

EPISODE

67. A Tale of Two Spies: The former heads of MI5 and MI6 on the Iraq War, double agents, and the IRA



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POLITICS, LAW & CURRENT AFFAIRS

HISTORY

SCIENCE & ENVIRONMENT

Former heads of British intelligence, Eliza Manningham-Buller and Sir John Sawers, discuss their experiences in the intelligence community with Roger Carrick, another former intelligence officer, on a podcast. They cover topics such as terrorism, Russia, Ukraine, Gaza, China, Taiwan, and the impact of technology. The trio underscores the significance of teamwork, trust-building, and discretion in intelligence work, while also acknowledging how terrorism and technology have transformed the nature of their operations. They also discuss the link between the Iraq War and the rise of terrorism in the UK, the complexities of rebuilding Iraq after toppling its autocratic regime, and the rules governing the use of covert human intelligence sources. The speakers share anecdotes about recruiting and managing human sources within terrorist organizations, emphasizing the necessity of ethical conduct and the constant verification of source reliability. They also examine recent geopolitical events, including the US's history of regime change and democracy promotion in regions like China, Taiwan, Russia, Ukraine, Israel, and Gaza. Finally, they contemplate the difficulty of making predictions and the issue of optimism bias, considering worst-case scenarios for the world in the next 5-10 years.

LISTEN



SUMMARY

TAKEAWAYS

Summary (🔴 Reviewed by a human)



05:36



Rory and Alastair bring together two esteemed former heads of British intelligence, Eliza Manningham-Buller and Sir John Sawers. Both entered the intelligence field by happenstance, with Manningham-Buller joining MI5 in 1974 and Sawers beginning his career at the Foreign Office before being recruited to MI6. They delve into their experiences as prominent figures within the intelligence community, covering a range of topics including the Iraq War, Russia, Ukraine, Gaza, China, Taiwan, terrorism, and the impact of technology.

Manningham-Buller and Sawers, along with Roger Carrick, another former intelligence officer, discuss the qualities that define an effective intelligence officer. They compare the challenges of addressing terrorism in Northern Ireland to the more dispersed threats posed by Al Qaeda and ISIS. The trio underscores the significance of teamwork, trust-building, and discretion in intelligence work, while also acknowledging how terrorism and technology have transformed the nature of their operations.

John Sawers admits to errors made in the organization of intelligence services and the misuse of intelligence in swaying public opinion during the Iraq War. Manningham-Buller criticizes the decision to go to war based on flawed intelligence, stressing that Iraq had no ties to 9/11 and that the CIA had assessed there were no weapons of mass destruction in the country.

The discussion also explores the link between the Iraq War and the rise of terrorism in the UK. It suggests that the US's overreaction to 9/11 and Israel's response to attacks in Gaza have inadvertently benefited terrorists. The speakers reflect on the complexities of rebuilding Iraq after toppling its autocratic regime and discuss a case involving an agent who was permitted to engage in criminal activities to infiltrate the IRA. They highlight the rules governing the use of covert human intelligence sources in such situations.

Former MI6 agents share anecdotes about recruiting and managing human sources within terrorist organizations, including thwarting bomb plots and turning a Yemeni

national trained as a suicide bomber into an MI6 informant. They emphasize the necessity of ethical conduct and the constant verification of source reliability, noting the evolution of MI6's recruitment strategies and the inherent dangers of handling human sources.

Sawers highlights the critical role of intelligence agencies like MI6 in safeguarding national security and preventing violence. He calls for recognition and support for those working in these agencies, countering negative stereotypes and Islamophobia. The influence of pop culture on recruitment, the allocation of resources within the agency, and the surge in counterterrorism post-9/11 are discussed, alongside the importance of training and legal frameworks. Despite this focus, the agency retains capabilities in other areas, including Russia and China.

The conversation shifts to the differences and challenges faced by MI5 and SIS, touching upon the intelligence capabilities of Russia and China and their interference in Western democracies. The concept of "active measures" employed by Russia to disrupt political life abroad is mentioned, as well as the implications of technological advancements like AI on intelligence operations. The speakers stress the need to protect democratic processes and uphold moral standards in intelligence work.

Recent geopolitical events are examined, including the US's history of regime change and democracy promotion in regions like China, Taiwan, Russia, Ukraine, Israel, and Gaza. The speakers acknowledge past errors in influencing foreign leadership and the delicate balance required when supporting democratic values against the backdrop of potential regime change repercussions. Praise is given to the Biden administration's approach to China, while concerns are raised about the influence of Trump Republicans on the situation in Ukraine and the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas.

