

## **Toby Harnden**

**Author & Journalist**

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**Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one-to-one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today, I'm joined down the line by Toby Harnden, the award-winning author and veteran foreign correspondent. *Dead Men Risen* was Toby's account of beleaguered British soldiers fighting desperately to prevent the Taliban from seizing Afghanistan's Helmand province, and it won an Orwell Prize. As a foreign correspondent, he reported from 33 countries, covering Belfast, Baghdad and Washington DC for The Daily Telegraph, Daily Mail and The Sunday Times. He was imprisoned in Zimbabwe and faced prosecution in Northern Ireland for his work. A dual US and British citizen and former Royal Navy officer, Toby, lives in Virginia. Toby, thank you for joining me.**

Hi, Paul. Great to be with you.

**The honour and the pleasure is mine. What an incredible career. We're going to have to make this a seven hour podcast out to take it all in. Let's start, if we may then, with your most recent book, 'First Casualty', it's the dramatic true story of the CIA's Team Alpha, the first Americans to be dropped behind enemy lines in Afghanistan after 9/11.**

Yeah, so I'm very proud of it. I was in Washington DC on 9/11, like almost everybody, it changed my life, it changed the world. And so this is very much a 9/11 book. It starts on 9/11 and one member of the CIA team is flying from Tashkent to Heathrow. Another is underwater at the special forces diving school in Key West, Florida, and another Mike Spann, who was killed on November 25th, 2001 was in CIA headquarters. And so it's a character driven narrative of what America did and what the CIA in particular did, that was leading the fight 20, nearly 21 years ago. And I feel that in some ways it's something I've lived over the last two decades in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. And I wanted to go back to the beginning and get the story from the protagonists who were actually there in those sort of incredible early days when, ironically, there was a considerable degree of success and a formula that kind of worked. And I think one of the tragic ironies really is because it worked so well, the mission expanded and it became sort of nation building and a hundred thousand American troops instead of hundreds of CIA officers in green Berets.

**It's a very visceral book. It places you with Team Alpha, as they write into battle on horseback.**

What I've tried to do, I think, it was the case in 'Bandit Country' about the IRA in South Armagh, which was my first book, which was published, wow, making myself feel old, in 1999, 23 years ago, and 'Dead Men Risen' is sort of the gritty dark underbelly of war. What happens in combat, bravery, but also cowardice, the things that go right, but the many things that go wrong, the chaos, the psychology, the emotions, the fear. And so I wanted to get down to that level with Team Alpha. I mean, it was sort of an incredible journey in itself to find these people, because obviously they were all CIA officers or retired. One is still serving, but I interviewed all six of them in the end who were surviving. So Mike Spann was killed and Mark Rausenberger was the medic, who died in the Philippines in 2016 on CIA duty. So six of them are still alive. One still serving, who eventually I got permission from the CIA to interview, a guy called Andy. But the others, I just sort of tracked them down, persuaded them to talk to me. Some of them sort of talked to me just right off the bat, others needed some sort of persuasion and other validators, a couple sort of wanted the CIA to give them the "okay" that they weren't gonna lose their security clearances, as contractors or whatever. But it became a very sort of intimate thing where I spent many, many hours with these guys. And COVID weirdly, I think in some ways helps because a lot of people were sort of isolated and had time on their hands. And also these people were not fearful people. So they weren't worried about masks and not seeing anybody or hiding away. I felt that I was able to go several levels deeper than I had before than say 'Dead Men Risen', for instance, with British soldiers and get in a position where I could sort of transport the readers through this story, through the eyes and sort of emotions of the protagonist, which was a great feeling to be able to pull that off.

**What's the impact been like?**

So it's been interesting. I mean, obviously there's different kinds of levels. And so in some ways, the thing that I'm proudest of is that I think it's helped some of these members of Team Alpha, some of the green beret, some of the SBS people who were there, some of the air crew, I think it's helped them sort of come to terms with what's happened, because they were there, but they had kind of sometimes literally sort of tunnel vision and they didn't know how it all sort of fitted together. And so there was a point in the research and this has happened previously with 'Dead Men Risen' where you start giving, as well as taking. And so somebody says, "oh, you know, I think I was doing this. And I was doing this and I think such and such was doing that. And then this happened, and I don't really know why". And I say, "Actually, I think the reason that happened was this, because I'd spoken to other people who had different sorts of part's. And then they're like, "oh, okay. Yeah". And, this was incredibly emotional and gut wrenching in many ways, Mike Spann was killed. I mean, David Tyson in particular, he was a CIA case officer, traditional spy, and former academic linguist. He was not an elite warrior, but he was suddenly in this position where Mike had been killed with these 400 Al-Qaeda prisoners in this uprising in this Fort. So the shit had really hit the fan and David had to step up and he had to function and he had to kill or be killed and he killed a lot of people. And so he has all these emotions of sort of survivor's guilt. Did he do the right thing? He completed a successful career in

