After a couple of phenomenal episodes, Mitch thought this week's was a stinker, especially considering there are just four shows left. Instead we were given

"There are two hands that can beat a royal flush. Jack Bauer's right hand and Jack Bauer's left hand."…

It was nice while it lasted.

Two weeks of really great episodes got us spoiled. We seemed willing to forget all about the stupid soap operas and lame plot devices that plagued this series like runners in scoring position plagues Indians' batters. But regrettably, they failed to build off the momentum of the new direction, and we were bogged down by "Couples Night". Bill and Karen. Morris and Chloe. Daniels and the Ice Princess. Jack and Audrey. Doyle and his ego. Milo and his nose. Ugh.

If you wanted riveting television Monday night…you hopefully did what I did and had "Heroes" recorded to watch right after "24", because this might have been the weakest episode of the season.

Recap.

Since CTU didn't think far enough ahead to have anyone backing up Doyle's truck (the one Jack hijacked at the end of the last episode), Doyle has to pursue him by first standing in the middle of a highway trying to flag people down so that he can steal their car. Most people are

smart enough to just honk their horn, swerve around him, flip him off, and go about their merry way. Except one old hippy guy who decides he'd rather stop and argue…and then gets his gray pony-tailed stupid ass thrown out of the car by Doyle.

Of course, it's going to be hard to find Jack…especially after he conveniently finds some mega-sized power lines to hide the electronic pulse from the tracking device installed on the component until he can remove it. This is from the MacGuyver school of writing for action shows…where the hero always finds exactly the thing he needs to improvise his escape.

In Washington, the press secretary says that the President could come out of his coma in "hours, days, or weeks". Not sure how long it will take, but since the word "hours" was used, and there are over five hours left…you do the math. Daniels has a meeting with Lennox, wondering how much he has to worry about the contents of the tape being made public. Biscuit tells the acting Prez that the tape was really just about covering his own ass regarding the assassination attempt, and that he's all for kissing copious amounts of Daniels ass from now on. But to show that he hasn't totally gone all the way back over to the dark side, he convinces Daniels to keep Karen Hayes on as National Security Advisor.

So what's the most pressing thing on the newly minted acting President's mind? Terrorism? Nuclear proliferation? Budget Deficits? No…it's getting laid. Evidently, Acting-President Acting-Horny doesn't seem to have the ability to multi-task the way Bill Clinton did. "With all that's going on, all I can think about is you", Powers growls to the Ice Princess before we get a mini National Geographic special: When Reptiles Kiss (Angelina Jolie has ten times the square inches of lip on just one of hers compared to both sets of both Daniels and Lisa).

I needed a quick hit of liquid cocaine to take away THAT memory (Jaegermeister, Goldschlager, and Bacardi 151 for those of you needed use of it at home).

Damn…now I'm probably going to be another, as we get into our next stupid couples spat, this time from the King and Queen of People Skills; Morris and Chloe. I really don't know why they are pissed at one another, and I really don't care (nor, I'm sure, does anyone else that's not an uber-geek). At one point Morris makes a snide remark about Chloe, and she responds with "at least I don't arm nuclear bombs for terrorists". Ah yes…rule #2,372 for lovers' spats; when all else fails, immediately go for the one comment sure to totally devastate your partner. I remember those days well…and I am so sporking glad that I finally friggin' grew up.

So the newly de-balled Morris goes to Bill and requests an immediate transfer. Tell you what, Morris…you might want to hold up on that for a minute, because back in Washington, there is a nasty jerk from the Department of Justice who decides that he really likes the words of a confessed murderer (Chad Lowe, coming off the Milk Carton to do a 60 second scene on a computer screen). The DOJ Jerk, Peter Hawk, informs Karen that someone must immediately go down for the fact that two or three years earlier, Bill released Fayed from custody for some stupid reason…like the fact that they had zero evidence that Fayed was involved in any crimes. After all, in Washington, who gives a spork about The Truth when you can find A Scapegoat?

(Follow the Law…get fired. Just the type of B.S. television writing that aggravates the hell out of my HR professional wife, who was tempted to start the "unwarranted termination" lawsuit for Bill).

Scapegoats trump Truth pretty much every time, I guess, so then we have to have the annoying phone calls back and forth between Karen and Bill, as she explains why she must fire him…to protect HER position, and the President. And I am still trying to figure out how stupid they think we are to believe that the government would be more concerned about their image than going with the truth. And furthermore…um…er…damn…lost my train of thought. I had the TV up too loud and those hearings with Pat Tillman's brother and Jessica Lynch distracted me. What was I saying again?

Another bad continuity problem with the actors, as I'm just not buying the sudden changes we see from both Lennox and Karen. OK, Lennox being a weasel and flip-flopping may not be that much of a surprise, or it may be that it's not really Tom, but his evil twin Skippy (I better shut up…that may be the only plot contrivance they haven't used yet, and I don't want to give them any idea). But from everything we've seen from Karen before, this total attitude of "your career has to be ruined for no reason just to keep MY career intact" rings really counter to how she has behaved up until this point. But in any case, Bill is out the door, leaving Nadia temporarily in charge, until a new director can get there in "a couple of hours"

Can we please get off this crap and back to Jack? Evidently, we can…at about the half-way point of tonight's show. He has changed the location of the meet with Cheng due to his Rogue Status, and is setting up his C-4 booby trap in an abandoned motel. He calls up Bill, gets his voice mail, and pretty much tells him goodbye as he lets him know he's in place to blow things up real good. He also asks Bill to take care of Audrey.