The podcast addresses the current state of the Middle East and the possible effects of political changes in the UK and US. Concerns are raised about Trump's policies, their impact on NATO and Ukraine, and the conflict in Gaza, underscoring the necessity for a broader peace process and trust in government. The value of selflessness and diversity in leadership is also highlighted.

Looking to the future, Manningham-Buller and Sawers contemplate the difficulty of making predictions and the issue of optimism bias. They ponder a worst-case scenario for the world in the next 5-10 years, considering the UK's challenges with a resurgent Russia and the potential consequences of climate change, among other global issues like China's rise and unrest in North Africa. However, they conclude on an optimistic

note, citing the promise of scientific solutions and the inspiration drawn from young people. Despite their contrasting backgrounds-one a baroness and the other a comprehensive-educated former spy-they share insights into working with Tony Blair and his leadership style.

Finally, the podcast discusses transformations within British intelligence and security services, including legislative changes and the establishment of oversight committees. It reflects on the values and interests of former leaders Sawers and Manningham-Buller, particularly their efforts to advance women in the field. Balancing legal compliance with risk-taking in intelligence operations is acknowledged as a challenge. An invitation is extended to current MI5 and MI6 heads to join the show. Guest Brian Kloss introduces the concept of disorder, advocating for embracing complexity and resilience in the face of an unpredictable world and static institutions.

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≡ Takeaways (👍 Reviewed by a human)

Introduction to "The Rest is Politics" Podcast

- **Podcast Name:** The Rest is Politics
- **Hosts:** Alastair Campbell and Rory Stewart
- **Special Guests:** Eliza Manningham-Buller and Sir John Sawers
- **Topics Discussed:** British intelligence community, global security issues, terrorism, technology, and political events.

Guest:Eliza Manningham-Buller

- Former teacher before joining MI5.
- Served as Director-General of MI5 from 2002 to 2007.
- Was involved during the Iraq War period.

Guest:Sir John Sawers

- Head of MI6 from 2009 to 2014, known by the title "C".
- Career spy and diplomat.
- Worked in Downing Street as Tony Blair's foreign policy adviser.
- Part of the coalition provisional authority in post-Saddam Iraq.

Recruitment into Intelligence Services

Eliza Manningham-Buller's Entry

- Joined MI5 by chance after a conversation at a party.
- Initially faced gender discrimination within the service.
- Worked with other women to change subservient roles for females in MI5.

Sir John Sawers' Entry

- Recruited while involved in student union activities at Nottingham University.
- Initially joined the Foreign Office, then moved to MI6.
- Preferred policy and diplomacy over operations and surveillance.

Reflections on Past Operations

Northern Ireland and Terrorism

- Eliza Manningham-Buller headed the Irish counterterrorism program.
- Noted differences between threats from the Irish terrorists and modern-day terrorism.
- Emphasized that Irish terrorists were ideologically motivated but not suicide bombers.

Post-9/11 Period

- Both guests discussed the impact of the Iraq War and the subsequent increase in terrorism.
- Eliza criticized attempts to link Iraq with 9/11, stating it provided Bin Laden with a jihad in Iraq.

Challenges in Intelligence Work

- Discussed the importance of moral parameters and legality in operations.
- Highlighted the need for diverse skills and personalities within intelligence services.

Current Global Security Issues

Russia and Ukraine

- Both guests emphasized the significance of Russia's actions and the need to manage the threat.

China and Taiwan

- Discussed the rise of China and the importance of managing U.S.-China relations.

Israel and Gaza

- Addressed the recent conflict and the necessity for a long-term peace process.

Return of Trump

- Expressed concern about the potential negative impact on democracy and international relations.

Personal Views and Experiences

On Leadership and Management

- John Sawers praised Tony Blair as an inspiring leader but noted his shortcomings in management.

On Fictional Portrayals of Spies

- John Sawers recommended "Damascus Station" by David McCloskey for an accurate depiction of life in intelligence.

On Future Challenges

- Both guests expressed concerns about climate change and its implications for global security.
- Emphasized the importance of scientific advancements in addressing future challenges.

Conclusion

- The podcast ended with reflections on optimism for the future, driven by young people and scientific progress.
- Open invitation extended to current heads of MI5 and MI6 to appear on the show.

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