the CIA. He went back to his family, but still has nightmares, still kind of searching for the missing pieces. Like he talks about almost like God's video of what happened. And he told me that the therapist had told him that video doesn't exist. It's been wiped from the hard drive, but I was able to assemble the closest to that, that I think is possible. And I think it's helped David reconnect with some other members of the team on a sort of a deeper level, appreciate what they did and sort of come to terms with what happened. And that, to me, if there was nothing else, that would make the book worth it. But I think it's also given a perspective to people about the end of 20 years of war, which obviously ended miserably of how it began, why it began obviously 9/11 and Al-Qaeda, and Bin Laden and all those things that so many people have forgotten and a formula that worked. And so I think it's given people a fresh perspective from 20 years ago. That was just something that just quickly passed through the news cycle. I feel that it's a valuable contribution to history and understanding of this war. And that's another thing I wanted to achieve.

**I mean, these military stories are obviously very deeply personal to you because you spent a decade in the armed forces yourself with the Royal Navy. How did your military training help you work as a correspondent in obviously incredibly dangerous places like Afghanistan and Belfast?**

Yeah. So it's interesting. So a bit like David Tyson, I was no elite warrior, I spent 10 years in the Navy, 3 of those years were at university because I did Dartmouth and office basic officer training. Then I went to Oxford for three years on a sponsorship and studied modern history, and then came back for sort of six and a half years. And I felt that my Naval career, I joined after the Falklands, the Gulf War happened when I was there, but I was based in Scotland. I tried desperately to get involved, but they managed to win it without me. And so I felt that my Naval career in a way was sort of sailing around to lots of nice places. And that's one of the reasons why I left because the cold war was over and it seemed like what was the point? And I still had this sort of thirst for adventure and I ended up getting it from journalism. It was interesting because you would think it was a very, very different kind of line of work. And it would be like two different worlds and it is, but I actually found the transition relatively easy because I felt that a lot of the things that I'd done in the Navy, I was also sort of doing as a journalist. So I was dealing with people from admirals to ordinary sailors, and having to get on with people and build a rapport. My job was changing in the Navy every couple of years, I was going into unfamiliar situations, unfamiliar places and sort of making do. And I felt that was very much what I did as a journalist, the Navy, a lot of things are kind of reactive, stuff happens and you deal with it. You're told what to do, I was told what to do by editors. Stuff happened as a news journalist and I just got on with it. But I do think that certainly in those days, and even now, a relatively small number of military veterans go into journalism. And it did mean for me that I understood the system. I knew what an officer was and knew what a sergeant was. I could understand why people wanted to join the armed forces. I could understand why people wanted to go to war and kind of enjoyed it. And so I think it gave me sort of empathy and a bit of a sense of credibility that I wasn't just some kind of pencil neck that went from public school to university and then straight into Fleet Street, I'd sort of lived a bit of something like their life.

**I mean, it's been an incredible adventure. What are the abiding memories of your time serving? You rose the rank of flag lieutenant to the second sea lord, and were posted with assault ships. I read that you helped to transport reindeer with the Norwegian Navy?**

I did, it was a lot of fun. So the rank was lieutenant, which is just like captain. The job was flag lieutenant. I didn't have a business guard, but flag lieutenant and assistant secretary, brackets personnel to the second sea lord, chief of Naval personnel, that was kind of the job. And in some ways I was a glorified bag carrier, I was this personal assistant. I did a lot of staff work. I staffed honours and awards, promotions. But I travelled around the world with them. We went to Hong Kong, we went to the Falkland Islands, and all over the UK. I had two admirals, but that was interesting because I had a window into power as well. I went to a meeting with one of the admirals and Chris Pan in Hong Kong for instance. And we were VIPs in the Falkland Islands and went to Northern Ireland on an official visit. And we had all these kinds of high level intelligence briefings and stuff. And so it was fascinating. I mean life on board a ship is great fun. I twice joined ships in Hong Kong and twice went round Australia. The second ship that I joined in Hong Kong was HMS Edinburgh and lieutenant, His Royal Highness Prince Andrew was one of the lieutenants on board. I was a sub lieutenant. And so we went all around Australia, joined the bicentennial in 1988 with Prince Andrew, or 'H' as we called him on board. And Fergie followed us around, so it was interesting.

