

War: A Young Man's Game

Headliners journalist Sonti Ramirez, 19, speaks to Sir Richard Dannatt, the former head of the British Army, about the deaths of young soldiers in Afghanistan and the radicalisation of young Muslims in Britain.

"When one of your own children is there, one watches the news on a daily basis with a keen eye". This is Sir Richard Dannatt speaking about his experience on having a son fighting in Afghanistan 2007. Whilst most of the parents of soldiers would be waiting with baited breath for their children back at home, Dannatt was in the middle of his term as General of the British Army and on tour in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

"Whenever a soldier was killed in Iraq or Afghanistan, I was telephoned and told, and of course when my own son was there it was quite a problem for my staff just telling me soldiers had been killed, I'd be thinking 'was it my son as well?'".

Following his departure, Dannatt took up a new role as Constable of the Tower of London 2009, (a highly prestigious position amongst people of his calibre). More intriguingly, Dannatt also took up the role as a Conservative House of Lords peer not long after our interview.

Dannatt had previously made headlines due to his usually outspoken criticism of the government's handling of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. His acceptance of the Tory peer position had therefore raised questions from the media about his level of neutrality towards the situation. But speaking to us today, Dannatt seemed a lot more perceptive and insightful about his time as head of the British army.

"There was some reluctance I felt from the government to spend money that was necessary. I was arguing the case internally within the Ministry of Defence but also on the other hand I was talking very publically about these things. I think it has had the effect of getting the government to understand that if we are going to be successful now in Afghanistan we've got to have the right number of troops with the right amount of equipment. I was putting a bit of pressure on them, I will admit that."

An issue that has been frequently been raised about the Armed forces is the rate of soldiers that are being killed who have only just come out of training, aged 18 and 19 only. So what does the Ex-chief of the Army have to say about this?

"The army is generally a young man's game. The vast majority of people in the army are aged between 18 and 25, particularly the soldiers who carry out the fighting and difficult operations. so tragically and sadly when there are casualties not surprisingly statistically therefore they're amongst the younger people ."

What is unique about the so called 'war on terror' is that you find young people from Britain fighting on both sides of the conflict what with the radicalisation of young British Muslims, some of whom have even gone abroad to places like Afghanistan to fight British troops. Dannatt blames the "older, more responsible people" for "perverting Islam for political purposes".

"I think that it is tragic that some people have been born and brought up in this country and radicalised in that way, to have the idea sold to them that its terrible what we are doing in Afghanistan so you must go out and fight. To grow up here and then to turn around and want to go to Afghanistan and kill British soldiers, I think that's a real shame, a real tragedy."

Dannatt is very clear about what it is the British are trying to achieve in Afghanistan and why that is an important cause. "We want to achieve a situation where it's got a government that is popularly supported. I often talk about it being a war about the people, for the people, not just in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but also for this country following what happened on 9/11. This is the kind of terrorism we have to bear down on."

Many have questioned whether Britain can bring about democracy to Afghanistan, as the 2009 reassignment to Afghanistan has seen more troops killed and wounded than in the whole of 2006 where the vast majority of British fatalities have taken place in Helmand.

But Dannatt sees Britain as having a strong responsibility in the region. "We've got considerable historic legacy from our imperial and colonial days. I mean the line that was drawn between Pakistan and Afghanistan, which is pretty contentious, (the Durand Line), who's it drawn up by? We can't walk away from the legacy of our history. I think the UK will find it very hard to walk away from these things."

It is easy to forget the troubled history between Britain and Afghanistan. The last time British troops set foot in the country was the late 18th century, under the imperial quest to protect British assets from Russia. This time round, the quest is still to protect British assets but takes on an altogether more moral outlook, to destroy the Taliban influence, defeat international terrorism and attempt to establish a democratic society in Afghanistan.

Western governments have also traditionally backed the current President Hamid Karzai. In the most recent Afghan elections, Karzai has been dogged by criticism and accusations that he has done little to tackle cronyism and corruption in Afghanistan. In most recent development, it has been said by an election monitor that Karzai's government made arrangements to fix the second round of voting in the country's presidential poll.

So what does Dannatt think about this? "It [Afghanistan] will never be a perfect democratic state like the United Kingdom but elections are really important. We want the people to choose their government and not the Taliban".

But how are the British army incorporating the people of Afghanistan in this? There has been particular criticism about the role of women in Afghan society. Recent legislation has been seen as condoning rape within marriage, with Karzai accused of selling out Afghan women for the sake of Conservative Shia support at the presidential election. Here Dannatt seems to accept Britain must tread carefully when dealing with such cultural issues.

"We are guests in their country, this is a Muslim country and we must respect their religion and tradition. In the west we would expect equality of opportunity, for both men and women able to go to school, university and get jobs that are of equal footing. That of course is not the tradition in somewhere like Afghanistan. I don't think we should push too hard. We would be being disrespectful of their culture if we did"

So ultimately what does Dannatt think is the solution? "People have often said to me General, don't you study history? The last three wars in Afghanistan we lost, why do you think we can win the fourth one? We're not there to win, we're not fighting the Afghans. We're trying to work with them to help create a society that gives them a chance in the future and removes the threat to our own security".

About this story

This article was written by Sonti Ramirez, 19.

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