

Opinion British Secret Intelligence Service

The spies who struggle to love James Bond

Despite his obvious failings, 007 highlights what the secret services are up against

HELEN WARRELL DECEMBER 20 2021

There are moments in the latest Bond film when art imitates life a little too closely. *No Time to Die* involves a deadly bioweapon, which is unnerving during a raging pandemic. The fictional MI6 chief, known as “M”, bemoans¹ the fact that the world is arming “faster than we can respond”, and that the enemy, once a flesh-and-blood adversary, is now “floating in the ether²”.

5 These same complaints are made frequently by real-life defence and intelligence personnel grappling with AI, cyber attacks and the prospect of high-tech warfare.

But if Britain’s security establishment is grateful that Hollywood is highlighting such threats, it is careful not to show it. In fact, the Bond films have always been a mixed blessing for UK
10 spies. The caricature of a misogynist action man risks deterring³ the female and non-white, non-Oxbridge candidates that MI5, MI6 and GCHQ are now urging to join their ranks. Meanwhile, those who apply to the agencies in droves⁴ after each new film release are often unsuited to a career in modern espionage. The hard-drinking, gambling, libidinous, indiscriminate killer of 007 fame “is not the type of candidate we’re after”, one security official notes drily.

15 For this reason, MI6 is wary of admiring its fictional — and most famous — officer too much. Alex Younger, former head of the foreign intelligence agency, admitted five years ago he was “conflicted” about the films, and said if Bond were to join now, “he would have to change his ways”. The current chief, Richard Moore, has coined a twitter hashtag, #forgetjamesbond, to
20 promote his drive for a more diverse workforce. Meanwhile, Ken McCallum, director-general of the domestic intelligence service MI5, explained last year that launching a profile on Instagram would help his agency “get past whatever martini-drinking stereotypes may be lingering” to convey a better sense of what life in the service is actually like.

But maybe these spy chiefs protest too much. The benefits of Bond for Britain’s soft power,
25 and the image of its spies as skilled, respected and omnipotent, is still a net positive. One Whitehall official tells me that the brand is “hugely useful” when recruiting agents — the men and women who risk their lives to pass intelligence from inside key targets such as terror cells. Bond is an “immediate reference point” for the idea of taking risks for a greater good, the official explains. The budget of Hollywood’s MI6 may be limitless, but this is no bad thing.
30 “We are painted in the minds of a global audience as some form of ubiquitous⁵ intelligence presence,” Younger conceded in a letter to *The Economist* four years ago. “This can be quite a force multiplier.” (...)

While Britain’s security services don’t need to run a contest, *No Time to Die* is potentially a
35 film they can get behind. Bond is humbler and more vulnerable than earlier incarnations, his lothario⁶ instincts softened by age and experience. He is now, as the FT’s film critic says, “a wrecked old spook⁷ with one functional knee”. The charismatic Nomi, a young, black, rising star of MI6 — who regards Bond with sardonic wariness and outsmarts him — is a far better role model for the future of espionage than her clapped-out predecessor.

40 Still, modernisation only goes so far. Bond’s vintage cars, on-the-spot assassinations and enthusiasm for drinking on operations persist. His Aston Martin is deployed in a lightning car chase through the vertiginous streets of Matera, and he later enters the villain’s island lair in a stealth⁸ glider designed by Q branch which transforms into an underwater submersible. In these

scenes at least, it is reassuring that the fantasy world of 007 remains largely untroubled by real life.

1 bemoan: complain about 2 ether: atmosphere/sky 3 deterring: discourage 4 in droves: many people 5 ubiquitous: omnipresent 6 lothario: a man who seduces women 7 “wrecked old spook”: damaged old ghost 8 stealth: moving undetected

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