**And 25 years in journalism, I mean that's an incredible career already.**

Well, yeah. So it's funny, I feel like I was surfing waves really because I started at age of 28, in 1994 in the Telegraph newsroom. So I kind of got my foot in the door. I did theatre reviews and obituaries and things. And I got my foot in the door because a guy called Gordon Ducker who was the night news editor at the Express, an RAF reservist. I was talking to him vividly, he had dinner in Greenwich and I was like how do I get into journalism? How do I break in? I don't have any connections, don't have any family history of this because it seems full of nepotism. And he was like, "oh, well, you've been in the services, you don't wanna go to journalism school or the regions unless you have to, because if you, then you need to catch up time. So if you could kind of miss out on that step, that would make sense. And the best way to do that is to get on a diary", all these diary columns, The Times Diary, Telegraph had the Peterborough column and he said "Max Hastings is editor of the Telegraph, he's very pro services. So why do you try Peterborough at the Telegraph?" So I thought "oh, that's a good idea". And so I wrote to Quentin Letts who's still around, he was the editor of Peterborough and he sent me a letter. So one thing I did, which is very foolish, is I immediately offered to work with no pay, never do that because it will be accepted. Quentin enthusiastically accepted my offer to work with no pay, but he sent me a letter back saying "dear lieutenant Harnden, or whatever, thank you for your letter, if you'd be so kind as to contact my secretary, Maureen, perhaps you could come in and have a chat". So that's what I did. And actually Quentin agreed if I brought in a story I was paid. So that was a big incentive to bring in stories. And so at that point I was still in the Navy, but I was on my way out, sort of giving in my notice. I was sort of banished to Plymouth and I used to drive up from Plymouth to London every weekend to work on Sundays for the Peterborough column for no money apart

from contributions. And that was my foot in the door. And it was funny at the time I remember thinking like, "oh my foot's in the door, that's it". And that is in a way how it worked out. I mean, obviously now I would look at that and think like, well, that's an opportunity, but lots of people get to that stage and it doesn't work out. But I think my sort of assumption that it was all gonna be okay was probably a good one to have, because there were some bumps, one point Max Hastings wrote me a letter saying "I know I promised you a contract, but we don't have the money. My suggestion is you go and work for a regional paper for a few years and then come back". And I talked to a friend who advised me to just ignore that and keep coming in and that's what I did. And that letter was completely forgotten.

**Isn't that absolutely amazing? How did you sort of progress through journalism then? Because you'd done the military career. You'd started off in newspapers. How did you end up this incredibly prolific veteran, very well respected foreign correspondent. Was that always going to be your destiny?**

Yeah, who knows? I mean, my plan going in, I didn't really have that much of a plan, but I just wanted to write and I didn't even particularly wanna write news, but I got to the last three or four, I think for a bursary with The Independent and I was gutted that I didn't get it. I went to the interview and I sort of thought, I don't know whether it was sort of arrogance or excessive optimism or whatever, but I thought, "oh, I've got the interview, there's probably 300 that applied and they're giving five interviews for two places, of course I'll get one". But I didn't actually - Decca Aitkenhead, who I know you've had on the podcast - she got one of those places. So she edged me out. So who knows what it would've been like if I'd got a burry at The Independent, but I just wanted to write. And when I got to the Telegraph, Quentin said to me, "oh, how about news"? And I thought that sounds cool, that's the sharp end, running around covering murders, going to the scenes of bombs and stuff. So, I got a trial on news and I immediately thought this is great, this is really, really good because it's not just writing. It's not just like thumb sucking. It's finding things out, talking to people, this kind of logistics of it and the kind of adrenaline, kind of getting the technology. This is back in the day, trying to get your laptop connected to the internet and everything, or as a dictate the copy down the phone line to a copy taker. And there was a real rush from all that. And also I remember early on, I think when I was getting the trial on the news, Max Hastings interviewed me and it was pretty intimidating. And I remember him saying, "so what would you like to end up doing?" I just said, "well, foreign correspondent". And partly I was playing to the audience because obviously Max was a famous foreign correspondent, war correspondent and made his name in the Falklands. But I feel like I remember thinking as I was saying that foreign correspondent, that's the right answer for Max Hastings, but also pretty good thing to do. And so fairly early on, I sort of had that in mind and actually Max Hastings wanted to bring me onto the Evening Standard to be their defence correspondent. And I didn't want to go to the Standard because it was a regional paper, rather than a national paper. And also, I didn't want to get up at three o'clock in the morning. I was quite happy with rolling into the office at 10:30, which was the sort of national newspaper sort of day, 10:30 to sort seven or eight in the evening. And so I said to people in the newsroom "I got this offer from Max Hastings, what should I do?" And they were like, "well, do you want to go?" I said, "well, not really". And they were like "well, okay, so you want to use it as leverage to get what you want here, but you can't

