

Angelina Jolie Asks the Outgoing Head of MI6 Talk About Protecting Democracy, Fighting Misinformation and His Life as a Spy.

Angelina Jolie

What impact will the pandemic have on human security and human rights? I put that question to Sir Alex Younger, who until September headed MI6, Britain's Secret Intelligence Service.

From an undisclosed location, he spoke of a technological race threatening the security and economic strength of liberal democracies. But 30 years in espionage, he said, convinced him of the power of human agency: "We created the things that divide us, and it's in our power to solve them."



Andrew Milligan—WPA Pool/Getty Images Alex Younger at a talk at University of St Andrews in Scotland on Dec. 3, 2018.

Did you grow up wanting to be a spy?

I don't think I harbored a burning ambition to work in the secret world. The opportunity came to me, and if I'm honest, I prevaricated, because I understood some of the things it would involve and the moral and personal responsibilities.

It must have been at times a lonely existence, living a secret life.

It is an unusual way of life, even if it gets normalized after 30 years. There is a risk of isolation, but because our work is secret, those of us who do it develop tight bonds.

Did it involve sitting at the dinner table, concealing things from your own family?

We are never asked to conceal what we do from our partners. You do have to wait for the right moment before you bring your children in on the secret.

Actors pretend to be other people. But they do it on a film set, surrounded by a cast and crew who know it is a pretense. As a spy, how do you prevent that from damaging your personal integrity?

There is a trope in the movies that this is a morality-free environment. Speaking for my former service, the opposite is true. You need to have a very developed sense of your values as a person, as a human being and as an organization.

Some people might not think the world of espionage has anything to do with the wider good.

Not all intelligence services are the same. We seek to defend the values of our liberal democracy, and we understand that if we undermine those values we haven't achieved anything. I reject the idea of a moral equivalence between us and our opponents. I don't want to sound hubristic. We are not an NGO. But the satisfying fact is that protecting our country's and our allies' interests often puts us up against the geopolitical bullies of the world—the terrorists or the war criminals or the nuclear proliferators. We make life harder for people like that.

If I can press you on that a little. You served in Afghanistan. Does it trouble you that America is encouraging a peace settlement that will see the Taliban return to power, without guarantees on the rights of women?

It's always been clear to me that this is not the type of conflict for which there is a military solution. It has to end in dialogue. But the Taliban need to understand that Afghanistan is not the same as when they were in charge. The Afghan people, Afghan women in particular, have totally different expectations.

How much were you conscious of the people who don't have a voice but are on the receiving end of insecurity, like refugees?

We are paid to be dispassionate, but we are human beings, and we're selected for our capacity to be able to empathize. It is impossible not to be profoundly influenced by the circumstances of the people we talk to and touched by the suffering that we encounter.

If what you do is secret, how are agencies like yours held accountable?

Secrecy is not the purpose of what we do. It's part of what we do, and it's necessary because there are many brave men and women who agree to work with us whose only protection is our ability to keep their identity secret. But we are highly accountable. We don't recruit from some extraterrestrial planet, we recruit members of the public who share the same values as you have, and that I have, and would simply not tolerate the types of breaches of law and values of which we are sometimes accused.

We are speaking because like many people, I'm trying to find answers and a path forward at this time. Do you see any possibility of regaining consensus on human rights and holding aggressors to account?

My expectation is that we'll have to find different ways of creating consequences for those who violate global norms. Our alliances are our great strength as liberal democracies. Other values systems don't have alliances, they have clients. We have genuine partnerships.

In your six years as MI6 chief you never took part in a conversation like this. Why are you speaking now?

Those of us who live in liberal democracies are at risk of underestimating how much agency we've got, how much power we've got to deal with the problems we face. I want to send a message that our fate is in our hands. We should have confidence in the things that make us strong: our institutions, our alliances and our capacity to innovate.

We're approaching the election here in America, and hearing again about the possibility of foreign interference. How serious is the threat, and to what extent are countries like Russia to blame?

Russia feels threatened by the quality of our alliances and, even in the current environment, the quality of our democratic institutions. It sets out to denigrate them, and it uses intelligence services to that end. It is a serious problem, and we should organize to prevent it. And not, by the way, by behaving like Russia but simply by calling out what we see. But we shouldn't big up the Russian role, which does their work for them. And we shouldn't allow ourselves to be distracted. Russia didn't create the things that divide us. We did, and it's in our power to sort them out.

Already there is the suggestion that China has emerged stronger from the pandemic, as other countries have struggled. How will China evolve?

The Chinese government will do whatever is in the interests of the Communist Party. It seems very unlikely that as the Chinese economy matures, and growth rates slow, they will become more like us. On the contrary, I think they will seek to buttress their legitimacy by doubling down on nationalist ideology. We are going to have two sharply different value systems in operation on the same planet for the foreseeable future. We mustn't be naïve. We need to retain the capacity to defend ourselves. We need to establish rules of coexistence, even when there is no love and precious little trust. We should use the weight of global problems to force statesmanship on all sides.

The internet and social media—people thought of them as very democratizing forces. Do you think the balance has tipped the other way?

I think there was a feeling that because it democratized knowledge so effectively the internet would be on the side of free countries. I think we've all been through a grief process as we've worked out that actually it can be bent to the purpose of social control just as easily. If I had one message, it would be that our future security is going to lie in our mastery of the key emerging technologies; so artificial intelligence, quantum, synthetic biology, there are others. We invented all of these things, and, if we can't stay at their cutting edge, it doesn't really matter what else we do, our security environment will degrade. But, by contrast, if we can innovate, and remember we have been really successful at this in the past, I think we'll have a secure future.

One of the issues is lack of trust in the information we receive. What can we do as citizens to better inform ourselves?

Maybe I'm just a natural skeptic or just a trained intelligence officer, but what gives me a really bad feeling is when I'm reading an article and I start violently agreeing and feeling good about the fact that this person thinks the same as me. That's

incredibly comforting, but the first thing you should do in those circumstances is go and find an article espousing exactly the opposite point of view. I think there's something about disciplining yourself into finding both sides of the argument, and avoiding the echo chamber. I think we should be training ourselves, training our kids. It should be part of our daily lives.

With reporting by Simone Shah and Madeline Roache