

*PLEASE NOTE "THE ANDREW MARR SHOW" MUST BE
CREDITED IF ANY PART OF THIS TRANSCRIPT IS USED*

THE ANDREW MARR SHOW
INTERVIEW:
GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS
HOUGHTON
CHIEF OF DEFENCE STAFF
NOVEMBER 8th 2015

ANDREW MARR:

Now appropriately on Remembrance Sunday, I've been talking to the Chief of the Defence Staff, General Sir Nicholas Houghton. We discussed Syria and the forthcoming defence review, but I began by asking him if this is the most important day of the year for him as head of the armed forces.

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:

I think so in many ways. This is a day when everybody has their own thoughts about remembrance, about the armed forces. I think some of that is at a very private level, a personal level. Some of it is still very raw because sadly we continue to lose people on active service. But I do think there's a ... there is I think over the last few years a sort of a... growing awareness within the nation as a whole that it's more than just a single day and it's more than just recent combat. You know there is a remarkable sort of sense of remembrance about sort of the whole history of combat in a way.

ANDREW MARR:

Are you at all concerned about the fact that some parts ... some communities in

Britain have been so hostile to recent conflicts that the kind of general national consensus is fragmenting at the edges?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:

I think there has been some public concern and awakening of public conscience about the justification for conflict. In many ways I think that this is a good thing. I mean at the moment we're experiencing a remarkable series of historic remembrances from Magna Carta, Agincourt, Waterloo, the First World War, and I think for those who sort of reflect on this it tells a story of a remarkable evolution of our country and its democracy and what it's come to be today, which is still a remarkably privileged country with an open society and freedoms and a meritocracy, but it also documents over all those years the degree of service and sacrifice that's had to be invested in creating the country we enjoy today.

ANDREW MARR:

(over) Yes. And of course for a lot of people thinking about today, they'll be thinking above all about the Second World War and the defeat by democracy of fascism. In that context, do you think it's fair, reasonable to see ISIS as a fascist expansionist state?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:

I wouldn't give it that particular label myself, but I do think it presents a significant threat, perhaps an extraordinary threat to what one might call the sort of normal run of terrorism. It's because ...

ANDREW MARR:

(over) David Cameron I think has said "existential" threat.

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:

Well existential. And I think when the Prime Minister speaks like that, I don't think he necessarily means in terms of they're going to come and take our territory off us, but I think in terms of to undermine our way of life, our freedoms, our liberty, you know the values we stand for. I think that's the true nature of the existential threat that a threat like ISIS does or has the potential to present.

ANDREW MARR:

Because we do seem to in this strange position where there is a proposal for another eight Tornado jets to help with the American attacks inside Syria, which most people think is not going to be enough to defeat ISIS but the Commons is against, without there being an overall plan which is big enough and bold enough to actually defeat ISIS on the battlefield. If the politicians came to you and said do you know what, we've changed our minds, we really want to defeat ISIS on the battlefield, it's over to you, could you do it? Not you personally, but could the West do it?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:

Well I don't think that you defeat an ideology militarily. I think that's always been behind the international formulation of what we are doing about ISIS. And if you'd indulge me, I think from a national perspective the only thing that we can unilaterally own as a country is a strategy about ISIS that keeps the country and the people of this country safe, and that's why our national strategy is all about border security, the remarkable work of our intelligence services in intelligence led operations within the country, reaching out through the Muslim society within the country to assist them in deradicalising and delegitimising ISIS. But we've only ever said that we could make a contribution to the international defeat of ISIS, and again this is as much down an ideological route as it is a military route. And I do think it's important that in the end the military dimension of this is done by regional players, by Muslim countries, by local armed forces and, therefore, I don't think we should play the decisive military role because it runs the risk of adding fuel to the radicalisation of ISIS as an abhorrent cult.

ANDREW MARR:

How much do you think the bringing down of this airliner – I don't know if you've got security information and so forth which confirms that every paper seems to think it is now ISIS that did it – how much does that change the game?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:

I think the important thing perhaps is how it might impact on the thoughts of Russia in this respect. You can't just look at the activities of Russia over the last year or so

through the focus purely of Syria. You've got to take a step back and think this is actually part of them wanting to secure regional influence in a part of the world close to their near abroad. Now then, I think that what this might really make them think is yeah this is just more though than propping up our equity there. We have serious interest here in the destruction of this abhorrent ideology.

ANDREW MARR:

And we've gone through a couple of years now where Putin has been raised further and further and further as one of the big, big threats to the West. Do you think this is possibly a turning point in our relationships with Russia?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:

Well it could be. I mean those who sort of you know talk about these things, attendant at National Security Council debates, do make the point that there is also an opportunity here. There's an opportunity for an element of political convergence between if you like America, ourselves, you know the West *and* Putin; that there will be some identification of a common view on how political transition of Assad could work.

ANDREW MARR:

Let me talk, if I may, about the money. Five years ago, there was what everybody seems to accept was a pretty brutal strategic defence and security review settlement, which meant the army coming down quite dramatically, the navy coming down and so forth. Since then, the number of troops has fallen quite fast – I think faster than was expected – and the number of reservists hasn't risen nearly as fast. In fact I think there were only 20 net reservists added to the armed forces last year, which is an astonishing small figure. Are you concerned now about the state of the armed forces ahead of this new SDSR?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:

Well am I concerned? I'm always concerned.