be too crass about it. You have to sort of be subtle". And so that's what I did. I remember Sue Ryan who was the home news editor. I said, "Sue, I've got this offer from Max at Standard", I was upfront. I said, "I don't really want to go. But I was just wondering how you saw things here, what the future might be like". And she said, "what would you like to do?" And so I said, because I was prepared for this. I said "I'd like to be a Middle East correspondent," which was completely outlandish. I've been in journalism for sort of two years, or Northern Ireland". And she was like, "we might be able to make Northern Island work". Because that was drawing at the first IRA ceasefire. And it was seen as a sort of a story that was kind of on the way down, although I had an inkling that it wasn't, because I'd already spent a few weeks out there sort of covering for Richard Saville, who became my predecessor. And so that was my big break. So I was sent to Northern Ireland, by the time I got there, the ceasefire ended. In fact, I was in Canary Wharf when the south key bomb went off, I think February the 8th, 1996. So that was the end of the ceasefire. And there was a wobble when I was worried that they might actually withdraw the offer because they'd want somebody more experienced out there, with a sort of IRA campaign having resumed, but they did send me out there. And I think when I'd been in the newsroom, there'd always been this sort of feeling of like, "oh, who's this weird guy that used to be in the Navy who doesn't know shorthand, hasn't done hard news for a regional paper. What do we do with them?" And I would get the sense sometimes I was the last person, if something big was going on, I was the last person in the newsroom to sort of be sent out, because I just hadn't been tested in hard news, but going out to Belfast, I was the only person there and there were bombs going off and people being shot and all sorts of stuff and I had to do it. And I think I very quickly showed that I could do it. And so that just took me to a new sort of level, really that I was sort of a tested hard news journalist. And then it became, as well as the IRA and loyalist terrorism and all paramilitary stuff, there was also a lot of politics. And so I began writing a lot about politics because we had the Good Friday Agreement and we had Tony Blair and the peace process and all the rest of it. And so that gave me another dimension. And then by this point, Charles Moore was the editor and he was very, very interested in Northern Ireland. And so that led to me going to Washington. Now, I'm not sure that that was the right position for me, in a way I was a victim of my success in writing about politics because I wasn't especially drawn to politics. I don't have a deep love of politics and I'd already turned down being sent to the lobby in Westminster as a sort of a junior correspondent because I just thought I want real stuff, real people, war, blood, guts, that's more my thing. But I got sent to Washington and I was a little bit concerned that I was just writing about guys in suits in the Oval Office and on Capitol hill, then 9/11 happened. So the war came to me and the war eclipsed the politics at that point. So this is kind of a long answer, but that's how it happened. And obviously a lot of luck and accidents are involved in all that.

**And three books. I mean, you mentioned Northern Ireland there, your book, 'Bandit Country: The IRA & South Armagh' led to the formation of the Smithwick Tribunal, which investigated whether there'd been collusion between the Irish police and the RUC officers regarding those 1989 murders.**

I loved the Northern Ireland story. I was completely immersed in it. I was writing six, seven days a week and I just sort of lived it. There was no kind of dividing line between my work life and my personal life, I was drinking with cops and army officers and former IRA men and dating got mixed up in it as well. And it was just fantastic.

