism. Military historian Bernard Fall has written that “torture is the particular bane of the terrorist, just as anti-aircraft artillery is that of the airman or machine-gun fire that of the foot soldier,” for instance. (We should not take this seriously – I only intend to show that this connection is made by military theoreticians.)

Counterterrorism and espionage fictions — from Jean Lartéguy to Tom Clancy and *24* — represent torture as an objectively useful and effective part of spycraft. By associating the use of torture with professional expertise, these genres make torture seem like a morally acceptable weapon in the fight against political enemies. Sometimes, in this genre, torture is simply one of the things that needs to be done in order to acquire information. Each part of spycraft has a particular professional application: If a nut is loose, you tighten it; if a terrorist has information, you torture it out of him.

For the avoidance of doubt, I should add that there is, in fact, a clear consensus on this issue. Torture certainly makes people speak. But the idea that it is a clear route to actionable, useful information is a total fallacy. In his landmark study, [Torture and Democracy](#), Darius Rejali writes that “for harvesting information, torture is the clumsiest method available to organizations, even clumsier in some cases than flipping coins or shooting randomly into crowds.”

Second, the ticking bomb scenario is also closely related to other thought experiments that aim to discuss the problem of competing harms. Utilitarian moral theory has long held that bad actions can be permitted if they will ameliorate more harm than will be caused by not committing them.

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[The trolley problem](#), for example, is often used to demonstrate that choosing to redirect an out-of-control train onto a track which will result in the death of one person, however unpleasant it may be in itself, is better than allowing the train to collide with a group of people, condemning them to die in an avoidable accident. Movies and novels which explore this idea often represent torture as a way of doing good in the world by using dirty tactics — which represent, in this case, the “lesser evil” — against completely, irredeemably evil foes in order to avert greater catastrophe. Think *Dirty Harry*, Frank Miller’s Batman or the Netflix reimagining of *Daredevil*.

Finally, and perhaps most persuasively, the ticking bomb scenario appeals to the protective impulse that people feel toward their children (or vulnerable groups more generally). In movies such as *Taken* and *Death Wish*, strong fathers torture gangsters and human traffickers in order to rescue or protect their daughters. In these texts, to be a good parent, one should be prepared to commit torture. This is perhaps the least well-understood aspect of the way the ticking bomb scenario works. By appealing to our deeply held protective emotions, the scenario smuggles its pro-torture argument past our better judgment and forces us to conclude that, “Yes, if it was my daughter, I would do it.”

In sum, the ticking bomb scenario works, and has remained popular and persuasive, because these three ideas — utility, virtue and protectivity — dynamically overlap and interact to create a false idea: that torture can be justified.

### **Alex Adams**

[Alex Adams](#) is a critical writer and novelist living and working in the U.K. His critical work is about the literary, filmic and popular cultural representation of political torture. His newest book, [How to Justify Torture: Inside the Ticking Bomb Scenario](#), ([Repeater Books](#)) comes out September 10, 2019.