Those Chinese Bastards!!!® pull up in a stretch limousine, and Cheng comes in to get the component from Jack…who first demands to see Audrey. He tells her to head off past a bridge to where a local cab will be there to pick her up, and tells Cheng that he won't give him the component until he knows she is out of range of her sniper. Cheng agrees. It looks like Jack is going to go ahead and blow himself up. Whatever will they do for "24" now?

Never fear, and never underestimate the ability of someone at CTU to screw the pooch. Doyle has found his truck, armed himself, and is calling in a SWAT team from CTU. But he's getting impatient, thinking Jack will really give Cheng the component. And he's right…Jack did give it to him, but juuusssst before Jack was able to set off the C4 (imagine Bob Uecker's voice on that one), Doyle starts shooting bad guys outside the room. Cheng makes like Jesse Owens to the back of the hotel, where he happened to have three armored Hummers standing by. Wow…a backup plan! What a concept! Maybe Cheng should be in charge of CTU, because in six seasons, I've not once seen them make such a move…it's always been "Jack's out there alone, and he'll eventually bail his own ass out".

TCB!!!® also remembered to bring along some surface to air missiles, so the chopper from the not-really-better-late-than-never SWAT team is quickly dispatched, and of course the Hummers can't be pursued by the obligatorily Product Placed Ford SUVs over the rough terrain. Maybe they should switch sponsors to Jeep.

Jack is totally pissed…and totally under arrest. He blames Doyle for screwing things up and allowing Cheng to get away with the component, while temporarily forgetting the fact that he broke several hundred laws and endangered millions. But at least Audrey is safe…Jack does have his priorities. He asks Doyle to take care of her…evidently forgetting that he asked Bill Buchanan to take care of her as well. Looks like we may have a custody battle on our hands that outdoes Alec Baldwin and Kim Bassinger.

Jack tries to talk to Audrey, but she doesn't seem to recognizer him, only repeating the phrase "Help me, Jack. Please don't let them do this to me." Oh No!!! She's been brainwashed into thinking that she's R2D2, projecting Princess Leia's call to Obi-Wan over and over!!

Those Chinese Bastards!!!®

Final Thoughts.

Looks like Audrey's brain is now pretty much on the same level as Junior Soprano's. That's really going to piss off Jack.

A new CTU director will be there "in a couple of hours". And from the previews, the words "we have a spy" are uttered. I'm not even going to bring back the "who is the mole" feature, as it has to be Milo or Agent Johnson. My money is on the jerk and not the jerky geek. So naturally, the impending CTU crisis will give both Jack and Bill Buchanan a chance to show their worth…Bill in particular will probably re-assume control after the "new director" comes in and royally screws everything up (like they do every year).

Two items came out this week that pretty much guarantees Wayne Palmer's recovery and resumption of power. The fact that the press secretary said he could come out in "hours", and that she announced that Daniels was scheduling a 9 AM press conference. Hmm…since the season ends at 6 AM, I get the feeling he'll not quite make it to that one.

Best Scene: Dorky Hiro meeting up with his ultra-cool future self at the end of the show. Yeah, that was from "Heroes" and not "24", but it was the only thing I saw Monday night worthy of being placed here.

Jack Bauer Bad Guy Body Count: 26. Managed to shake off getting shot in the chest and took out two of Cheng's goons. Once again…CTU may not be able to plan an operation for shite…but as opposed to the bad guys, they always wear their Kevlar vests.

The 24 Milk Carton. Have you seen these people?

Ex President Logan. OK…since it looks like the Russians get involved next week, is it possible that he helps out where Daniels screws up?

Martha Logan. Next year, maybe.

Phillip Bauer. Another person that could help unravel things.

The Blue Man Conspiracy Group. I'm thinking we may have found another member in the obnoxious DOJ attorney Peter Hawk.

Marilyn and Josh Bauer. Still at CTU, I guess. Which means they'll come back into play during the upcoming mole crisis.

Walid and Sandra Palmer. Sandra might show back up after Wayne recovers.

Life Expectancy: Unscientific wild assed guesses on how much longer certain people will still be breathing and the chance they have of living through the day. 5 hours to go.

Milo – 3 more hours. He's either the mole, or the man killed by the mole. Chance of living through the day? 15%

Morris – 3 more hours. 100% chance that he'll find some heroic way to get Chloe the hell off his back. Chance of living through the day? 80%

CTU Agent Johnson – 3 more hours. My front runner for the mole. If Morris doesn't kill him, Doyle will. Chance of living through the day? 10%

Phillip Bauer – 4 more hours. This would be the one person that would bother me the most if

they don't follow up with his character. Chance of living through the day? 50%.

Mike Doyle – 4 ½ more hours. I'm leaving him on the list, but I think they're still setting him up to be the main partner of Jack for some time to come. Which means, given the nature of "24" and of Rick Schroeder's usual level of "commitment" to a series…he'll be killed next season. Chance of living through the day? 80% (same as last week).

Cheng Zhi – 4 hours, 45 minutes. After what he did to Audrey? This is going to be a better whacking than how Fayed bought it. Chance of living through the day? 0%

Off the List.

Audrey Raines – She is now safe, but given her mental condition, she won't really be a factor any more. Does a long, long convalescence open the door back up for Marilyn?