But there was this place, South Armagh, that I was drawn to very early on because I've been in the south in the Republic covering the IRA killing an Irish police officer, which is a huge story. This would've been around sort of May, June 1996. And then on the way back, another story broke, which was that the Metropolitan Police had flown over and were all sort of combing through South Armagh in sort of forensic suits. And they'd made a number of arrests and they were looking for evidence connected to the Docklands bomb, where I'd been there for that. And I remember driving across the border and seeing this sign, it said "Forkhill, seven miles." And I thought, "Forkhill, I've heard of that. That's sort of near Crossmaglen, it's IRA heartland, I'll just drive in and take a look." And I drove along the road and it's like British soldiers in helmets and full camouflage and blackened faces and everything. In the undergrowth, there's police everywhere, cops, Metropolitan Police cops and also RUC and the helicopters. And it was a war zone. And I thought, "wow, this is incredible." This is part of the United Kingdom in name, but it's just like enemy controlled territory, IRA controlled territory. This is just a place apart. And so I started looking into it and Slab Murphy was the IRA chief of staff. He had a farm on the border. There was an IRA sniper team that operated in South Armagh, there were two teams with like 50 calibre rifles taking out soldiers and police sometimes from very long distance. And also the key elements of this as well was that the bombs, the big bombs, including the Docklands bomb in London were South Armagh operations. The bombs had been assembled in South Armagh, transported across Irish sea in different ways. I mean, they were South Armagh operations. I thought this is incredible, this place. And then I was friends with an intelligence officer there called Rupert Thorneloe, who subsequently was killed in Afghanistan and was a central part, 'Dead Men Risen.' But we were talking about, there were six or eight families who were running South Armagh from the IRA point of view. I thought, "well, where's the book on this?" And there wasn't one. I like that. Wow. And so that became 'Bandit Country.' And again, it was kind of impersonal in a way of me just being so new to it all to just sort of think that I could write this book, but I think I did a pretty good job. It was just this incredible place. And it just gave me this sense, which has continued that journalism is great. It's the first draft of history. And I love doing it, but books are part of history. A book is forever. I mean, certainly there are a lot of political books, I feel like bumper stickers or news articles and they're just kind of in the moment, you just buy it for that election cycle or whatever, but I don't wanna write books like that. I wanna write books that are forever. And I feel like 'Bandit Country' is like that, I mean it's 23 years, but it still gets cited, like in The Sunday Times this weekend, which is always very gratifying. And so while I didn't wanna sort of quit and just write full-time books, which is a precarious existence anyway. And I wanted to have that kind of buzz that the news gave me and a big newspaper to get me around the world and get me to places. But I also did have the bug of books. There've been 10 years between the first and second book. And then again, the second and third book, so I need to up my hit rate. But yeah, so as well as giving me this sort of turbocharged kind of boost at the beginning of my journalism career, it also did set me on the road to writing books.

**Tell us about 'Dead Men Risen.' I mean, obviously you've set the scene already in Afghanistan, but you let the Welsh Guard soldier's stories, frankly, speak for themselves. Is PTSD something that interests you? I mean, you've obviously covered it for Panorama as well.**

Yeah. So a good segway, to use that American word, which I think has crept into the English language as well, from Northern Ireland. So Rupert Thorneloe, who I mentioned. So he was a captain in the Welsh guards in Northern Ireland who I got to know and he was a source I guess, but he also became a good friend. So in those times in the mid to late nineties in Northern Ireland he'd just been on the SAS Selection course and he'd failed on weapons handling right at the last minute. And so he was a bit bummed out about that, but he'd got this intelligence job and he was in the job actually, Robert Nairac, who was a grenadier guards officer, who'd been abducted by the IRA and murdered in 1977. And so I learned all about Nairac, which was another kind of connection to the book in South Armagh and what became 'Bandit Country'. But Rupert was on the fast track, a great guy, highly intelligent and had a work ethic, like no one else. And so fast forward to 2009 and he was the commanding officer of the Welsh guards, lieutenant Colonel, I knew this was the summer of Panthers claw and the height of the British casualties out there. And they'd already lost a platoon commander, Mark Evison and a company commander, Sean Birchall. And so I knew they were having a hell of a time, carnage. And then I remember I was doing a sort of an online project. We were going down the Mississippi, we were driving, we weren't on a boat with Julian Simmons, who I'd been in jail in Zimbabwe with, and I flipped over my laptop and there's a headline about Rupert Thorneloe being killed. I was like, "oh my God and so he was the first battalion commander to be killed in action since H. Jones of the parachute regiment in the Falklands in 1982". So it was a huge deal. It was national news. And not only did I know Rupert, but I'd known a guy called Charlie Antelme, who was a major, but was promoted to acting lieutenant Colonel to take over from Rupert and flown out to Helmand. And also a guy called Ben Bathurst, who's now a lieutenant general, I believe. And his father was admiral of the fleet, Sir Benjamin Bathurst, first sea Lord when I was in the Navy. And I knew him a little bit and he put me in touch with his son who'd been a company commander in Northern Ireland. So it was sort of just coincidental, but I knew several people in the Welsh guards. And so I just contacted the regiment and just said there could be a book on this because those three levels of casualties, actually they were the first battalion since the Korean war to lose platoon commander, company commander, battalion commander, and the Welsh guard sort of bought into it. And so I went out there in the summer, early autumn of 2009 to sort of be embedded with them and do all the initial interviews. And that became 'Dead Men Risen.' And it was very personal to me because Rupert had been a friend but I just found the people unburdening themselves. I very much wanted to integrate it with sort of the home front and families and Rupert's widow, Sally. And so I went to interview her and just sort of heartbreaking, the effect it has on families and what it does to those who are left behind. And then in the later stages of the research, soldiers were starting to unburden themselves. At the beginning it was all, everyone's there, they've got a mission, it's all very sort of can do, we can win this war, we can take this hill, we can change what's happening in Helmand, but a year later people were starting to reflect on some of what they felt was sort of the senselessness of it. There were demons and this had a really kind of serious effect. And there was a guy called Dan Collins, lance sergeant Dan Collins, which is like the guards rank of corporal, I remember being sort of in awe of him because he'd been wounded twice. He'd had bullets bounce off his body armour, he'd really been in the thick of it. And he was a hero, legitimate hero and he ended up hanging himself in a remote quarry.

