SECURING FREEDOM

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Introduction

This book, based on the Reith Lectures which I gave in 2011 and an earlier lecture I gave in 2010, is dedicated to the staff, past and present, of the Security Service, of which I was a member for thirty-three years.

Given that their names are not known, other than to their families and their colleagues, I want to use this brief introduction to describe them. Fiction often describes intelligence officers as unscrupulous cynics, driving Ferraris (bicycles are more likely in real life), ignoring the law, obsessed by sex, alcohol and gadgets and preoccupied with internecine rivalries. Not so. My colleagues were committed and conscientious, motivated not by large salaries and bonuses but by the importance and value of their work. They often worked under great

pressure, well aware of the potential consequences of the choices that they made in intelligence work. They did not expect recognition, either of their skills or their successes. When their friends in other occupations chatted about work, they became adept at turning conversations away from themselves. In their social lives they may have had to listen to people pontificating about events in the news and resist the urge to correct them. In their closest relationships they had to decide when to break cover and to whom they could safely reveal their employer. Their lives and their finances were regularly scrutinised through vetting; they surrendered some personal privacy and freedom of movement. They thought about what they were doing, the standards they needed to maintain, the ethical issues that arose. They were familiar with the law and sensitive to the society in which they worked and which they represented. They were self-critical – how could the organisation do better,

how could it learn from its mistakes? And, like many public servants, they learned to rise above uninformed criticism from some parts of the media.

I was proud to lead them. When I retired in 2007, it felt a bit like bereavement. I did not miss knowing secrets, the excitement of operations, the highs and lows, the political context. My adrenalin flowed more sluggishly and I liked that. What I missed were my colleagues, being part of a trusted team of people of high integrity, shrewd intelligence, imagination, arcane skills and determination, who often made me laugh.

I was surprised when the BBC asked me to give the Reith Lectures, sharing the series with Aung San Suu Kyi. It had never occurred to me that I might receive such an invitation. I never saw myself, and still don't, as an intellectual in the tradition of Reith speakers. When I was invited I made the mistake of looking up the list of previous speakers, from Bertrand Russell onwards. This was not good

for my confidence and I doubted that I had enough worth saying to attract the scale of audience that the BBC expected. But as I came to write, to reject, to reorganise and to check on clichés, platitudes and the usual traps, I realised that there were indeed things I wished to say. And that, although I had retired from the Security Service over four years before, this was an unexpected but welcome opportunity to give my views on some important issues: freedom, security, the rule of law and intelligence.

The first three chapters of this book largely follow the Reith Lectures, while chapter four is based on a lecture I gave to an audience at the House of Lords in 2010. Chapter one discusses terrorism, ten years on from 9/11, the fear it induced and the threat to our freedom. The second chapter considers the role of security intelligence in protecting our lives and our freedom. Chapter three describes the wider policy context of these issues, both foreign and domestic.

Finally, chapter four expands on my view of intelligence and its uses.

1
Terror

On the day of the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington, I was working in my office as usual. I was deputy head of the British Security Service and responsible for its intelligence operations. I came out of the room and my staff were standing, watching the television in silence. It was difficult quite to take in what we were seeing. But we quickly recognised that this was terrorism and came to the immediate conclusion that al-Qaeda was responsible. I am not sure whether we stopped to eat but I do know that we spent the rest of the day checking past intelligence, directing the collection of more intelligence and preparing briefings and papers for the government.

The next day I flew to Washington to talk to our American colleagues about

what had happened and to offer support. With me were the head of the Secret Intelligence Service, more usually known as MI6, and the head of GCHQ, our signals intelligence agency. American airspace was closed and the officer in charge of the RAF station at Brize Norton was reluctant to let us take off, but the Prime Minister had agreed with the President that we should go. We landed at Andrews Air Force Base and drove in convoy to CIA headquarters. We found our American friends from the CIA, the FBI and NSA, the American signals intelligence agency, angry, shocked and tired but also resilient and determined. They had had no sleep. Casualty numbers were, as yet, unavailable and there were fears of an even higher death toll than was, in fact, the case. We were all haunted by images of the attack planes full of passengers, the slashes in the sides of the twin towers of the World Trade Centre, collapsing floors, the raging fires, people jumping to their deaths

to escape them, pedestrians shrouded in dust and emerging tales of loss and also of heroism.

In our sobering talks with the Americans we focused on al-Qaeda, having no doubt of its responsibility for the atrocities. Bin Laden had made it clear that he wished to kill Americans and their allies and before 9/11 substantial intelligence effort had been directed against him and his group. While the actual attacks were a shock, we had been concerned all summer by intelligence of developing al-Qaeda plans. And the attacks shared characteristics which were familiar to us: coordinated suicide attacks designed to cause maximum casualties, carefully planned and executed without warning. We discussed how intelligence could be developed to provide more extensive insights to al-Qaeda to try to prevent further attacks. Obviously the United States has many more intelligence resources than the UK, but they welcomed our offer of support. And, of course, after

thirty years of conflict in Northern Ireland, we had greater experience of terrorism on our own soil.

After the talks, we went back to the British Embassy. We were all in a reflective mood and in the garden we talked late into the night about what had happened and what the next steps might be. We discussed whether the United States would take direct military action in Afghanistan, where al-Qaeda was based. What were the security implications for our own citizens? We mulled on the various options open to the US Government and, more widely, to other Western governments. One of those present argued that the peace process between Israel and the Palestinians needed to be revived, an explicit recognition that the West needed to readdress the open sore in the Middle East that could well have contributed to these events. Those present agreed. It was important, even so soon after a monstrous crime, to consider all possible ways of reducing the likelihood of

further attacks. Despite talk of military action, there was one thing we all agreed on: terrorism is resolved through politics and economics not through arms and intelligence, however important a role these play.

And I call it a crime, not an act of war. Terrorism is a violent tool used for political reasons to bring pressure on governments by creating fear in the populace. In the same way, I have never thought it helpful to refer to a 'war' on terror, any more than to a war on drugs. For one thing, that legitimises the terrorists as warriors; for another thing terrorism is a technique, not a state. Moreover terrorism will continue in some form whatever the outcome, if there is one, of such a 'war'. For me what happened was a crime and needs to be thought of as such. What made it different from earlier attacks was its scale and audacity, not its nature.

I understand that the United States with its long tradition of offering