ANDREW MARR:

Yeah.

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:

That's my sort of professional job. But am I concerned in a way as we approach this SDSR that it's going to be as it were more of the same and more retrenchment, no not at all.

ANDREW MARR:

Because the world has changed since then?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:

Well not just because the world has changed, but I think the domestic situation has changed. I think we do have to sort of base as we look forward to this defence review, which should be one that is primarily about confidence and optimism and a reassurance to the people of the country, that there's got to be a bit of realism in the fact that the world has become a somewhat more dangerous place. If you like, the latent threats have become patent ones.

ANDREW MARR:

So on defence spending George Osborne has promised you the NATO 2 percent, the extra spending, but are you concerned the Chancellor and the Treasury might start to kind of nibble away at that by adding things like military pensions into it?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:

Well I think it would be a miracle if the Defence and the Treasury did not submit to NATO those things that it is permissible under the NATO rules to claim as national defence expenditure. My concern is that however the figures are done, there is real additional spending available for defence, and that is absolutely the case. And so if you like for the first time in a long time, probably 25 years, what this forthcoming SDSR is about is not the management of decline but the management of betterment.

ANDREW MARR:

What about Trident in all of this because again people like Crispin Blunt have suggested that the amount of money that Trident is now taking, will take over the next 20 years, is now disproportionate and unreasonable compared with all the other

threats that we face?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:

Well I just think it's one of those things that we've got to keep a running eye on because the very effectiveness of Trident as a nuclear deterrent has to be complimented by effective conventional forces as a conventional deterrent. Now that's not just the forces of the United Kingdom, but in concert with our NATO allies, and therefore you should never run the risk of creating an imbalance between your nuclear and your conventional forces or the whole credibility of deterrence starts to fall apart.

ANDREW MARR:

To a lot of people we seem quite close to that imbalance given the small size of the Royal Navy these days, for instance.

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:

No, but that is why deterrence in a Western sense is all about deterrence within NATO, not just on our own. Collective security is ultimately what preserves the security of the country.

ANDREW MARR:

Not just us alone. Of course we now have the leader of the opposition who says quite openly he would never press the nuclear button. Does that worry you?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:

Well it ... it would worry me if that, er, thought was translated into power as it were because ...

ANDREW MARR:

So if he wins, he's a problem?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:

Well there's a couple of hurdles to cross before we get to that.

ANDREW MARR:

Of course.

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:

But the reason I say this – and it's not based on a personal thing at all, it's purely based on the credibility of deterrence. The whole thing about deterrence rests on the credibility of its use. When people say you're never going to use the deterrent, what I say is you use the deterrent you know every second of every minute of every day and the purpose of the deterrent is that you don't have to use it because you successfully deter.

ANDREW MARR:

So no point at all in spending billions and billions of pounds if our enemies think we'd never use it?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:

Yeah because deterrence is then completely undermined. And I think people have got to ... You know politic... Most of the politicians I know understand that and I think that, dare I say, the responsibility of power is probably quite a sobering thing and you come to a realisation 'I understand how this thing works'.

ANDREW MARR:

Now there's been a lot of coverage of the legal threats now faced by British forces abroad and we read today there's a new bill of rights being published which will give members of the armed forces new protections. Can you explain why you think that's essential?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:

Well there's a very specific thing within the European Court of Human Rights and the act on this about the right to life, and of course everybody does have a right to life but on a battlefield it's slightly different. At a very low level, a very low tactical level, occasionally a young lance corporal even might have to by design risk the life of one of his section in order to achieve the mission or to save the lives of the balance of the section. Now if he's going to hesitate in doing that or stop doing that or start to worry

about doing that, that completely undermines the whole basis of the way in which we operate at a tactical level and that's ... and you can expand that then right up the chain of command.

ANDREW MARR:

Sure. At a personal level do you have any sympathy with Marine A?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:

Well I think of course I would say I had sympathy. I think it was two years ago on this show that I said that what I absolutely abide by the view is that we institutionally should not allow ourselves or demand some default right to leniency as and of itself. That has got to be the judicial process which judges these things in context and on their merits because I don't think that we should institutionally drop our standards. We shouldn't remove our ...

ANDREW MARR:

(over) So does that mean you think the press campaign on this is misguided?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:

Well I think to an extent it is. I think that that judicial process has run, to an extent some leniency has been shown. I think there's another review potentially on to say was there any evidence that wasn't brought to bear which might afford a review of the degree of leniency shown. But this is down to the legal process. It's not down ... And most of the people I talk to within the armed forces absolutely get this. If we ...

ANDREW MARR:

(over) So we might see a review of some kind?

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:

Well that I don't know. That's a judicial process and it's not one that I will be personally fighting for.

ANDREW MARR:

Sir Nicholas, you have a very long day ahead of you. Thank you very much for

starting it here. Thank you.

GENERAL SIR NICHOLAS HOUGHTON:

Thank you, Andrew.

INTERVIEW ENDS