**Oh, Jesus.**

And that led to the book and then that led to the sort of Panorama, which wasn't just about the Welsh guards, but Dan was a sort of central figure in that documentary. And he'd just been treated appallingly and sort of left out there to just not quite rot, but he was just sort of left to his own devices. And he'd recorded this video instead of a note, he'd sent videos to his girlfriend and his mother. And I just remember his mother gave us this video of Dan with a camouflage kind of headdress on, he was in the woods, it was raining. He had tears streaming down his face just saying goodbye to his mother because he wanted to get away from hell, which was his term for helmet. So the PTSD, which is a feature also of 'First Casualty,' the sort of invisible injuries that became an area of interest for me too.

**It's incredible. I mean, like most people, I'm so grateful to people who serve because they're putting themselves in harms way during, but then there's a lifetime of flashbacks, PTSD, they're ruining their lives so that we can live our lives in peace, frankly.**

Yeah. I mean, it's interesting. I speak to so many people about this. I mean, on one level it's like we're an all volunteer force. And I know just from my own personality, I grew up with my grandfather, who fought in the Second World War, showing me his medals. And I always had a thirst for action and combat, which I never experienced in the Navy, sort of to my regret, in some ways that's a sort of an immature way to look at things, although it's also the way young men usually often are. But I remember being in awe of some of the platoon commanders in Helmand. So young left tenants, who were leading platoons in combat and being awarded military crosses and being shot at and killing people and thinking like, "wow, this is incredible and something I've never experienced", but over time I hope I've matured cause I'm 56 years old, I've realised that there are costs to that. Be careful what you wish for. I mean, not only can you lose your legs, leading a platoon in Helmand, but you're gonna live with what you've seen, what's been done to you, what you've done for the rest of your life. And I don't think that means that people who've served in combat are sort of victims and we should feel sorry for them, but we should obviously look after them and we should thank them and recognize them, we should recognize what they have done in our name. I mean, whether you are in the UK or the US, we send people to do this, whether you agree politically with the exact policy at the time, this was sort of done in our name. And some of these things were really sort of dirty, ugly, nasty things that had to be done or that the politicians or we as a country decided should be done and they bought the brunt of it. And so I find this is sort of a fascinating area and it's certainly been very much part of my work as it's gone on.

