

MI-5

reviewed by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [June 13, 2012](#) issue



I just finished watching the 87th and final episode of the British spy series *MI-5* (all ten seasons are available for instant viewing on Netflix). Why did I spend three and a half days of my life on a soapy spy serial? For Jesus, of course.

And also because it was a provocative and immediately relevant series. The show—called *Spooks* in Britain—aired contemporaneously with the war on terror. The first episode aired on May 13, 2002 (with production beginning just months after 9/11), and the show ended June 17, 2011, just a few months before the last convoy of U.S. combat troops left Iraq. Neither I nor the show mean to make any sweeping claim about the war on terror being over—members of my congregation are still on the ground in Afghanistan. But this show got its oomph from addressing a reality right in front of us.

MI-5 features a counterterrorism unit of the British security service MI-5 called Section D. In one early show, the spies respond to a test scenario in which a dirty bomb kills the royal family and a few members of Parliament. In the drill, Section D debates whether to declare martial law and run the country or respond with less drastic measures. “Very Oliver Cromwell of you,” one character says to section chief

Tom Quinn (Matthew Macfadyen) when he advocates a takeover.

As the episode progresses, the characters begin to wonder whether they are part of a drill or are participating in a new reality. In some ways, this story offers a perfect image of the war on terror: we (the audience) struggle to know what is real even as our moral limits are tested. Meanwhile, the characters also question not just proper procedure but the very nature of the harm they are being asked to alleviate. Is it “out there” with the dirty bomb or in their own heads?

At one point, Quinn speaks by video camera with a rescue worker in a hazmat suit. He orders her to go to the radiation-contaminated site of the bomb blast to help determine who launched the attack. “So you’re the bureaucrat at the desk, ordering me to my death in defense of the realm?” she asks. He responds blandly, “Something like that.” The sequence asks viewers: What would you do in defense of the realm?

MI-5 poses and, through its characters, answers such questions. Would you feign a love affair to gather information? Despite some scruples, yes. Would you turn a child into an informer with possibly deadly consequences for him? Yes. Would you defy orders from your own government, going rogue? Yes, quite often in fact.

But there are also limits. Unlike the character Jack Bauer in the American show *24*, these spooks do not torture remorselessly in pursuit of information. Not usually. But would you poison the former home secretary when it becomes clear he was involved in an ultranationalist coup within Britain? The answer here is: yes.

The show has come under fire for being sensationalistic. There’s no arguing that. But what kind of dramatic series would show spies at their desks? Yet the show gives the appearance of verisimilitude far more than its more famous predecessor in British spy fiction, the James Bond movies. Whereas 007 sashays across the screen drinking martinis and bedding bombshells, effortlessly escaping ruthless bad guys and saving the world, the world of *MI-5* is startlingly unromantic. Every time one of the members of Section D shows a genuine love interest in someone else, that person has to be vetted fully and all but frisked before romance can ensue. Characters’ lovers and spouses and children become casualties of their beloveds’ efforts at spycraft. Though characters try to separate private life from professional life, that proves impossible. One episode ends as a love interest (Ellie Simm, played by Esther Hall) is barricaded inside her home with her daughter. Section D has installed a

security door for her protection. But it turns out that the spooks have locked her inside with a bomb ticking toward 0:00—at which point the season ends.

The show is the anti-Bond in another way. The spy heroes endure savage suffering. Helen Flynn (Lisa Faulkner) is tortured by having her arm lowered into frying oil in an effort to get information out of her. Then the bad guys dunk her head in. Calls of protest flooded BBC headquarters at this unprecedented level of televised barbarity.

The series never depicts that level of violence again, but it remains unrelenting in the horrors it subjects its heroes to. As a viewer, you come to know that as soon as you like a character, he or she is a goner. One episode opens with a funeral for a fallen spook. The priest intones her gratitude that so many of the spy's friends from "the office of wildlife and fisheries" could be there. As she says it, all the spooks' cell phones go off. A bomb has exploded in central London. Good guys are never exempt from danger. In fact, their willingness to rush into it often makes for short lives.

MI-5 resembles the Bond stories more in its love of gadgetry. The technical whizzes always have some smaller listening device or craftier exploding mechanism to provide. More than a few of these whizzes end up dead themselves.

One salient piece of technology is London's omnipresent surveillance cameras. Few episodes pass without a baddie being spotted on camera. Yet the show never stops to ask Orwellian questions. Perhaps privacy is so far gone that the question would have no traction with the viewer. Everyone expects to be filmed at all times. But the question is worth examining: what are we willing to trade in the name of safety? And have we fully considered the implications of putting our faith in superior gadgetry? The most terrifying bad guys in the series aren't so much the jihadists as the Chinese and Russian characters whose own gadgets might actually get the best of us.

In the last episode of season ten, a character asks for the latest Intel update. She's told, in inimitable British deadpan, "Bad people want to kill us." The claim is not untrue—people who want to kill innocents do exist. *MI-5* illustrates this claim at length and uses this premise to force a meditation on human sacrifice. Would you give up your integrity, your family, your privacy, your limbs and your life to fight evil? Does the question or the answer change if you are a Christian?

For the church, after Good Friday, no further sacrifice is necessary to make the world come out right. Christian realists, from Augustine (on a certain reading) to Reinhold

Niebuhr, have their logical accounts for why violence is still necessary. The world is a fallen place, not yet entirely redeemed by Christ.

But that argument remains an uneasy one. Just war theories are always at their best when they are not about self-defense or patriotism, but about defense of the innocent and defenseless. The specter of the bomb that killed 52 Londoners on July 7, 2005, hangs over this series. In our world, these questions are not abstractions. But how would those willing to serve their country, with deadly force if necessary, need to comport themselves in a world beyond sacrifice, in one in which the last sacrifice prays from his cross “Father, forgive”? I have no idea. But it’s a question worth thinking about, especially in the company of these spooks.