**You were elected president of your JCR at Oxford university in 1987, and many of your contemporaries are now running the country? You knew David Milland very well. Ted Verity, you told me it was a big lefty back then in the day. I don't know what he's doing now, editor of some newspaper. I don't know which one it is, it might be an obscure one. Never heard of it. Little brother Ed made an appearance, you said Michael Gove was a decent bloke and you didn't know Boris well, but he was there. I mean, tell us about your adventures.**

Yeah. I mean, it was incredible. So I grew up in Manchester. My dad had been in the Navy and was an architect. So we weren't from down the pit or anything, but sort of middle class, I didn't go to a public school. I was the first person in my family to go to university. And so it was a big deal to get into Oxford and do you remember *Brideshead Revisited* and the *Dreaming Spires* and all that stuff. And when I got there, it was sort of a bit like that. I mean, I remember Olivia Shannon, who was the daughter of Paul Shannon. She died from some kind of cocaine, some kind of drug overdose. And I remember being there when the police were bringing her body out of Christchurch next door and she was in a very rarefied state, the term then was *sloane ranger*. Everything was "sloane", and that set was the social elite of the elite. But there was also student politics and I remember being first introduced to David Milland by somebody who said, "oh, this is David Milland, he's going to be a Labour MP". And his nickname at the time was Donny from Donny Osmond because he looked like Donny Osman, with big white teeth and kind of cheesy smile and kind of slightly nerdy. And yeah, so David was the JCR president before me the year before me, 1986. And I think he was chair of the Labour club. And he was seen as a sort of Labour aristocracy in a way because of his father Ralph Millerband. And I remember, we used to organise speakers and remember Ken Livingston came along, a friend of the family, and I wandered around Oxford with Ken Livingston looking for somewhere that sold cream cakes. And we had Bruce Kent come, people subsequently used to say David Millerband had the brain the size of a planet that was often written things like that in the media. I think David was clever. He got a first but the thing that stuck out to me about him was this incredible work ethic. I mean, he was very clean living and he would be up at seven o'clock in the morning, reading the papers in the JCR, debating political issues sometimes with people who disagreed with him. I remember Jonathan Peacock was one of them who was a Tory who I think became a QC. So it was no surprise to me really that David took the route that he did, but I do remember David's little brother Edward coming up for an interview. So he must have been about 16 or maybe he didn't come up for an interview. Maybe he just came up for a look around. And I remember this like very young, if we thought David was nerdy, then Ed was just orders of magnitude more nerdy. I remember the sense that David, JCR president, first class degree, the right sort of politics. He was sort of beloved in the college from the dons and the sort hierarchy. And I remember getting this sense, I think even at the time that there's no way David Miliband's brother is not gonna get in, he's got the golden ticket. And sure enough, Ed Milland did get in, but it sort of just affected the way I thought about the whole leadership contest that Ed Milland got into in Corpus and Oxford on the cotels of his brother David. And so to then sort of knife him in the leadership contest. I don't know. I had a lot of feelings about that and I think a lot of people who know David did and still do. But yeah, and there's all these other people like, so Boris Johnson was the president of the Union, I think in my third year. And was this sort of impossibly glamorous character. I remember him, he had the same blonde hair, but it was much neater to sort of swept back. His girlfriend, Allegra Mostyn-Owen, had been on the cover of *Vogue*. I didn't have any girlfriends that were on the cover of *Vogue*. He was sort of living the dream and I didn't even know about it, but you know, the Burlington Club and all that kind of stuff. And the Oxford Union debating society, which was seen as an attraction to the prime minister. And then all these other characters like Ed Davey was a JCR president, I think at Jesus College when I was there and Michael Gove, who was at Lady Margaret Hall, and it was also sort of union hack, always called hacks, not journalists, but you know, like operatives in the union. And I remember he was dating a girl at Corpus and so I

would see him occasionally and he was always wearing a kilt. And I remember writing something in Cherwell, I think it was a letter anyway, something in Cherwell, the university newspaper describing him as a plonker and this always stuck with me. A few years later, in 1994, I was just breaking into journalism. I had my foot in the door at the Telegraph, but basically I was just a guy who was a junior news reporter who wasn't even on a contract who was just doing shifts. And there was some kind of party, Michael Gove was there. And so Michael Gove was quite a big deal at the time as a journalist, he was working for the Today Program and he was one of their sort of correspondents and he'd do these very witty sort of reports and stuff. And so I remember seeing Michael Gove thinking, "oh shit, I called him a plonker in print, this is gonna be a bit awkward". And then I spoke to him and he couldn't have been nicer. And just genuinely seemed interested in me. "How are you, what have you been doing? What's going on?" He really wanted to talk and connect properly. And at that point I had nothing to offer him, I wasn't in any position to help him. He was much further up the career ladder than I was. And because of what I'd written about him, which I presume he hadn't forgotten because who would forget that, it didn't matter to him at all. And so I've never really had any contact with him since, but I've always had this sort of soft spot for Michael Gove who gets horrendous press. That he's a really decent bloke because he genuinely wanted to connect with me and talk to me as a person when I had absolutely nothing to offer. So kind of the opposite of the cliché of politicians, who only just out for what they can get and only sucking up to donors and people who can help them. So it was kind of interesting to get to know a bunch of these characters at Oxford.

**Tell us how you ended in Virginia. I mean, you live in a community which is home to many high ranking military and Washington government officials. Is that a grit base for you? Tell us how you ended up there, but what's your analysis of American politics at the moment? It seems to be never more so politically and culturally polarised.**

Well, yeah, so it's interesting. So I'm just outside DC. So I could drive to Georgetown in 20 minutes on a good day, downtown sort of 35 minutes, but it's Virginia, it's a state, coincidentally, I'm very close to CIA headquarter. So there's lots of retired intelligence officers, military diplomats. So when I first got to DC, I lived in Georgetown. So I've got two kids who are now 15 and 13. And when the second one was born, I decided Georgetown is just too claustrophobic and just not right for kids. So I did that cliché thing of sort of moving out to the suburbs and ended up here. It's definitely a bit of a different perspective on DC, but in terms of politics, I've moved away from it. I absolutely hate what this whole thing has become and the way people have become the sort of ripping people down on Twitter, the sort of assuming bad faith. James Bloodworth on the podcast the other day, I thought spoke very eloquently about this, assuming bad faith from anybody that disagrees with you and also the sort of the dominance of Trump. One of the first stories I did when I got to the US in 1999 was covering Donald Trump, who was floating a run for the reform party. And I went to little Havana, full of Cubans in Miami to cover this cloud. Who clearly in my mind was not gonna run for president, but we just did a kind of a piss-take type story about it. To me, Donald Trump was always the sort of personification of the ugly American. And he was always the stereotype of Americans that I was trying to dispel for the British audience of British editors. And so holy shit,

the guy became president, in 2016, I didn't think he was gonna run. I didn't think he was gonna win, nor did many other people. And in a way, I think I had a lot of the building blocks to see that he certainly had a chance of winning. And I sort of kicked myself for being in that sort of mindset. I think I'd had in 1999, this guy's not serious. And in many ways, he wasn't serious in many ways. I mean, he didn't think he was gonna win, but he did. And then everybody just sort of went crazy. And to an extent they'd gone crazy already, but you know, CNN was wall-to-wall Donald Trump. And so the dirty little secret is Donald Trump loves the media, and the media loves Donald Trump. They need each other. He's a creation of the media and CNN did this sort of deal with the devil. They helped him become president by giving him so much coverage. And then they sort of turned against him. They'd always nominally been against him, but they really turned against him and basically their whole kind of business model is this guy's a racist and a fascist and anybody that has anything to do with him, we sort of hate him and it became like a punch and "Judy show". And then, Trump would attack CNN and CNN would attack Trump. And the rest of the media, pretty much, was just divided into opposing camps. And so the old kind of formula of writing the news straight, being fair, which doesn't mean just both sides. And it doesn't mean just recording its stenography or recording what people say rather than what the truth is or the meaning underneath what they're saying doesn't mean any of that, but we just kind of lost that. So journals like The Washington Post - "Democracy Dies in Darkness", these pompous sort of slogans where journalists and news organisations decided that journalists needed to be competent in this sort of culture war, or political war or whatever you wanna call it. And so the stories would be framed to take down Trump or curse the worst possible light on Trump or anything he was doing. And that's exactly what Trump wanted. I mean, in a way the media became the caricature of them that Donald Trump had said before, it was completely true, so they sort of walked into the trap. And so it's just a huge kind of mess now. And I'm very glad to be out of the day-to-day or even sort of week-to-week coverage of politics because it's just so toxic and as I've got older, I've realised that what I'm really interested in is ordinary people who often have extraordinary characteristics, but ordinary people in extraordinary situations. So like David Tyson, the CIA case officer in Qala-i-Jangi, fought in 2001, he's not a celebrity, he's not famous but I'm much, much more interested in that sort of person than young guy that became the White House chief of staff or a Senator, or the chairperson of a House of Representatives committee. So I don't know, I'm kind of glad to be out of it and just sort of looking at it pretty much from the outside really, albeit from within Washington.

**Toby, that was a hugely interesting conversation. Thank you ever so much for your time.**

Well, thank you, Paul. I really enjoy the podcast and it's been great to be on it.